

# Divided We Fall

## How the U.S. Force Is Losing Its Joint Advantage over China and Russia

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*Professionalism and Jointness are perishable, they must be cultivated.*

—Joint Chiefs of Staff White Paper

Since the implementation of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act (GNA), the U.S. military has held a particular operational advantage over potential adversaries with respect to joint interoperability. That

advantage is the ability to conduct operations that are truly joint, where forces from different services work interoperably and interdependently. However, in recent years, the U.S. military has taken steps that threaten to undermine this advantage by weakening the very reforms that have lifted the joint force. Among other things, it has diluted joint education and curtailed joint duty assignments while adversaries such as China and Russia are slowly but steadily enhancing their ability to



plan and conduct joint operations. To preserve its joint advantage, the U.S. military must reverse this trend and recommit to building military leaders who can think jointly, operate jointly, and lead jointly. Without a renewed emphasis on joint officer development, the United States stands to cede competitive space to global adversaries such as China and Russia.

## The Joint Imperative

*Jointness is not automatic and it is perishable. It must be advanced through continual joint force development efforts.*

—Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*<sup>1</sup>

As stated in the 2014 *Army Operating Concept*, “American military power is joint power”; it is through joint operations that the U.S. military achieves objectives set by the national command authority.<sup>2</sup> With the GNA and subsequent reforms, Congress’s aim was to strengthen the ability of the U.S. military to plan and execute joint operations. Joint operations rely on the unique capabilities of each service ranging from combat platforms, warfighting organizations, and most important, joint-minded leaders for each mission. Rarely does a crisis lend itself to the capabilities of a single military service, and this means the forces from each must collaboratively orient toward common objectives rather than each fighting a separate campaign. Through the effective conduct of joint operations, the U.S. military is able to achieve success during times of conflict, and when it operates jointly and simultaneously through all domains and around the globe, adversaries have few military options to counter our actions.

It took the United States three decades to build the joint operational-level advantage it possesses today. More than simply establishing joint commands and assigning officers from the various services into joint billets, the Department of Defense (DOD) deliberately

institutionalized key enablers for joint operations. This included developing organizations to produce joint concepts and doctrine, conducting several major joint exercises annually to hone the readiness of the joint force to carry out wartime missions, and maintaining a robust inventory of lessons learned from joint operations and exercises.<sup>3</sup> Most important, the DOD learned the importance of instilling jointness in the minds of officers through joint professional military education (JPME) and subsequent joint duty experience. This is because JPME and joint duty are central to fostering the interpersonal trust that underwrites interdependence between forces of different services. These reforms have created a joint force of unprecedented capability, a result that our strategic competitors have recognized and are now endeavoring to achieve as well.

## The Rise of China as a Joint Threat

Since assuming the office of president of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of improving joint operations in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Recent reforms moving the PLA toward more effective joint operations include changes to training, personnel, concept development, and organization.<sup>4</sup> By drawing lessons from past U.S. military operations—Desert Storm, Kosovo, and the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003—Xi and senior PLA leaders concluded that victory in warfare is achieved through joint operations. In its 2019 annual report to Congress, the DOD outlined multiple ways in which China seeks to restructure its military to improve jointness. For example, the PLA recently published the *Outline of Training and Education* that emphasizes joint training in all domains and increased training through multiservice exercises, maneuvers, and mobility operations.<sup>5</sup> Further, according to the authors of a recent National Defense University publication, China is also reorganizing its command structure through the establishment of five theater commands, each responsible for developing joint operational plans. Though domestic in nature, this bears a striking resemblance to the arrangement of the U.S. combatant commands under the Unified Command Plan.<sup>6</sup>

The PLA leadership understands the operational imperative of its military in a conflict with another nation is not the total destruction of an adversary’s armed forces. Rather, victory lies in the destruction of warfighting potential, ranging from strategic leadership

**Previous page:** Russian, Chinese, and Mongolian national flags are displayed on armored vehicles 13 September 2018 during the Vostok 2018 military exercise on Tsugol training ground in Eastern Siberia, Russia. The exercise involved nearly three hundred thousand Russian troops, a thousand aircraft, and thirty-six thousand military vehicles from Russia’s army, air force, and navy. (Photo by Sergei Grits, Associated Press)

to communications infrastructure. Attaining these goals or destroying these target sets requires the integration of long-range fires and effects *across each branch of service and across all domains*.<sup>7</sup> Through such reforms to the PLA, China seeks to create a force capable of “complex joint operations.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, PLA leadership is focusing greater attention on both joint training and joint education to build the capacity of military officers to command and control joint operations.<sup>9</sup>

China is not yet at the threshold of surpassing the U.S. military’s capability to conduct joint operations. The United States has a deep bench in experienced and educated joint officers, not to mention joint doctrine and operational concepts, and these are capabilities that China still lacks. Further, China is moving toward an integrated joint fires system and advancing toward a joint logistics and joint acquisition enterprise.<sup>10</sup> It is prudent for the United States to continue to monitor China’s advance toward a military capable of joint operations with the assumption the PLA will mirror current U.S. joint capability by 2035.<sup>11</sup>

## The Steady Russian Advance

After years of neglect and underinvestment, Russia’s advance toward a more capable and effective force began in earnest in late 2008. In the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian military had minimal funding with which to man, train, and equip its units. Early indications of this underinvestment came to the forefront in 1994 with the feeble and haphazard performance by the Russian military in Chechnya. This circumstance persisted over the next decade and a half during operations in Kosovo in 1999 and later in the Republic of Georgia in 2008. In the latter, the Russian military was able to achieve strategic objectives, but this success was attributable more to the use of overwhelming force and capability overmatch than a more effective military force. The performance of the Russian military in Georgia prompted broad reforms to create a more capable and professional force.<sup>12</sup> Although the reforms included changes to professional military education, they principally aimed to improve military efficacy through restructuring of the Russian military.

By operating jointly, the Russian military stands to create unique operational advantages through its more diverse range of militarized forces. In her book *Russia’s Military Revival*, Bettina Renz details how the Russian

approach to joint military operations is not entirely analogous to the U.S. concept of jointness, which usually involves the participation of forces from two or more military services.<sup>13</sup> To understand Russian joint operations, one must comprehend Russian force structure and how it starkly differs from that of U.S. military and those of many states. While the Russian military has the traditional armed forces with army, air force, and naval components, Moscow’s military efforts can also incorporate other nontraditional militarized forces such as the Federal Security Service, the Interior Ministry, and the Ministry for Emergency Situations. This arrangement follows a different paradigm and is not well understood by many in the U.S. military. Under this structure, the Russian military can directly leverage nontraditional forces and capabilities in circumstances that would require the U.S. military to be subordinated under another interagency department. For example, the Ministry for Emergency Situations, a component of the Russian military, is the lead for foreign humanitarian assistance, whereby any U.S. military involvement in the same would be under the auspices of the U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>14</sup> This broad range of forces enables Russia’s military to conduct joint military operations

against adversaries across a broad spectrum of activities and well below the threshold of armed conflict.

Moscow’s intervention in Syria demonstrated to the world the Russian military’s increasing capability to

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conduct joint combat operations. According to the research of Tim Ripley, as discussed in his book *Operation Aleppo: Russia's War in Syria*, throughout its involvement in the Syria conflict, the Russian military integrated its land, air, and maritime forces to mass effects against forces opposing the Syrian regime. Facilitating this, Russia set up a joint command and control center ironically named "Central Command" (or "Centcom")

to provide unity of command over its forces. This facility was also a combined Russian, Iranian, and Syrian headquarters that coordinated the efforts of three armies, two air forces, and one navy.<sup>15</sup> Russia's joint operations in Syria served as both a laboratory and a showcase for the growing ability of Russia's military to operate as a joint force. Russian forces continually operated close air support; ground maneuver; and





long-range land, air, and maritime strikes in a concerted effort to achieve operational objectives.<sup>16</sup>

Russian joint operations in Syria and the increasingly larger and complex *Zapad* (West) joint military exercises signal that Moscow's forces will not be pushovers should the United States and NATO partners decide to engage them on a battlefield in the future. However, as with the PLA, the Russian military does not currently

pose wide-ranging and significant challenges to the overmatch enjoyed by the United States. After the reforms of the last decade, the Russian military has become smaller and remains very limited in its force projection capability. However, restructuring and targeted investments are producing a force that is much more effective and ready, and this trend is expected to continue in the years ahead.<sup>17</sup>





## The United States—Standing Still or Moving Backward?

*PME [Professional Military Education] has stagnated, focused more on the accomplishment of mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity. ... PME is to be used as a strategic asset to build trust and interoperability across the Joint Forces and with allied and partner forces.*

—Summary of the National Defense Strategy<sup>18</sup>

Few would disagree that the reforms under the GNA and subsequent legislation have enabled the components of the U.S. joint force to operate better, gaining in both efficiency and effectiveness. However, rather than improving on these gains, in recent years, the U.S. military now appears to take jointness for granted and has worked to weaken many mechanisms that have lifted the joint force. These missteps manifest most saliently in the areas of joint education, duty, and organization.

**Joint education.** The DOD appears to have lost its way in ensuring military officers receive quality and timely joint education. It has largely succeeded in obfuscating the intent and focus of a critical phase of joint education by accrediting myriad senior-level organizations for delivery of JPME Phase II (JPME II). Most of these programs and institutions exist for purposes far apart from joint education, and their accreditation creates tension between serving their particular service or specialty focus and the requirements for a truly joint curriculum and experience. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's policy for joint education does little to assure consistent emphasis in joint content and approach across these programs, and despite its intended and legislated purpose, this phase of joint education is now widely misunderstood, becoming many different things to many different people.<sup>19</sup> In short, there is absolutely no basic common core of content that institutions must cover in the JPME II curriculum. Further, a 2008 policy change no longer requires officers to receive this phase of JPME before serving in their first joint assignment, despite the preparatory intent for the education.<sup>20</sup> According to RAND, the disordering of joint education and joint duty

has now become endemic in practice.<sup>21</sup> Despite explicit warning by Congress in 1989, JPME II is now seen by the Services as simply a “check the box” requirement for promotion to flag or general officer.<sup>22</sup>

**Joint duty.** In another step backward, the DOD also diminished the value of joint experience to officer development. With the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act in 2017, the DOD succeeded with a legislative initiative to substantially reduce the amount of time required of officers serving in a joint assignment to receive joint duty credit. While the change helps to increase the number of joint-qualified officers on the books—a cosmetic improvement—the measure severely shortchanges the joint experience acquired by officers and saddles combatant commands with increased personnel turnover and staff inefficiency. Additionally, some services delay assignment of their officers to joint billets until after those have met their service requirements for promotion to O-6 (Army colonel or Navy captain). This adds to beliefs that joint duty matters only when it comes to promotion. In fact, it encourages officers to avoid joint service as long as they possibly can, serving instead in the assignments their service values most. Together with the changes to JPME, the DOD is taking a quantity-over-quality approach to joint officer development.

**Joint organization.** With respect to joint force structure, the disestablishment of Joint Forces Command in 2011 represents another unfortunate setback to the joint advantage of the U.S. military. Not only did the action eliminate a powerful advocate for jointness, but it also eliminated the operational control the joint command exercised by law over the forces assigned to it.<sup>23</sup> This left the preponderance of U.S. conventional military forces under the exclusive control of their respective services—a circumstance that continues today. It was the intent of Congress in 1986 that, with few exceptions, all forces shall be assigned to the unified commands in order to reduce the parochial influence the services exerted in past joint military operations. A key architect of the GNA reforms and author of *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon*, James Locher III, testified to the Senate Armed Service Committee in 2015 that this circumstance risks “returning to the service separateness that crippled military operations prior to the Goldwater-Nichols Act.” Yet, in 2017, the DOD sought and succeeded in legislative change preserving the circumstance of service-retained forces.<sup>24</sup>

**Previous page:** Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks to coalition service members 27 November 2019 at Operation Inherent Resolve headquarters in Baghdad. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Dominique A. Pineiro, U.S. Navy)

With these events as a backdrop, it seems unlikely that the United States is on track to sustain, much less build upon, the competitive joint advantage it enjoys over potential adversaries. It is time for the DOD to pause and reflect.

## Consequences

The ability of the U.S. military to employ each component of the joint force, synchronized in time, space, and purpose, is paramount to maintaining overmatch over adversaries in time of conflict. The United States has witnessed past failures by its military services to

diagnosed, if ever, there will be an instinctive resistance by the department to earnestly identify and meaningfully address the challenge, especially when other priorities abound. This is because the GNA reforms to joint education, duty, and organization, while having only modest advocacy in the joint staff, have little substantive advocacy within the powerful services. Congress had to force much-needed reforms on the DOD in 1986 and will need to do so again if the department succeeds in continuing its efforts to undermine the mechanisms that have enabled the joint force to become what it is today.



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operate as a joint team. Operation Eagle Claw, the failed rescue of the hostages in Iran, serves as one example. Casualties in the invasion of Grenada serve as another painful reminder of the price paid when the services fail to operate jointly. So it seems illogical, if not nonsensical, that in the face of contemporary security challenges the U.S. military would diminish, rather than to preserve or expand upon, the various GNA reforms that created the finest military force in history.

While the specific consequences of the U.S. military's incremental retreat from jointness are hard to discern in advance, three outcomes are likely. The first is that negative effects on the joint force resulting from these changes, while unquantifiable, are all but certain. With increased service influence on joint operations and combatant command staffs increasingly manned by officers ill-prepared for joint duty and who will turn over more often, we should expect more ill-fated mistakes by the joint force to include deadly ones. Our not-too-distant history reminds us of this.<sup>25</sup> The second outcome is that the joint force and the DOD will be slow to recognize these problems and their underlying causes. Moreover, the operational implications of departmental efforts to weaken GNA reforms may go undiagnosed for a very long time and perhaps will come to light only after a succession of military operations beset by parochial attitudes and joint incompetence during both planning and execution. Finally, once the problem is properly

## Conclusion

A thirty-year head start in building joint competency was not the choice of the U.S. military; rather, it was effected forcibly by Congress through legislation. Discerning and thoughtful members of Congress recognized the fiascos of Vietnam, the Mayaguez incident, and the deadly mistakes in Operation Urgent Fury and Eagle Claw for what they were. In response, they drove institutional change in the DOD and against the unified opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The realization that the military fights as a joint force is a key part of the officer maturation process. Joint duty and education are not zero-sum options; they are not wasteful drains on service resources. The ability to put aside service parochialism to capably plan and execute as a joint team is a force multiplier for forces operating at the tactical and operational levels of war. Doing so requires quality and timely joint education, depth of joint experience, and effective joint organization before forces and functions are brought together in time of crisis. The joint advantage enjoyed by the U.S. military is highly perishable and must be cultivated continuously. If we expect to win the first battles of the next war, the department must reaffirm its commitment to improving the capability and capacity of the joint force. ■

*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Army, the Joint Forces Staff College, the DOD, or the U.S. government.*

## Notes

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