



Sailor updates status board in combat information center aboard USS *Antietam* during naval surface fire support exercise mission, Pacific Ocean, September 26, 2020 (U.S. Navy/James Hong)

Fight Tonight

Reenergizing the Pentagon for Great Power Competition

By Brandon J. Archuleta and Jonathan I. Gerson

From General Ulysses S. Grant and the Wilderness Campaign to General Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Normandy invasion, war planning has long been considered central to the study of U.S. military history.

But due to a confluence of political circumstances and a series of unique demands placed on the U.S. military from the end of the Cold War through the war on terror, the Pentagon's bureaucratic capacity for strategic

planning gradually eroded, eventually giving way to an overreliance on operational plans and grand tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan. Circumstances have changed, however. As Russia and China espouse revisionist aims and U.S. global hegemony comes increasingly into question, it is more important than ever for the Department of Defense (DOD) to reenergize its war-planning apparatus and prepare for what will likely be a prolonged era of Great Power competition (GPC).

This article examines recent developments in the Pentagon's war-planning processes as a consequence of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the U.S. military's subsequent shift toward GPC. This fundamental transformation is manifesting in three ways. First, DOD has recently defined the *continuum of competition* from cooperation to conflict. Second, Pentagon policymakers have introduced the concept of *global*

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integration to address the nature of the contemporary threat environment. Finally, the Pentagon bureaucracy has reinstated a rigorous war plans review process with stakeholder input from across DOD and the joint force, and these changes will have implications for the joint force for years to come.

We begin by offering a brief primer on war plans to introduce readers to the three vital inputs for contemporary war plans. Next, we explain the gradual erosion of the joint force's war-planning processes. We then discuss how the Pentagon is reenergizing its war-planning apparatus for GPC. Finally, we offer three recommendations for the joint force as it adjusts to and implements the nascent concept of global integration within its war-planning processes.

A Primer

Contemporary U.S. military war plans are a function of three vital inputs: perceived threats from the international environment, policy endstates, and resource constraints. First, military threat perception is driven by foreign capabilities and intent. In other words, which state and/or nonstate actors present both the credible military capabilities to contest the U.S. Armed Forces and the malign intent to use them? Second, what are the ultimate wartime objectives that senior U.S. policymakers espouse for the military in the event of conflict (for instance, protecting National interests, defending allies, defeating aggression, regime change)? These are inherently political questions that rightfully inform and bound technocratic military planning. Third, what resources—budgets, basing, personnel, materiel, and equipment—does the military have to wage such a war and meet those prescribed wartime objectives? With finite budgets and limited technology, it would be irresponsible for the U.S. military to plan wars—of any scale—assuming unlimited defense spending and yet-to-emerge technology. Save for the Manhattan Project during World War II, rarely does new technology emerge just in time to win a war. Thus, war plans must address perceived

threats by conforming to meet politically oriented policy endstates with the given military resources available.

In other words, military war plans are highly dependent on and sensitive to the international threat environment, policy endstates, and resource constraints. These three factors, however, do not always align. Therefore, uniformed commanders are obliged to highlight the potential risks to military strategy for civilian policymakers, but civilian policymakers are free to accept or reject that risk based on the political imperatives of their decision. While senior military leaders are accountable to civilian policymakers, civilian policymakers—elected and appointed—are accountable to the American people. This is part and parcel of what scholar Eliot Cohen refers to as the “unequal dialogue” in civil-military relations.¹

Planning is not unique to the Pentagon. In fact, elements of the U.S. Government first adopted strategic planning in the early 1980s to “strengthen organizations, improve effectiveness, and create public value in different ways.”² Like any other governmental plan, DOD war plans must “facilitate understanding of the forces driving issues, explore options in terms of their feasibility and likely consequences . . . regarding the costs and risks associated with various alternatives.”³ The difference, however, is that war plans “may never transition to execution” because they are based on global contingencies that might never come to fruition.⁴ Be that as it may, modern war plans are the products of deliberate planning processes based on policy and strategy guidance from the President, Secretary of Defense, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS).

War plans aim to synchronize military activities in time, space, and purpose with the resources available. “Therefore,” U.S. Army strategist Robert Gleckler argues, “the plans must be based on current military capabilities if they are to meet the criterion of feasibility.”⁵ Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made a similar point while speaking to U.S. troops overseas in December 2004: “You go to war with the Army you’ve got, not the Army you might want or wish to have

at a later time.”⁶ If the war plan is uninformed by resources, it will “not paint a realistic picture of the types of decisions and tradeoffs that senior strategic- and policy-level decisionmakers would be faced with should the plan be required to transition to execution.”⁷ Furthermore, war planning “blends futuristic thinking, objective analysis, and subjective evaluation” to develop the most clear-eyed strategy for mission success.⁸ War plans then serve a vital bureaucratic function for the U.S. military and National security apparatus.

Gradual Erosion of U.S. War Planning

The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era for war planners, as the mid-1990s brought a new series of challenges for the United States, including limited wars. However, without a Great Power adversary such as the Soviet Union to focus U.S. grand strategy, DOD war planning became increasingly listless and ad hoc, responsive only to regional contingencies as they emerged around the world. From Somalia and Bosnia to Kosovo and Rwanda, the United States found itself immersed in police actions and humanitarian interventions as the sole guarantor of the liberal international order. These frequent, small-scale military interventions required U.S. war planners to pivot away from the sort of conventional, high-intensity conflict the Pentagon preferred toward low-intensity stability and peacekeeping operations. Moreover, U.S. victory in the 1991 Gulf War and the initial success of Operation *Enduring Freedom* in 2001 emboldened policymakers into believing the joint force could project power and decisively compel any adversary with a technologically superior force at the time and place of its choosing.⁹ Absent a global threat, however, geographic combatant commanders drafted regional war plans that hinged on superior military capabilities but otherwise lacked an appreciation for the strategic level of war.

This oversight became painfully apparent during preparations for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to RAND,



Force Reconnaissance Marine with Command Element, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, performs simulated breach utilizing welding torch during visit, board, search, and seizure exercise aboard USS *Germantown*, South China Sea, September 6, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Taylor DiMartino)

“In November 2001, at Rumsfeld’s request, [U.S. Central Command Commander General Tommy] Franks began a series of revisions of Operations Plan (OPLAN) 1003, the war plan for the Persian Gulf. . . . The plan focused on winning the war. There was no annex in the plan for postconflict operations.”¹⁰ Consequently, “What were anticipated to be relatively quick and easy postconflict operations went badly” as “welcoming crowds of liberated Iraqis never formed.”¹¹ Mired by insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, senior Pentagon planners increasingly deferred to commanders in the field—those closest to the fight. Thus, the Pentagon’s bureaucratic capacity for strategic planning gradually eroded, eventually giving way to an overreliance on operational plans and grand tactics for day-to-day combat.¹² Moreover, Pentagon policymakers during this period considered conventional war

plans versus near-peer competitors, such as Russia and China, an afterthought as they hurriedly executed obligatory reviews in cursory fashion with little credence to the thought of global conflict. But with the prospect of renewed competition between Great Powers looming over the horizon, continuing such an approach would be neither sustainable nor advisable.

Modern U.S. War Plans and the Return of GPC

Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer once famously wrote, “The most striking feature of the post-Cold War world is its unipolarity. No doubt, multipolarity will come in time. In perhaps another generation or so there will be Great Powers coequal with the United States. . . . But we are not there yet, nor will we be for decades. Now is the unipolar

moment.”¹³ Nearly three decades later, famed political scientist Fareed Zakaria declared American hegemony dead in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*.¹⁴ Indeed, the “unipolar moment” has passed and given way to a renewed era of GPC. The NDS clearly illustrates this point: “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by . . . revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model.”¹⁵ To meet these emerging challenges, the Pentagon has reenergized its war-planning apparatus to prepare for what will likely be a prolonged era of GPC.

Competition vs. Conflict. To better conceptualize recent shifts in the geostrategic environment, DOD has recently defined the continuum of competition as cooperation, competition below the

threshold of armed conflict, and armed conflict.¹⁶ Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has employed an “artificial distinction between an environment of armed conflict and peace without significant military competition.”¹⁷ But the international threat environment is no longer conducive to such constructs. Recognizing this fact, the joint force has “adopt[ed] a better framework for understanding, describing, and participating within a competitive operational environment.”¹⁸ To be clear, this is not to suggest that GPC has somehow made the world more dangerous. The pundits who peddle that line are quick to forget that GPC is the historical rule, whereas unipolarity was the historical exception. While the cooperation-to-conflict spectrum is imperfect and has sparked feverish debate among defense scholars, it is an important first step in articulating the changing conditions of the geostrategic environment and “is by far the most mature effort to change the paradigm for military campaign planning.”¹⁹

Global Integration. Beyond delineating the differences between competition and conflict, Pentagon policymakers have introduced the concept of global integration to address the evolving nature of the threat environment. The earliest conceptions of global integration date back to the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Less than a decade after the tragic fall of Saigon and end of the Vietnam War, DOD suffered a number of embarrassing strategic, operational, tactical, and institutional setbacks that called the entire defense establishment into question. First, the Iranian hostage crisis during the Jimmy Carter administration led to a “failed rescue mission—dubbed Operation *Eagle Claw*—to secure the hostages, resulting in the deaths of eight American Servicemen after two aircraft collided at Desert One—the predesignated forward arming and refueling point in Iran.”²⁰ Second, the bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut pushed President Ronald Reagan to withdraw all U.S. troops from Lebanon. Third, poor planning and intelligence during Operation *Urgent Fury* in Grenada

required enterprising Navy SEALs to rely on a pay phone and calling card to coordinate airstrikes onto the island nation.²¹ Finally, lavish Pentagon procurement practices that resulted in \$400 hammers and \$640 toilet seats demonstrated the need for a major overhaul.

To address these myriad problems, Congress passed Goldwater-Nichols, which produced the Nation’s most significant military reforms since the National Security Act of 1947. For example, Goldwater-Nichols clarified the role of combatant commands, reorganized the Services, formalized joint education, and firmly delineated the Secretary’s role in managing America’s global defense responsibilities, in contrast with those of the CJCS as the President’s principal military advisor. Taken together, the Goldwater-Nichols reforms pushed the military away from the inter-Service rivalries that dominated the early Cold War era, thereby cementing the burgeoning notion of “jointness” among the military Services. By eventually embracing jointness, the Services laid the intellectual foundation for what would ultimately become global integration.

According to the Joint Staff, four recent changes in the strategic environment are driving the military’s evolution from jointness to global integration:

- proliferation of advanced technologies [has] accelerated the speed and complexity of war
- conflicts involve all domains and cut across multiple geographic regions
- American competitive military advantage has eroded
- global demand for forces continues to exceed the inventory.²²

This last point is especially important because it speaks to resource constraints that frame and bound planning for war. Simply put, there is only so much joint force to go around.

Recognizing this challenge, the Secretary has designated the CJCS as the “Global Integrator” in accordance with the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act.²³ In this capacity, the CJCS is to advise the Secretary “on allocation and transfer of forces among geographic and

functional [combatant commands] to address transregional, all-domain, and multifunctional threats.”²⁴ This guidance represents a significant shift in Pentagon war planning by “amplifying” the role of the CJCS in U.S. foreign policy.²⁵ For decades, combatant commanders drafted regional war plans with the operating assumption that their respective commands would be the priority theater in the event of conflict, thus planning to receive the preponderance of U.S. military forces in crisis. However, resource allocation is a zero-sum process. In short, DOD needed an honest broker to help the Secretary adjudicate global force allocation decisions. Having been a combatant commander himself, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis understood this point well. That is why he empowered the CJCS, General Joseph Dunford (a fellow Marine), with these newfound global integration authorities.

According to the former director of the Joint Staff, Lieutenant General Kenneth Mackenzie, USMC,

Global integration is the arrangement of cohesive joint force actions in time, space, and purpose, executed as a whole to address transregional, multifunctional challenges across all domains. It is a top-down, iterative process that integrates planning, prioritizes resources, and assesses progress toward strategic objectives. Global integration ends include enhanced senior leader decisionmaking, strategically integrated worldwide operations, and a balanced and lethal future joint force.²⁶

To illustrate this point, Professor Hal Brands of Johns Hopkins University argues the United States has forgone its decades-old two-war strategy and “is now building a force . . . around the requirements of winning a high-intensity conflict with a single, top-tier competitor—a war with China over Taiwan, for instance, or a clash with Russia in the Baltic region.”²⁷ This concept again serves to highlight the limits of U.S. military capacity—the joint force simply cannot be everywhere at all times. Thus, global integration has emerged as a joint force imperative in

order to meet the complexities of 21st-century warfare.

War Plan Reviews. Building on Goldwater-Nichols, today's Global Integrator role places greater responsibility on the CJCS as the arbiter of combatant command resource requirements and the President's principal military advisor. With an eye toward emerging global problem sets, the Pentagon bureaucracy has also reinstated a rigorous war plans review process with input from stakeholders from across DOD and the joint force. Two important innovations include development of Global Campaign Plans (GCPs) and Globally Integrated Base Plans (GIBPs). The former address day-to-day competition below the level of armed conflict, while the latter deal exclusively with contingency and conflict. For example, "GCPs address threats or challenges that significantly affect U.S. interests across the globe and require coordinated planning across all, or nearly all," combatant commands.²⁸ As planning constructs for competition, these GCPs are resource-uninformed and do not require transportation, sourcing, or logistics assessments.²⁹ On the other hand, GIBPs are resource-informed and do require transportation, sourcing, and logistics assessments. According to the Joint Staff,

A GIBP recommends adjustments to the day-to-day priorities for all [combatant commands] in the event of a crisis or contingency. GIBPs are developed from the Global Readiness Review of the state-based priority challenges and make recommendations on the reassignment or reallocation of capabilities to the conflict. The GIBP also identifies Presidential- or Secretary-level decisions for execution of the plan. These decisions include activation of the plan, reallocation of strategic assets, and retrograde options for capabilities no longer essential to the conflict response.³⁰

Interestingly, these plans move through two complementary review processes—the "Tank" process and the Joint Planning and Execution Community (JPEC) process. While Tank refers to the CJCS's personal conference room, the

related staffing process surrounding it has assumed the same moniker. Hence, Tank is both a venue and a process. On the first point, this is where the CJCS convenes the other four-star flag officers from across the Pentagon and around the world, either in person or by video, to discuss some of the Nation's most highly classified matters, including war plans. As one might imagine, content does not reach the Tank until it has been vetted and endorsed for four-star review. This speaks to the second point.

Before the CJCS and his or her four-star contemporaries review content, it is "Tanked" by two-star operations deputies followed by the three-star operations deputies with significant staff officer input throughout. While the Tank process is not typically contentious, it is also not meant to be a consensus-building exercise either. Combatant commanders and Service chiefs always retain the right to non-concur with analysis and decisions. That is Pentagon-speak for lodging a formal disagreement. Given the level of seniority involved in the Tank process, senior military leaders generally address broad strategic issues with major policy implications. For instance, when examining policy endstates, a politically appointed policymaker may choose to join the flag officers to represent the Secretary and administration. Again, policy endstates bound and constrain war plans. Rarely does the Tank delve into the operational level of war. This is where the JPEC comes into play.

The JPEC process is akin to what public administrators refer to as Large Group Interaction Models.³¹ The JPEC is an ad hoc confederation of about 100 staff officers around the world charged with reviewing war plans line by line. These officers are subject matter experts who apply their operational and strategic acumen to the problem set at hand to ensure plans are feasible, acceptable, and suitable, all the while ensuring their organization's equities are represented. For instance, a combatant command might be most concerned with the plan's scheme of maneuver, while a Service might be primarily focused on resource mobilization. While the Tank processes

ensures broad strategic coherence, the JPEC process addresses the fine print, as it were.

With the recent advent of GCPs and GIBPs, the CJCS has implemented two new planning constructs for competition and conflict. The first is an annual GCP assessment that travels through the Tank and JPEC processes.³² Second, the Joint Staff leads "Global Readiness Reviews of state-based priority challenges" through the Tank and JPEC process as well.³³ In short, this collective effort has given DOD a new planning framework to delineate between competition and conflict, thereby reenergizing the Pentagon's war-planning apparatus to meet the challenges of GPC.

Beyond Joint Staff readiness reviews, former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, a former war planner himself, reenergized his office's war plans In-Progress Review (IPR) process. IPRs provide "an ongoing process to gain the [Secretary's] review and approval of plans and provide a forum for senior leaders to focus on combatant commander's plans to refine strategic direction and discuss military options early in the planning process."³⁴ These forums also allow the Secretary to ensure plans are properly aligned to policy endstates and contemporary National security objectives. Taken together, the Secretary, CJCS, and Service chiefs have reenergized the Pentagon for GPC and large-scale combat operations.

Recommendations

As the United States competes with nuclear-armed revisionist states such as Russia and China, it is increasingly likely that the Joint Staff and Services—not only the combatant commands—will play a more important role in the war plans process for the foreseeable future. The prospect of GPC with two global adversaries poses too much risk to leave the entire planning process to compartmented geographic commands without frequent input from the CJCS, Service chiefs, and their respective staffs. After all, the CJCS is DOD's Global Integrator, and the Service chiefs are "purple" members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Therefore, we offer three recommenda-



Army Paratroopers assigned to 173rd Airborne Brigade prepare to move into town, August 20, 2020, during Saber Junction 20, held at Army's Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels training areas (U.S. Army/Tomarius Roberts)

tions to further develop the Pentagon's bureaucratic capacity for globally integrated war planning.

First, Service war planners must be prepared to “campaign in competition.” In other words, long-term Service investments and initiatives to bolster global posture, command and control, expeditionary logistics, ally and partner interoperability, and force modernization must be geared toward both day-to-day military operations and the rapid transition from competition to conflict through dynamic force employment and joint warfighting concepts. In recent years, Service war planners have simply validated combatant command OPLANs with an eye toward Title 10 resourcing should the joint force be called on to “fight tonight.” However, as the competition continuum evolves, the Services will be required to set global conditions in order to gain a positional advantage for combatant commanders versus U.S.

adversaries. Service war planners who appreciate cooperation and competition, not just conflict, will be force multipliers for Service chiefs acting in their purple capacities.

Second, the Secretary should carefully balance combatant command authorities with the CJCS's global integration responsibilities. For instance, while geographic combatant commanders are the coordinating authorities for their regional war plans, the CJCS is responsible for synchronizing these myriad plans in time, space, and purpose around the world. We are not advocating for creation of a new general staff, much less an imperial Joint Staff, to be sure. Such a recommendation would be a departure from decades of military leadership and run counter to Goldwater-Nichols. Clearly, combatant command OPLANs benefit from their authors' regional experience and expertise. However, when facing adversaries with global capabilities, someone has got

to be the arbiter and honest broker between multiple OPLANs competing for limited resources. As the Secretary and President's principal military advisor, the CJCS is that person.

Third, military strategists must appreciate how the competition continuum varies across domains—land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. “The great challenge for military and cybersecurity professionals,” writes technologist Tarah Wheeler, “is that incoming attacks are not predictable, and current strategies for prevention tend to share the flawed assumption that the rules of conventional war extend to cyberspace as well.”³⁵ Thus, malign activities in space and cyberspace will likely ebb and flow between Phase 0, “Shaping Operations,” Phase I, “Deterrence,” and Phase II, “Seize the Initiative,” well before conventional military operations begin.³⁶ The joint force could anticipate space and cyber attacks on military information networks and

the joint logistics enterprise to disrupt U.S. global communications and force flow. Consequently, war planners must understand how to craft military activities ahead of and in response to both symmetric and asymmetric threats. The U.S. Army, for its part, refers to this concept as *convergence*—that is, “the rapid and continuous integration of all domains across time, space, and capabilities to overmatch the enemy.”³⁷

Bound by the realities of the international threat environment, policy endstates, and resource constraints, war plans are the ultimate bureaucratic tool to hedge against global conflict. With these linkages in mind, DOD is reconfiguring Globally Integrated Base Plans into Global Integration Frameworks for fiscal year 2021 and beyond. By defining the competition continuum, introducing the concept of global integration, and reinstating a rigorous war plans review process, DOD has reenergized its war-planning apparatus to prepare for what will likely be a prolonged era of Great Power competition. Indeed, this fundamental transformation will have implications for the joint force for years to come. JFQ

Notes

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