

Two Navy MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopters from USS *George H.W. Bush* take off during joint fire exercise with Army AH-64 Apaches from 3rd Battalion, 159th Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, 42nd Combat Aviation Brigade, and Air Force joint terminal attack controllers from 82nd Expeditionary Air Operations Squadron, on July 8, 2014, near Camp Buehring, Kuwait (New York Army National Guard/Harley Jelis)



Preparing for Tomorrow's Fight

Joint Concepts and Future Readiness

By Andrew J. Loiselle

We need to learn to set our course by the stars, not by the lights of every passing ship.

—OMAR BRADLEY

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Military forces that quickly adapt to change usually prevail. It is difficult to adapt in the near term, more so when there is an extended time horizon, but not adapting can exact a heavy toll in blood and treasure. The high cost of not adjust-

ing to new situations underlies the stereotypical conservatism of military organizations, and it is borne in their propensity to lean heavily on the lessons of the last war and eschew radical change. But those who do not try to anticipate change risk surrendering the

initiative on the future battlefield. In the words of the new National Defense Strategy (NDS), the joint force “cannot expect success fighting tomorrow’s conflicts with yesterday’s weapons and equipment.” Neither is “modernization defined solely by hardware; it requires change in the ways we organize and employ forces.”²¹

Modernization also requires that we make informed choices between the demands of the *now* and the demands of the *future*. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently called for a balanced inventory of capabilities and capacities to meet current challenges, for forces positioned to manage strategic risk, and for joint concepts to address future challenges. He stressed that we “cannot afford to choose between meeting today’s operational requirements and making the investments necessary for tomorrow.”²²

The U.S. military uses joint concepts to inform its investments in future force readiness and, in the words of the NDS, to “evolve innovative operational concepts.” Put simply, a joint concept proposes a way to employ the joint force to solve a military problem when existing solutions are ineffective or nonexistent. The joint concept is the centerpiece of a proactive approach to achieving future joint force readiness. It postulates a viable hypothesis for testing and ultimately leads to changes in doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P). A joint concept provides a unifying vision for how the joint force will solve an anticipated problem. It guides force development efforts across the entire community by providing a focus on nested Service-centric or domain-based concepts. The concept is not doctrine, nor does it guarantee success. It does, however, exercise the war-winning ability to adapt and ideally improves the joint force’s future readiness by getting it mostly right, thereby reducing the amount of adaptation that will inevitably occur once the truths become apparent. Joint concepts give us a head start on the race to the technological and operational high ground that will dominate the future battlefield.

To be sure, future joint force development is necessarily speculative because no one can predict the future. A comprehensive view of the future requires wide-ranging, open-minded, and keen analytical perspectives on anticipated challenges and solutions. Accordingly, the Joint Staff J7 leads a deliberate, collaborative approach to joint concept development. The approach begins with educated judgments about the future battlefield, then determines how this evolved environment will affect the current joint force’s ability to accomplish projected missions. Joint concept developers identify gaps in the current ability to meet future challenges and then propose solutions in the form of new operating methods and the DOTMLPF-P changes needed to achieve them. In both describing the future operating environment and postulating solutions to forecasted military challenges, the Joint Staff casts a wide net to capture diverse views, compares competing predictions, and ultimately determines the solutions to anticipated challenges. The two following articles discuss how and why the Joint Staff explores possible futures and then develops joint concepts to address anticipated future military challenges.

The *Joint Operating Environment 2035* summarizes the Joint Staff’s understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead.³ The Joint Staff derives this understanding through consultation with hundreds of futurists drawn from domestic and foreign governments, academia, industry, and think tanks. The objective is not only to determine a broad understanding of possible futures but also to spark debate and foster critical thinking about their military implications. The first article, “Exploring the Future Operating Environment,” elaborates on the Joint Staff’s work to anticipate future challenges and opportunities. It stresses the need to study joint operations within the context of clear strategic and military trends and the importance of balancing well-grounded intelligence assessments with diverse perspectives on possible futures. The exploration of possible futures sets the stage for joint concepts.

Strategic guidance shapes joint concepts. The 2016 National Military Strategy established the strategic framework for the joint force, identifying Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations (commonly referred to as the “4+1”) as the most pressing challenges. From a force development perspective, they typify possible scenarios that span the range of plausible future military operations. Collectively, they call for an inventory of advanced capabilities and sufficient capacity to *compete, deter, and win* across the entire range.⁴ The family of joint concepts extends this framework to 2035, examining how trends might create gaps in the current joint force’s ability to meet these challenges and proposing solutions in the form of concept-required capabilities. The combination of concept-required capabilities shapes the future joint force and informs investments in future readiness. The second article, “A New Approach to Joint Concepts,” discusses how the family of joint concepts serves the Services, combatant commands, and other capability developers throughout the Department of Defense (DOD).

From inception through implementation, the Joint Staff methodology for concept development hinges on extensive collaboration among DOD stakeholders, other governmental organizations, academic institutions, think tanks, and multinational partners. The production team includes members from the Services, combatant commands, and Joint Staff. Their research draws from current strategic guidance, the *Joint Operating Environment 2035*, *Joint Strategic Assessment*, and other joint, Service, and agency studies to identify future trends, implications, and challenges. They also look beyond the joint force to other governmental and nongovernmental organizations, academia, industry, and multinational partners to expand understanding of the challenge and explore potential solutions. Foreign military partners, in particular, provide valuable input based on unique perspectives or expertise, especially as the United States prefers to conduct military operations within a coalition whenever possible.



Aviation Electronics Technician assigned to Battlecats of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 73 conducts maintenance on MH-60R Seahawk in hangar bay of USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, Pacific Ocean, April 24, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Bill Sanders)

The production team consults with these experts throughout concept development to refine the military challenge and discover innovative ideas that might contribute to its solution.

The draft concept undergoes rigorous review by multiple stakeholders and subject matter experts. A planner-level working group and general officer steering committee—both consisting of representatives from the Services,

National Guard Bureau, combatant commands, Joint Staff directorates, DOD agencies, and international partners—meet regularly to evaluate proposed concepts, review progress, resolve issues, and promote collaboration among the joint community. Both bodies provide a mechanism for J7 accountability to stakeholders and act as clearinghouses that ensure DOD-wide unity of effort in the development of concepts. The Joint

Staff director approves concept recommendations and issues a memorandum to facilitate broad collaboration. Ultimately, the Chairman or Vice Chairman approves completed joint concepts after thorough staffing throughout DOD. The entire process takes 12 to 18 months to allow for thorough review and collaboration.

From scouting the future joint operating environment to proposing solutions to anticipated military challenges, wide-ranging participation is the key to success. The Joint Staff's approach to concept development reflects the essentiality of collaboration and coordination in the governance process, production team composition, use of multiple external reviews, and comprehensive staffing. The approach not only ensures the concept is thoroughly researched and contains sound recommendations, but it also unifies multiple force development efforts across DOD, U.S. Government, and multinational partners. Ultimately, joint concepts inform the Chairman's recommendations for balancing current and future readiness by providing well-grounded solutions to highly plausible challenges. JFQ

Notes

¹ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening America's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense), 7, available at <www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

² Joseph J. Dunford, Jr., "Maintaining a Boxer's Stance," *Joint Force Quarterly* 86 (3rd Quarter 2017), available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-86/>>.

³ *Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, July 14, 2016), available at <<https://fas.org/man/eprint/joe2035.pdf>>.

⁴ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1.