



Implementing the National Defense Strategy Demands Operational Concepts for Defeating Chinese and Russian Aggression

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KEY ISSUES

The 2018 National Defense Strategy is a rare area of bipartisan consensus, with defense experts from both parties viewing it as a prudent guide for long-term competition with China and Russia.

Implementing this strategy demands new operational concepts for defeating Chinese and Russian aggression.

Without these concepts as a framework, DoD and Congress may not be making the best use of the recent budget increases.

Work on these concepts continues to lag; congressional intervention could give it a much-needed boost.

SUMMARY

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) shifted the Department of Defense (DoD) away from a strategy focused on counterterrorism and deterring regional threats like Iran toward competing with, deterring, and, if necessary, defeating Chinese and Russian aggression. DoD is portraying the President’s Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2020, which is the first such request submitted since the release of the NDS, as a down payment on the long-term investments required to develop a future force that can execute this strategy. Given the price tag of \$750 billion, Congress and the American people should, in the words of Ronald Reagan, trust DoD, but verify that this is money well spent on advancing the priorities of the NDS.

DoD leaders briefing Congress will argue that their proposed budget choices align with the NDS—even when they’re continuations of past budgets or longstanding bureaucratic preferences. These officials aren’t intentionally misleading Congress. Radical change risks disrupting current and future operations and the defense industrial base. Defense leaders are therefore reluctant to share with Congress options that stray from the status quo. Likewise, they are wary of providing any analyses of alternative means to support the strategy. But maintaining the status quo is a path to failure given the seismic shift of the NDS. Successful implementation of a strategy for great-power competition will require Congress to foster change and hold DoD accountable when its investment choices don’t align with its strategic priorities.

New operational concepts, backed by independent analysis, are vital for DoD to meet its goal of deterring and, if necessary, defeating Chinese and Russian aggression should competition lead to conflict. Crucially, such new approaches cannot just be internal tools, but should play a role in enabling congressional oversight. They are important lenses for Congress to use in examining defense investment choices, separating the critical programs from the nice-to-have or the unnecessary.

To this end, Congress should encourage the development of new operational concepts for fighting China in East Asia and Russia in Eastern Europe. Congress should request that multiple organizations—both government and non-government—lead independent studies to develop operational concepts and provide supporting analysis to both DoD and Congress.

Congress has used this approach before to examine the size and shape of the future Navy fleet and Air Force inventory of aircraft, with good results. A similar effort aimed at developing new operational concepts would advance the bipartisan understanding of the NDS and provide tremendous value to the American taxpayer.



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WHAT IS AN OPERATIONAL CONCEPT?

Operational concepts have become trendy in defense circles since the release of the NDS and the subsequent report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy. By calling for new joint thinking on war with China and Russia, these two documents took operational concepts, previously the narrow concern of military historians and small circles of defense planners, and inserted them into the broader debate on defense issues.

Despite their trendiness, or perhaps because of it, the defense world is awash in conceptual vaporware—shallow PowerPoint decks masquerading as joint concepts—while bereft of meaningful operational thinking supporting the NDS that could be used as a framework to understand the massive investments in recent defense budget requests.

Part of the reason operational concepts lack coherence or fidelity is that there is no agreed upon definition as to what they are or what they should contain. To remedy this definitional gap, Congress should demand that, at a minimum, these concepts describe how commanders seek to achieve strategic objectives within constraints by

- » positioning forces geographically;
- » sequencing operations in time;
- » informing their forces and denying information to the adversary;
- » coordinating the actions of their forces in time and space;
- » maneuvering their forces to and within the theater;
- » directing their available firepower, particularly preferred munitions and cyberattacks; and
- » sustaining their forces logistically.

While operational concepts focus on military art and science, the inclusion of strategic objectives and constraints is a critical point. A concept that fails to achieve its political objectives, or is unimplementable because of political constraints is a failure, even if it solves every operational problem. The Army's AirLand Battle concept, which it developed with the Air Force during the late Cold War, demonstrated how strategic constraints can lead to operational innovation. Facing numerical inferiority versus the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the standard solution was to retreat, trade space for time, and use a mix of tactical nuclear weapons and "people's war" to grind down Warsaw Pact forces. Frontline NATO Allies like Germany were understandably perturbed by the notion of fighting a nuclear guerilla war on their own territory, thereby destroying their countries in order to save them. These constraints helped lead to the innovative idea of fighting an "offense in depth" against the Warsaw Pact's follow-on forces using long-range precision strike weapons.

A *good* operational concept should conduct these activities in a way that exploits enemy weaknesses and maximizes friendly strengths (and vice versa) to achieve better-than-expected outcomes based on comparisons of the forces involved. A *great* operational concept should achieve this disproportionate effect through methods that the adversary is systemically unwilling or unable to counter. For example, AirLand Battle leveraged U.S.

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advantages in airpower and precision strike to attack Soviet and Warsaw Pact follow-on forces, thereby offsetting U.S. and NATO numerical disadvantages. This concept leveraged systemic U.S. advantages in sensors, networks, microcomputing, personnel, and training that the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact could not match.

HOW CONGRESS COULD USE OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS FOR BUDGETING AND OVERSIGHT

Congress could use operational concepts and supporting analysis in myriad ways to advance implementation of the NDS. First, congressional interest would force DoD to accelerate and escalate the importance of concept development. One of the more frustrating aspects of DoD is that innovative thinking is often trapped under layers of bureaucracy or detached from decision-making processes. Congressional pressure, combined with the risk of being out-innovated by FFRDCs and think tanks can surface the good work that is occurring in DoD and ensure that senior leaders are paying attention.

Second, Congress can use these concepts to guide its oversight of complex issues by contextualizing key decisions. For example, aircraft procurement is a perennial area of focus, given its share of the budget. An operational concept could demonstrate the role of a given aircraft in a potential conflict and show how the concept relies (or does not) on the aircraft. Moreover, the concept could highlight the critical factors that comprise effective airpower—sensors, networks, munitions, air bases, maintainers, etc.—that are often overlooked in the focus on aircraft numbers. Thinking conceptually can remedy this imbalance by showing the interdependence of investments.

Commissioning operational concepts and supporting analysis from multiple independent sources will help level the playing field between Congress and DoD—particularly vis-à-vis the military services. This work will not make members and staff experts overnight, but it will enable them to ask better questions and draw on independent analysis to dig into the answers. The services will likely respond to this demand the way they did when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara introduced systems analysis into DoD’s planning and budgeting process: they’ll seek to master it for their purposes.¹ This is a feature of this process, not a bug—service staffs should spend far more time developing, analyzing, wargaming, exercising, and improving warfighting concepts for their most stressing challenges.

BUILDING ON PAST SUCCESS WITH MANDATED INDEPENDENT STUDIES ON DEFENSE PLANNING

Congress has successfully used legislation to provoke creative military thinking and analysis in the recent past. The 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) tasked the Navy, a federally funded research and development corporation (FFRDC), and a think tank to submit separate reports to Congress on the future architecture of the Navy’s fleet. The recommendations in these reports, as well as the analysis that went into them, greatly advanced thinking on the future Navy fleet and continues to inform the Navy’s force-planning decisions. The 2018 NDAA tasked similar studies on the Air Force’s inventory of aircraft, which have not yet been released.

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1. See RAND’s classic book on the advent of systems analysis in the Pentagon, *How Much is Enough*, by Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, in particular, p. 44, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/commercial_books/2010/RAND_CB403.pdf.



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Comparable legislation could task some combination of the military services, the Joint Staff, FFRDCs, independent think tanks, and the relevant combatant commands to develop operational concepts and supporting analysis for related to potential military scenarios in East Asia and Eastern Europe. The ideal end-goal of such an effort would be coherent joint operational concepts for defeating Chinese and Russian aggression. Given the difficulty of this goal, Congress may need to accept service-specific concepts as an interim step, then work over time to stitch these into coherent joint concepts.

The mixture of analysis and competition from different viewpoints—including from organizations without vested interests in the outcome—is key, and Congress can play a critical role in surfacing choices and tensions resident in the range of perspectives. Congress, and particularly the staff responsible for the nuts and bolts of the National Defense Authorization Act, need to understand how new concepts measurably improve warfighting outcomes, and how proposed or potential major investments in the Defense budget fit into these concepts.

The military services conduct enormous amounts of analysis on alternative concepts and force structures, but they are loathe to share work that doesn't support their official position (both inside DoD and externally). DoD formerly developed a joint analytic basis to enable comparisons of different concepts and force compositions, but Pentagon leadership killed this process in 2017. The resultant gap makes the use of competing concepts and analysis by independent organizations critical. Without an independent check, the military services are essentially grading their own homework.

WHY NOT USE OPERATIONAL PLANS?

Many in DoD and Congress wrongly view operational plans (OPLANS) as interchangeable with operational concepts and use them as a basis for program and budget decisions. OPLANS should be informed by operational concepts, but the two are not the same. The distinction may seem arcane, but operational concepts should matter far more than OPLANS to both DoD and Congress in developing the future force through the budget process.

OPLANS are the most detailed form of planning for real-world contingencies, like the Gulf War. They focus on near-term challenges and, as such, combatant command planners build them assuming they have access to current forces—not future investments. This makes the plans feasible to execute, but makes them poor guides for investments in the defense budget for two reasons.

First, OPLANS' near-term focus is out of step with a budget process that funds programs and technologies that can take years or even decades to reach fruition. Benchmarking potential investments against their relevance to current threats is a surefire way to lag behind adversaries' future capabilities and leave the joint force at a disadvantage. While this wasn't a major problem when threats were static or deteriorating, like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, it is problematic against dynamic competitors like China and Russia.

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Second, since the combatant commands build OPLANS with the current force, using them as a basis for building the future force creates a circular logic. If, for example, DoD were to have X aircraft carriers, Y fighter squadrons, and Z brigade combat teams, the current plan would require X aircraft carriers, Y fighter squadrons, and Z brigade combat teams. In the next budget cycle, DoD would maintain X aircraft carriers, Y fighter squadrons, and Z brigade combat teams; so the *next* plan would require X aircraft carriers, Y fighter squadrons, and Z brigade combat teams; and so on. Building a future force based on OPLAN requirements severely inhibits change to the force and throttles long-term innovation.

Instead of a being a deterministic endpoint set in the near term, operational concepts should be set in the future and use the current joint force's inventory and capabilities only as a starting point. They should be specific to a potential adversary and a theater of operations, but they should not be as detailed as an OPLAN. They should be set far enough in the future that they can guide multi-year budget decisions, without being so distant that uncertainty undermines their utility for decision making; seven to ten years is appropriate. Finally, they should not be constrained by the projected joint force. If a concept demands capabilities or force structure that are feasible, but don't yet exist, they should be included to help push DoD and the services to think creatively and embrace change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Commission multiple independent organizations to develop operational concepts, along with supporting analysis, for defeating Chinese and Russian aggression.
- » Hold DoD and service leadership accountable by asking how their proposed investments support these concepts and, if necessary, shifting funds to more promising initiatives.

Legislatively mandating the development of new operational concepts is a good start, but it may not ensure the services use these concepts to build their forces. Members and staff should require the services, the Joint Staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense to show how choices in the budget—such as the decision to start or cancel a major program—align with their concepts and prove the effectiveness of their choices with analysis and data. Should Pentagon leaders fail to demonstrate how their decisions support their warfighting concepts, Congress should be willing to withhold funding until answers are forthcoming.

The NDS noted that the U.S. military advantage against China and Russia is eroding and that urgent action is needed to arrest this erosion. One can imagine many U.S. taxpayers and members of Congress shaking their heads in disbelief, knowing that the U.S. defense budget vastly exceeds those of China and Russia combined. The NDS provides a clear and coherent strategy for addressing this issue. The U.S. military will need to develop operational concepts that are more than catchphrases or slide decks to implement this strategy and spend taxpayer dollars more effectively. Congress can and should help make this happen.