

Airman changes light on wing of B-52 Stratofortress during annual command and control exercise Global Thunder 2019, at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, October 30, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Sydney Campbell)



Structuring for Competition

Rethinking the Area of Responsibility Concept for Great Power Competition

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The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (GNA) implemented a revolutionary change in the organization and operation of the Department of Defense (DOD), by focusing

on empowering combatant commanders (CCDRs) to enable joint interoperability. Following GNA, the Unified Command Plan (UCP), the document used to provide operational instructions to all branches of DOD, also saw

major revisions. The UCP readjusted the balance of power from the Services to CCDRs and outlined the corresponding missions, responsibilities, and geographic boundaries. Since 1986, the UCP has evolved incrementally to support the addition of two geographic combatant commands (GCCs) and four functional combatant commands (CCMDs). Although this area of responsibility (AOR)-centric model was particularly well suited for

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conflicts in the industrial age, it is insufficient to address the challenges of Great Power competition in the information age.

In the 20th century, the norms of warfare included clear lines between war and peace, and technology was largely focused on building capabilities to conduct symmetric warfare. Such capabilities were generally constrained in reach to a limited geographic region. Even in the asymmetric counterinsurgency wars of the early 21st century—a prelude to further changes in the character of warfare—the tools and techniques for influencing populations and eradicating insurgent forces remained generally confined by geography and therefore had little global impact. Today, the line between war and peace is blurred, and exponential growth in technology has resulted in capabilities that are global and instantaneous, thus enabling military operations and adversarial activities to occur simultaneously across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains.¹

Even if we can create and master new tools capable of dominating today's battlespace, just having the best technology will not be enough: Winning conflicts today requires changes to the ways DOD organizes and employs forces. Ultimately, if the United States fails to take a comprehensive approach toward adapting to the challenges of the information age and adversarial competition, then we will cede our national security advantage. Therefore, if we do not deliberately couple innovative technological change with radical shifts in the way we are organized, we will fail to optimize these new technologies. This point is also noted in the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission report, which states that “maintaining or reestablishing America’s competitive edge is not simply a matter of generating more resources and capabilities. . . . [T]he innovative operational concepts we need do not currently appear to exist.”² This is an inflection point; if this disparity is not addressed now, the cost to regain our advantage and global military superiority will be untenable on any meaningful timescale in the future.

Modern Warfare

Although the nature of warfare is enduring and largely unchanging, the growth of modern technology and shifts in the nature of geopolitical competition have altered combat in the 21st century.³ In a time of unceasing technological change, our adversaries are leveraging the nearly instantaneous and global nature of the information, space, and cyber domains to render the line between peace and war irrelevant. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford has declared that both “the character of warfare and the strategic landscape have changed dramatically.”⁴ This evolution has enabled not only Great Powers such as Russia and China but also lesser powers such as Iran and North Korea, which lack the conventional power to confront the United States but have the ability to challenge us in new ways through disinformation, cyber operations, space launch, and counterspace activities.

In the 21st-century multidomain battlespace, warfare is less a conflict of annihilation between opposing military forces in a single AOR than one between opposing “operational systems.” Chinese strategists refer to this concept as *systems confrontation*.⁵ Planning for and then executing operations in a systems confrontation environment require a joint, all-domain planning and command and control system. To enable seamless integration of complex operations from sea floor to space and to enable complex collaboration from the tactical to the strategic level, both geographic and functional commanders must be able to see the same extended battlespace. Such a broad system does not currently exist. Indeed, the current CCMD structure strains to operate across geographic and functional touch points and boundaries, narrowing the scope of strategic planning and jeopardizing our ability to set a war-winning posture. Furthermore, capable adversaries are unlikely to constrain themselves only to vertical escalation within the CCMD AOR in which they reside; more likely, they will escalate horizontally, attacking across domains and

geography on a global scale. To manage these problems, prompt and aggressive action is needed to transition from an industrial age organizational structure to a model that accounts for the global adversarial rivalry, influence, and competition endemic in the information age.

Third Offset

To fully appreciate the need for an evolution in organizational structure, we must link GNA and the second offset. Offset strategies have been used twice as a means of asymmetrically compensating for a disadvantage in a military competition. In the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower focused the first offset on nuclear deterrence; between 1975 and 1989, the second offset focused on technology such as stealth and precision bombing. These technological changes occurred concurrently with the revision of both GNA and the UCP. In 2016, then–Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work started a third offset focus that combined “technology, operational concepts, and organizational constructs—different ways of organizing our forces, to maintain our ability to project combat power into any area at the time and place of our own choosing.”⁶ Today, while third offset technical capabilities such as artificial intelligence and hypersonics are being developed, there has been only a nod toward the need for a refined organizational approach and structure.

National Security and Defense Strategies

The 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy “formally reoriented U.S. national security strategy and U.S. defense strategy toward an explicit primary focus on Great Power competition with China and Russia” and highlighted the reemergence of long-term strategic competition as a central challenge to U.S. national security interests.⁷ During testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2018, then–Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated, “We cannot expect success fighting tomorrow’s conflicts with yesterday’s

thinking, weapons, or equipment.”⁸ Recent initiatives such as the assignment of coordinating authority responsibility to CCDRs and the codification of the Chairman as the global integrator are laudable first steps toward rectifying shortfalls in the current structure and prioritizing the development of a more agile and lethal force. Similarly, Dunford acknowledged the operational impacts of Great Power competition, and he promulgated concepts such as global integration and dynamic force employment across the joint force through a series of globally integrated tabletop exercises, wargames, and campaign plans. The concept of global integration focuses on the synchronization of activities in time, space, and purpose, across all domains and geographic boundaries, to influence our adversaries. His keen emphasis on the need to globally integrate operations was meant to drive a shift in focus from conflict to competition so that we maintain our competitive advantage.

In June 2019, the Joint Staff published Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, “Competition Continuum,” which draws on the requirement to campaign through competition below armed conflict through armed conflict. An overarching point in this document is that success in campaigning requires “the skillful application of both cooperation and competition below armed conflict.”⁹ Nevertheless, global integration is not an end unto itself. Without a deliberate focus on the more profound, systemic, and structural shortfalls of the current DOD organizational construct, these global integration concepts will fall short in their ability to drive a third offset change in organizational structure capable of addressing the current character of warfare.

Current Combatant Command Seams

Over time, the CCMD construct has expanded to adapt to new realities and challenges. The standup of U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) as the 10th CCMD and the recent activation of U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM) as the 11th demonstrate that

leaders recognize the need for focused attention on new warfighting geometry and on the ways we will execute military operations in the future. While well intentioned, however, this growth in CCMDs has had the undesirable consequence of concomitantly increasing the number of organizational seams across which CCMD coordination and synchronization must occur. Using Russian malign influence as an operational vignette: The Russian government has effectively applied pressure in every functional domain and across every geographic AOR over the last 6 months. Therefore, to adequately address the military objectives tied to this problem set, a staff officer would be required to coordinate with all 11 CCMDs. The resulting number of seams coupled with the inability of the joint force to sufficiently support CCMD capacity requirements dramatically increase Clausewitzian friction, causing commanders and staffs within these organizations to spend the preponderance of their time balancing cross-command equities rather than focusing on adversaries. While this friction can be overcome, it requires staff officers to spend their time developing, institutionalizing, and following time-consuming bureaucratic processes. Unfortunately, this also means they spend less time planning and executing effective operations.

Despite these shortfalls, it is important to acknowledge that geographic CCDRs can be exceedingly effective in shaping their theaters by building personal relationships and organizational partnerships. These are powerful tools for advancing U.S. national security objectives. In this role in particular, GCCs are critical to protecting what the National Military Strategy recognizes as a center of gravity for the joint force and combined operations: our structure of alliances and partnerships that provides access and influence around the globe.¹⁰ In any future organizational construct, this capability must be not only maintained but also bolstered with personnel with long-term and deep regional expertise. Equally important will be maintaining the equivalent deep expertise resident

within the functional CCMDs, especially in areas where technical competence requires a deliberate approach to force development.

It is also crucial to note that in establishing the GCCs, DOD leadership never intended to limit CCMDs to rigid geographic operating boundaries; rather, the intent was for CCMDs to be free to operate where necessary to carry out their assigned missions. In reality, however, geographic areas of responsibility have become restrictive. CCMD staffs are organized, trained, and equipped to solely manage their AORs, and their priorities within those boundaries are rigidly coveted. While some commands have made progress in coordinating along CCMD seams, few other than the functional CCMDs have managed to implement a global approach to the challenges they face. This is due not to any failure of vision or leadership, but instead to one of training and structure. Although the 2018 National Defense Strategy tasked the GCCs with global roles, their staffs have neither the capacity nor depth of expertise to execute such a scale. The daily feat of managing U.S. operations within any AOR consumes CCMD staff capacity. In the few instances where an insightful staff officer recommends a course of action for an issue with global implications (for example, intellectual property theft, ballistic missile proliferation, or adversary cognitive management), the bureaucracy of cross-CCMD coordination and consensus decisionmaking is self-defeating. These good ideas fade away unrealized because our structures are ultimately insufficient in effecting operations against agile and opportunistic adversaries. Such limitations are unavoidable in a system based on consensus among co-equal CCDRs and in the face of policy restraints requiring Secretary of Defense approval to move forces as small as a three-man dog team across CCMD boundaries.

A Reimagined Command and Control Structure

We propose to restructure the global command and control of DOD. In light of the points made above, three



MH-60R Sea Hawk Helicopter from "Battlecats" of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron (HSM) 73 takes off from flight deck of USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) during simulated Strait Transit as part of composite training unit exercise, Pacific Ocean, May 14, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Sarah Christoph)

key attributes of this reimagined global command and control structure emerge: a continued focus on global integration, the ability to conduct ongoing and persistent operations, and preservation of the ability to establish and grow relationships with partners and allies.

On the first attribute, any future organizational design should build on the progress made through the global integration effort of the last 2 years and continue to challenge how we think about unity of effort, unity of command, and command authorities and responsibilities. Global integration is about taking a comprehensive and broad look across multiple adversaries and balancing global risk. While CCDRs can influence decisions at the national level, the Chairman's physical proximity and statutory authority confer the access and perspective required to advise political leadership; this comports well with the role of global integrator. As the principal military advisor to the President and the National Security Council, the Chairman is a trusted leader in the development of security policy, providing apolitical advice to leadership of the risks and costs associated with the options under consideration as well as the risk of inaction. He sits at the confluence of the civil-military divide, which allows him not only to

influence policy guidance but also to deliver clear direction, consistent with the civilian leadership's desired outcomes, to the force. Furthermore, as the principal military advisor to the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman orchestrates the global laydown of forces, recommending the movement of force elements based on both desired political endstates and the risks such moves incur. The Chairman also can influence risk-to-mission and risk-to-force by engaging the Secretary and President and advocating for additional authorities for the employment of physical power or for actions in the information, space, and cyberspace realms.

The Joint Staff is the engine that supports the Chairman as he works to accomplish these tasks, although it is not currently structured as a headquarters staff. To effectively support the Chairman as the global integrator, it should be, and de facto the staff has assumed this role to deconflict activities in time, space, and purpose across all domains and GCC boundaries during world events in Venezuela, North Korea, Syria, and Iran and to address insidious Russian and Chinese malign influence. Aligning these activities under an optimized organizational structure would require an extraordinarily uncomfortable overhaul of Joint Staff functions, internal processes,

and alignment of resources; however, as Lieutenant General Kevin McLaughlin, USAF, former deputy commander at USCYBERCOM, stated, this shift would enable the Nation to become "ambidextrous."¹¹ With the right hand, we support commanders in localized terrestrial fights requiring the integration of numerous supporting commanders. At the same time, the left hand must be capable of supporting global commanders tasked to execute operations well beyond the perspective and authority of a regional commander. Essentially, there will need to be multiple supported commanders, all aligned with the higher authority, direction, and strategy flowing from the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman.¹²

A second key attribute of a reimagined command and control structure is an ability to rapidly respond to events in the operational environment. Future conflicts are likely to commence far more quickly than wars of the past and with no regard for physical geography. Consequently, there will be little time to shift from a competition or campaign posture. Frankly, the mentality of "switching" from peacetime to wartime highlights our tendency to view warfare as a *breakdown* of politics rather than its "continuation by other means," as Carl von Clausewitz viewed it—and as do many of our



Marines with Charlie Company, 4th Tank Battalion, fire M1A1 Abrams tank during theater security cooperation exercise Cobra Gold 19, at Sukhothai, Kingdom of Thailand, February 21, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Kyle C. Talbot)

adversaries. As the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning states, “growing instability, the erosion of international norms, and the rise of revisionist powers all suggest competition will be increasingly prevalent in the future operating environment.”¹³ As a result, the clear delineation between periods of “war” and “peace” has become impossible to discern, as our forces remain continually engaged around the globe in a complex milieu of competition. This reality has rendered many of our fundamental assumptions about the character of warfare invalid and presents a significant cultural challenge for DOD. We must recognize that the United States is engaged in daily competition and that success requires a seamless transition from a crisis response stance to one of ongoing and indefinite operations. This transition requires the organizational confidence to move from a supported to supporting relationship with agility. An effective warfighting

mission command structure must enable the joint force to proactively engage and persistently contest adversaries across a globally integrated battlespace. The success of such an organizational structure depends on the ability to minimize the discontinuity in the current environment and recognize the multifaceted nature of strategic competition.

The third and final key attribute of any new command and control structure is that it must preserve the ability to build relationships and partnerships that support U.S. security objectives. We need to leverage our partners and allies to maintain regional stability and security, advance interoperability, support robust logistics, and enable our forward presence. Although our current security cooperation efforts can sometimes feel frustrating and ineffective due to multiple competing interests and messages, a new structure that synchronizes and integrates a joint and DOD-wide approach would

empower partners to confront internal challenges while maintaining U.S. Government consistency across multiple lines of effort. Currently, cooperation activities such as foreign military sales are cumbersome and plagued with time-consuming bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles. Therefore, DOD offices that support security cooperation would also require some degree of process redesign and realignment to more efficiently engage across a global and domain-agnostic structure.

A Reimagined Unified Command Plan

What might such a reimagined UCP look like? One option we can envision would create two CCMD-like organizations called Permanent Joint Force Headquarters (PJHQ), one centered on day-to-day campaigning and the other focused on cooperation. The campaigning PJHQ would be comprised of sub-

ordinate task forces (TFs), each assigned global responsibility for specific competitors or threat actors. These TFs would conduct a range of tasks in pursuit of campaign objectives, including directing and coordinating activities during competition and managing the application of physical power should conflict erupt. Some of the subordinate TFs would be enduring (for example, Joint Task Force [JTF]-China), while others might be purpose-built to manage an emerging crisis after which they are stood down (for example, JTF-Venezuela). Ideally, the campaigning PJHQ would not only have the attributes of a warfighting command but also include interagency participation across the other elements of national power in order to redefine conflict away from “fight tonight” toward the orchestration and presentation of strategic shaping options as a means to proactively influence our adversaries.

In such a new model, USSPACECOM, USCYBERCOM, U.S. Transportation Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) remain global commands supporting the campaigning PJHQ. Perhaps they retain some “standalone” missions, but these operations would likely be executed under the authority of the campaigning PJHQ. For example, USCYBERCOM might have an element designated as the JTF for worldwide malicious cyber actors, or USSOCOM might lead the JTF to counter violent extremist organizations, but both would be in a supporting role, directed by the campaigning PJHQ.

Under this model, most of the current GCCs would devolve. While the United States could continue to fill critical positions such as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, commands such as U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Southern Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command would probably be subsumed and reimaged in the new structure. U.S. Strategic Command would remain, but it would focus exclusively on its nuclear mission. U.S. Northern Command would probably

remain for homeland defense and defense support to civil authorities.

The cooperation PJHQ would be tightly linked to the campaigning PJHQ and include interagency, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Service representation. The key difference between the campaigning and the cooperation PJHQs is that the latter would be threat-agnostic and focused mainly on building partnerships for partnerships’ sake, which both contributes to regional stability and can be leveraged in future conflicts. Subordinate TFs would be responsible for coordinating security cooperation activities across assigned countries, working closely with the campaigning PJHQ to set priorities for partner engagement. Under this proposed construct, the Joint Staff would assume the operational role as a headquarters staff in support of the global integrator, creating shared strategic context via a framework that brings coherence across regions and domains.

Although this vision represents a significant departure from the current AOR-centric approach and does not fully comport with the National Defense Strategy Commission’s recommendations and many senior policymakers’ viewpoints, it is necessary to posture DOD to maintain our competitive advantage. Without a revolutionary change in DOD organizational structure as audacious as GNA was in its day, the national objectives of our competitors and adversaries will soon overwhelm or render irrelevant DOD capacity to project power and achieve U.S. national objectives. We fully recognize that a paradigm shift on the scale described here would be significant in terms of the magnitude of the effort required to pull it off, the emotional toll it would take, and the resistance it would invite from those most invested in the current organizational structure. We also acknowledge that this article presents only one potential solution. Our intent is to engender a robust and candid debate about the suitability of the current organizational structure as we progress through the 21st century. We believe that the United States will need to be able to project power globally and

across multiple domains on a scale never before experienced. This conversation is challenging; however, it is a necessary one to have now if we are to posture the joint force for success in 2030 and beyond. JFQ

Notes

¹ Robert O. Work and Greg Grant, *Beating the Americans at Their Own Game: An Offset Strategy with Chinese Characteristics* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2019), available at <www.cnas.org/publications/reports/ beating-the-americans-at-their-own-game>.

² National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), available at <www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>.

³ Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., “Gen. Dunford: The Character of War,” *DOD Live*, April 30, 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Work and Grant, *Beating the Americans at Their Own Game*.

⁶ Remarks by Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work on Third Offset Strategy, Brussels, Belgium, April 28, 2016, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/753482/remarks-by-deputy-secretary-work-on-third-offset-strategy/>>.

⁷ Robert O’Rourke, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, R43838—Version 50 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 19, 2019).

⁸ Lisa Ferdinando, “Mattis Highlights Efforts to Restore Military, Fight Tomorrow’s Wars,” *Army.mil*, April 27, 2018, available at <www.army.mil/article/204461/mattis_highlights_efforts_to_restore_military_fight_tomorrows_wars>.

⁹ Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, “Competition Continuum,” The Joint Staff, June 3, 2019.

¹⁰ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

¹¹ Lieutenant General James K. McLaughlin, USAF, author email correspondence, September 25, 2019.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018).