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FUTURE OF WARFIGHTING

Unifying militaries through resilient operations

As the scope and scale of defense challenges evolves, there is a growing need to improve jointness between military services and alliances to improve operational effectiveness. Wars are no longer typically confined to a single domain, like land or sea, where operations in one domain rarely affects operations in another. Nor is warfare typically an isolated geographic event. Weapons increasingly strike over greater distances while cyber and information operations span the globe with a click. Warfare today occurs through multiple domains simultaneously with global reach. The scope and scale of future wars will likely only grow, and it can help to face these changes with improved military interoperability.

Militaries are often composed of services with their own sphere of operations and a self-contained combat capability—though with a fair bit of overlap in some areas, like aviation. Disjointed services can lead to duplicative efforts, disagreement over strategy, and operational stovepipes. Against modern defense challenges, separate and disjointed services can prove problematic for creating an effective national defense. For that reason, many militaries are pursuing efforts to improve jointness. In fact, 32 countries have already developed varying approaches to joint services.[1]

As militaries move away from independent forces to joint forces, they must combine resources and goals. A more joint force has the potential to draw on the strengths of all services, while compensating for weaknesses and avoiding duplicative efforts. Jointness should exist across the spectrum of military functions, from command and control to development and acquisition, talent, and operational resilience.

To enable joint forces, many countries are increasingly establishing unified commands which brings together segments of services into a single command structure for a particular geographical area or function. For example, the United States military operates eleven joint combat commands.[2] Many developing nations are adopting similar strategies.[3] India, for instance, created the Chief of Defence Staff in 2019 to improve jointness within the Indian military.[4]

Unified commands can be useful because they group military services and capabilities together under a common mission, whether a geographic area, like space or the Middle East, or a functional area, like cyber and transportation. The downside, however, is that while unified commands offer greater jointness, it's not uncommon that coordinating across or between a large organization can prove challenging. They may also compete among themselves for resources and missions much like the military services. To be sure, unified commands are a helpful step, but as militaries progress toward greater jointness, it will be important that they are mindful of avoiding new organizational silos and operational competition.

One-way militaries can support the creation of unified commands while avoiding potential pitfalls is by creating unified commands around resilient operations.

Resilient operations

Resilient operations generally require deploying the full range of tools to maneuver, sustain, protect, and apply force in warfare. From supply chains and a country's defense industrial base, to physical and digital logistical practices, resilient operations can link separate unified commands together through shared processes and resources that avoid duplicative efforts, while creating a critical connection and co-dependence around supplying and sustaining combat operations.

When developed to combat the spectrum of defense challenges confronting militaries today, resilient operations can be both a credible deterrent and operational advantage. Whether it's combating peer-adversaries, defending the rules-based international order, or confronting grey zone threats, resilient operations are necessary.

Connecting commands through resilient operations

Developing resilient operations can take many forms, but a few key elements are important regardless of form.

The first piece is a ***coordinated personnel sustainment ecosystem***. Militaries must sustain the troops necessary to fight and win wars. As militaries modernize, it will be important to evolve the systems that protect troops welfare, readiness, and quality of life. This may look different for different militaries, but it often includes human resources, legal, healthcare, and religious support among others. Importantly, without proper coordination and planning sustainment costs can easily take up a major portion of a defense budget. Militaries should create a sustainment vision that accounts for the personnel needs and how demands for talent may shift. A second important piece is matching operational goals with the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders responsible for personnel sustainment. This includes the military services, industry partners, among others. Finally, militaries should align training, talent processes, and related tools to personnel sustainment goals.

Militaries will also need to approach ***force protection jointly.*** Force protection involves protecting combat resources, from troops to bases, so that they are available at the moment of need. Historically, militaries conducted force protection through physical measures, like putting fences up around military instillations and storing critical equipment where it's harder to attack. While these approaches will continue to be necessary, the increasingly digital and informational nature of warfare requires more than physical protections. Cyber attacks can cripple important military capabilities, despite being behind the walls of a military base, and information operations can sway public, or even servicemember, opinion before war is even declared. As a result, militaries should apply force protection across and through multiple domains. Conducting force protection jointly requires a shared understanding of the operational environment and incentives, including risk calculus and goals. It also requires the ability to reach across services to leverage resources where they are needed.

The final element is ***closely coordinated logistical practices.*** From the industrial base, to theater supply and the tactical edge, military logistics will need to be closely connected and coordinated. A digital backbone, joint training and planning, and practice through wargames are all critical to joint logistical practices. Through these tools and practices, military can more easily and effectively manage the complex ecosystem of resources, suppliers, and transportation necessary for modern logistics, and all while under enemy attack. Allies and close partners should also be included where applicable.

Through coordinated personnel sustainment, force protection, and logistics, a military can develop a shared ability to ready, protect, and deliver combat capabilities through resilient operations. Building unified commands around resilient operations will require overcoming certain challenges, however.

Avoiding challenges toward a more joint force

As countries pursue greater jointness across their forces, there are inherent operational, technology, and cultural challenges that they will need to overcome.

- **Operational –** After decades or even hundreds of years of a service honing operational expertise, it can be difficult to share operational responsibilities and resources with other services. Afterall, why would an Army look to a Navy for operational guidance or vice versa? Here, it's important to remember that the success of the military—rather than a single service—is what is most important. Waging a successful land campaign won't matter if the country loses the war at sea. More than thinking about jointness, services should align operational concepts for the pacing defense challenges, unify processes, like those related to acquisition, and avoid competing for resources that their strategic guidance doesn't require. For instance, seeking to grow the Army when the pacing threat requires bolstering the Navy is likely counterproductive. The specifics of each of these operational needs will be different for different militaries facing different defense challenges and domestic political considerations, but deciding what is an effective approach should be done jointly.

- **Technology –** The battlefield is becoming increasingly digital. From communications to intelligence, and even individual weapons systems, warfare increasingly relies on interoperable digital technologies. 1s and 0s fuel much of modern combat operations. When military services approach technology differently, it can make joint operations difficult. While not every military capability needs to be interoperable with everything else, it is helpful to share certain technologies, especially those that enable the collection, use, and storage of data, like Cloud, AI, among others. Creating a shared technology ecosystem within a joint command will likely require reconciling service specific needs with budgetary constraints. Complicating matters, technology is not static. What technology a military needs today may be different tomorrow. Approaching technology adoption should be seen as a journey taken together by all services and not an end state or unilateral undertaking.

- **Cultural –** Each service often builds its own distinct culture. Unique service cultures can be a great thing but only if they share core cultural traits that align each service to the mission. For example, Special Operation Forces are often some of the most joint forces because they routinely operate together. While Army special operators and Navy special operators may have different skillsets and unit cultures, their shared cultural traits, like a commitment to the mission, allows difference to be complementary. When cultures are too diametric, bringing services together under a joint command can not only lead to a cultural clash but also friction over who will exercise command authority over joint forces. When realigning culture, it's important to keep focused on the goal (in this case jointness), keep a sense of humility, and seek outside perspectives that shed light on the positive and negative cultural elements as well as ways to fix them.

Getting started

Regardless of how a military is organized, they are built on discipline, a chain of command, and a willingness to take on the mission. So, while large military reorganizations can be a complicated task, the necessary elements to undertake it are already in place. What is required is a new joint doctrine to provide a common approach.

Joint doctrine

To reorganize around resilient operations and enable the creation of unified commands, militaries should have a rigorous, articulated, and empirically tested framework that can establish joint culture and processes around a shared mission.

Militaries by design are familiar with frameworks. Each service follows a doctrine which acts as guiding principles as they contribute to the military's mission. A "doctrine provides a military organization with a common philosophy, a common language, a common purpose, and a unity of effort." A Joint Doctrine (JD) provides the same at a unified level. With the joint commands being an amalgamation of multiple services with often disparate doctrines, militaries should prioritize establishing a JD. A JD it is not a prescriptive doctrinal template for how individual units should operate or discuss the requirements of specific missions. A JD can enhance the strategic, operational, and tactical effectiveness of the joint force through coherence. A well-developed joint doctrine can also align cultures.

Developing a JD should account for the most pressing defense challenges and the resources necessary to defend against them. But deciding how to assess defense challenges and the subsequent requirements can be challenging. An interoperability framework can help. The framework should not be viewed as a maturity model where the goal is simply to become the most interoperable. Instead, it's a way of assessing where a military is across important functions, like resilient operations, and where they'd like to improve based on which defense challenge is most important. In this way, using a framework to establish key parts of a JD is a journey where military leaders continue to evaluate priorities and plans as defense challenges change.

With key pieces of a JD identified, leaders can begin working backwards to understand what is necessary for developing resilient operations across unified commands.

Becoming a more joint military isn't just a smart thing to do, it's the necessary thing to do. Defense challenges today, and likely future challenges as well, necessitate a closely coordinated and organized military. Anything less than that and militaries will likely struggle against an ever-changing defense landscape. As long as defense challenges persist, so too should a military's pursuit of greater interoperability.

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Endnotes

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