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**The Pentagon Should Train for—and not just  
talk about—Great-Power Competition**

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# The Pentagon Should Train for—and not just talk about—Great-Power Competition

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The Pentagon has committed to competing with China and Russia—but it’s not training that way. If the United States is to be truly prepared for great-power competition, its forces need to train as they expect to operate in theater. The U.S. Cold War experience offers valuable lessons, positive and negative, about how best to equip the joint force to handle near-peer adversaries. Relearning the mechanics of great-power competition will require changing exercises and experimentation, and the Pentagon should emphasize joint exercises to draw on the collective capabilities of its services.

Focusing on joint exercises conjures a “back-to-the-future” feeling. For decades during the Cold War, major overseas training exercises featured prominently in the U.S. military’s playbook, and with good reason. Big exercises—training thousands of troops across services, domains, and sometimes nations—enhance joint force readiness by improving interoperability and building command, control, and communications among services and coalition members; demonstrate the value of relationships with allies and partners; and send a range of messages to adversaries.

To update the joint force for the challenge of China and Russia, the United States should build on these Cold War lessons by ensuring that its large-scale joint exercises also test U.S. forces’ ability to operate in [multiple domains](#) against “gray-zone” threats.

## Pretend Jointness

Regaining the muscle memory to compete against China and Russia after counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan is no small task. The pivot from counter-insurgency to great-power competition is moving slowly—for two reasons. First, there is widespread confusion as to what accurately constitutes a joint experiment or exercise. To be clear: a joint exercise entails significant personnel participation from each of the services that are integrated into a single joint force executing the will of the joint force commander. It is not a Navy corpsman going to the field with the Marine infantry unit; it is not an Air Force Joint Tactical Air Control Party supporting an Army rotation at the National Training Center; and it is

not Marine Corps fixed-wing aviation deploying aboard aircraft carriers. No, these are joint operations with a “little j”—activities that the services routinely conducted a half-century ago. Today, these “little j” events, overly focused on service sustainment training, do little to advance 21st-century concept experimentation and joint force integration in preparation for major conflict.

Jointness with a “big J,” on the other hand, is a deployable joint headquarters that is fully integrated with experts from across all the warfighting functions and services. The headquarters should be commanded by a flag officer and tasked by a combatant commander with cradle-to-grave execution of large-scale exercises that agnostically integrate kinetic and non-kinetic effects across the air, land, sea, cyber, and space domains, as well as the electronic spectrum. Although talk of jointness abounds across the Department of Defense, the force seldom walks the “big J” walk. To quote Winston Churchill, “perhaps we have been guilty of some terminological inexactitude.”

A second factor is that planners across the combatant commands are consumed with repeating the same named annual exercises even though most of them—to be precise—are demonstrations or service-centric sustainment training. These exercises drain scarce resources and compound legitimate challenges to expanding jointness— to include tracking and coordinating service-specific concept development, sustaining a reasonable operations tempo, complying with headquarters-mandated reductions, and reducing overhead costs. Decreasing the number of annual combatant command events to accommodate a [joint force commander’s higher-quality experimentation plan and credible “big J” exercises](#) is therefore an imperative that can no longer be ignored. Victory on tomorrow’s battlefield against peer adversaries requires that the United States transform how it prepares for war.

## The Past as Prologue (“Kinda”)

Large-scale Cold War exercises ensured that combat formations remained tactically proficient, and officers gave serious thought to the likely chaos and uncertainty that major conflict between nuclear powers would create. But these exercises also played a critical political-military role, signaling a strong U.S. commitment to allies and partners whose forces routinely operated with the United States in combined maneuvers designed, in part, to help improve coalition interoperability and bolster readiness.

Such exercises did not only serve as a signal to allies and partners, though. Their value as a showcase for U.S. resolve and global power-projection capabilities was significant. Large exercises like REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) and TEAM SPIRIT in South Korea were

essential to maintaining credible conventional deterrence of both the Soviet Union and North Korea. As intended, the latter two belligerent states often perceived such exercises as war-plan rehearsals and as possible (but still ambiguous) forward posturing for potential operations.

Large, multiple-theater exercises diminished after the Cold War. The Pentagon focused on reducing operating costs, confronting terrorism, and fighting simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the rise of China and renewed focus on Russia means large-scale overseas exercises should again play a key role in sustaining readiness and demonstrating U.S. preparedness to deploy and conduct multi-domain operations.

But the complexity of today's security environment is not defined solely by conventional peer-versus-peer or even proxy conflicts. China and Russia rely on gray-zone operations below the traditional thresholds for conflict—competing with the United States without provoking a conventional response. Future joint and combined exercises should go beyond the traditional air, land, and sea domains to include cyberwarfare, space, the electromagnetic spectrum—all integrated into a holistic and coherent operational design that includes features of irregular warfare. Jointly considering and exercising responses to gray-zone threats will pay dividends across the force.

## Soviet Exercises during the Cold War

The Soviet Union attracted U.S. attention by using large-scale exercises as operational rehearsals and as signaling tools. The *Okean* global naval exercise series in the 1970s demonstrated the transformation of the Soviets' coastal defensive navy to a blue-water force under Adm. Sergey Gorshkov. In April 1970, multi-fleet maneuvers across many oceans under a unified command from Moscow shocked the U.S. Navy and its NATO allies, who identified them as a challenge to U.S. maritime supremacy.

In April 1975, Soviet news agency TASS reported an even larger naval exercise—*Okean 75*, the largest to date in the Cold War—involving over 220 Soviet ships of all types conducting maritime maneuvers by the Northern, Baltic, Black Sea, and Pacific fleets. Land-based aircraft joined this massive power-projection display, with Tupolov-35s flying from Central Asian bases to the Arabian Sea, while surface units in the Indian Ocean indicated Soviet anti-convoy capabilities in a new theater. Meanwhile, maritime task forces conducting anti-aircraft carrier operations near Sardinia highlighted a potential Soviet threat to western merchant shipping and NATO naval activities at Tyrrhenian Sea choke points. In a particularly pointed signal, submarines and surface ships set up a barrier between Iceland, the Norwegian Sea, and the North Atlantic to rehearse extending the Soviet maritime defensive perimeter away from

the Barents Sea to keep U.S. aircraft carriers out of range of military and industrial targets. Significant command and control capabilities enabled simultaneous Soviet strike missions, highlighting the maturation of Gorshkov's long-discussed "[battle of the first salvo](#)" concept.

The massive scale of *Okean* 1975 was impressive for the times and elicited a sharp reaction from the United States. Navy Secretary [J. William Middendorf II publicly admitted](#), "[the exercise] clearly demonstrates the fact that the Soviet navy is capable of operating effectively in all the oceans of the world" with a fleet that had "twice the number of major combatants and submarines as the U.S. Navy." *Okean* was a [wake-up call](#) for the United States, which was preoccupied with evacuating Vietnam. Rattled Pentagon leaders commissioned a series of studies to better understand the new geopolitical landscape that was shaping the Cold War. The unambiguous message sent by the *Okean* exercises of the 1970s was that the Soviet Union had developed a robust navy to back its claim as a global military superpower.

## Learning from the "Bear"

During the 1980s, Pentagon planners recognized that large exercises could play a useful role in demonstrating U.S. power-projection capabilities while offsetting the Soviet Union conventional military advantages. Accordingly, the United States implemented annual REFORGER exercises to practice rapidly deploying multiple divisions from the United States to reinforce NATO. As one 1988 [observer noted](#), REFORGER's impressiveness stemmed not only from its size (125,000 personnel deployed across the Atlantic in 10 days) but also its critically important military *and* civilian mobilization and preparedness when U.S. forces reached Europe. REFORGER exercises were also complemented with annual air and sea deployments of U.S. Marines to Norway. Collectively, they broadcasted to friends and adversaries alike America's ability to rapidly project credible combat power across the globe.

Other U.S. and NATO naval exercises in the 1980s were designed to prod Soviet decision-makers and expose Soviet wartime responses for U.S. planners. Virtually the entire U.S. attack submarine force was deployed at top speed from U.S. ports to the high North Atlantic on [at least three separate occasions](#), sending the message to the Soviets (among others) that the United States could reach the Barents Sea before Soviet subs could sortie out of their bastions. In the Atlantic, [Ocean Venture 1981](#) encompassed 120,000 personnel, 1,000 aircraft, and 250 ships from 15 allied nations. The apparently shocked Soviet navy dispatched "[unprecedented numbers](#)" of surveillance and strike aircraft, submarines, and surface ships to shadow the exercise, offering the United States and NATO valuable insights into Soviet formations and operational procedures.

Not all signals sent during Cold War exercises were received as intended. The 1983 NATO [ABLE ARCHER](#) exercise contributed to a Kremlin war scare and nearly initiated nuclear war. Nonetheless, NATO judged the exercises' strategic insights as invaluable. Then-Supreme Allied Commander [Gen. John R. Galvin observed](#), "There was a failure to understand the absolute requirement for coordination and common purpose among the civilian, political, diplomatic, governmental, and military aspects of every endeavor."

On the other side of the globe, U.S. and South Korean forces conducted exercise TEAM SPIRIT each spring from 1978 to 1993 to broadcast credible defensive preparations of the peninsula to North Korea. [TEAM SPIRIT](#) peaked at 200,000 personnel in 1989, but its importance lay in its impact on North Korean perceptions. President Kim Il-sung reacted to the exercise by mobilizing his reservists and repositioning air, naval, and land forces annually at significant economic and political costs to the regime, making TEAM SPIRIT both a carrot and a stick for Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty negotiations and North Korea's inspections compliance. By revealing certain strengths through REFORGER and TEAM SPIRIT, U.S. planners enhanced deterrence and forced adversaries to [divert resources](#) into more expensive defense programs or alter key aspects of their overall strategies.

## Operate and Train as You Plan to Fight

Treating peacetime exercises as real-world operations—like the United States did with REFORGER and TEAM SPIRIT—provides the joint force with a number of advantages. Across the force, a heightened warfighting mentality will help improve overall readiness. Such an approach will imbue training events with a heightened sense of realism, compelling forces to replicate many actions they will have to execute in conflict.

Imagine a scenario where Army and Marine High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) units deploy with little notice to remote overseas islands and establish secure communications with a joint task force headquarters theater fires cell. The cell then receives targetable information from real-world sensors, provided by space or training drones. This allows the HIMARS unit to engage a hostile moving target (being simulated by a self-piloted "garbage barge") once non-kinetic effects have neutralized onboard emitters replicating the ship's countermeasure system. This "cradle-to-grave" kill chain scenario requires sophisticated multi-domain effects to be integrated across the joint force. If, for technical or political reasons, this type of realism is impractical, augmenting live exercises with high-quality virtual capabilities can help servicemembers master essential skills. This is especially important at the joint/combined level because those senior headquarters that are not forward deployed should

be required to deploy to overseas exercise locations to flex their command and control responsibilities.

Second, dynamically planned operations can be used to temporarily increase U.S. force posture and presence overseas. Deploying additional brigades, air defense units, and fleet assets to key European and Pacific theater locations will not go unnoticed by Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang. More importantly, these events can serve as pre-crisis, flexible deterrent options. [Before the outbreak of COVID-19](#), the exercise [DEFENDER-Europe 20](#) would have been the largest deployment of U.S.-based forces to Europe in more than 25 years. Carrying out [similar future exercises](#) will also allow the United States and its NATO allies to address long-standing interoperability, mobility, and command and control challenges.

Third, operations can be used to stress test existing practices against new concepts. In particular, the logistical concepts that underpin major war plans can be tested by requiring forward-deployed units to actually perform such real-world sustainment functions as drawing live ammunition out of storage bunkers, transporting different fuel types between theaters, and commencing operations with “planned shortages” of major classes of supplies. These critical sustainment events are too often ignored or “simulated” in traditional exercises, which allows the joint force to “cheat at solitaire”—in other words, to take expedient shortcuts.

New exercises can also stress test familiar operations at unfamiliar scales. One such exercise might test special operations and conventional forces’ ability to enforce a blockade with the simultaneous boarding of multiple adversary-leased commercial vessels. Simultaneous ship seizures by special operations forces and conventional Navy-Marine units trained to conduct complex “visit, board, search, and seizure” missions would signal mastery of all-domain coordination. Moreover, it would afford a tightly integrated rehearsal with multiple coalition partners who could provide the leased ships safe anchorage until the mock naval blockade ends.

Fourth, new large-scale exercises will allow the joint/combined force to experiment with concepts that are widely discussed in many military journals, such as multi-domain or all-domain operations, but that are too infrequently practiced. As Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr. [has noted](#), properly designed and conducted field exercises are a “great source of competitive advantage” that can reduce uncertainty about emerging threats, determine the right mix of new and legacy systems, enable development and evaluation of broad capabilities and new, relevant forms of operation, and uncover practical problems in new operation and force structure development.

Fifth, large training exercises can be effective vehicles for sending signals to potential adversaries about U.S. intentions and capabilities. For example, they might reveal the capability

of U.S. forces to launch surprise drone swarm attacks simultaneously against multiple naval targets. U.S. vessels could be designated a naval opposing force being pursued by “blue” surface and subsurface naval assets. Opposing force ships could then come under swarm drone attack from shore-based land forces (American or allied) that release waves of inexpensive, sea-skimming, short-range drones. Obviously, the risks and opportunities associated with revealing certain capabilities and sending specific messages should be calculated in advance. The United States should carefully consider any ambiguities that U.S. adversaries could misunderstand, thus resulting in spiraling tensions and unwanted escalation. Tracking and recording both adversary and ally responses to exercises should be required, and post-exercise analyses should gauge the overall impact of messaging.

## Looking Ahead

The joint staff and geographic combatant commander’s need to revise their annual experimentation and exercise programs to be more relevant to today’s great-power competition. They cannot merely fall back on large-scale exercises like REFORGER and TEAM SPIRIT, designed for another era, in the hope that they continue to be successful models for today’s deterrence and force posture. Exercises of yesteryear should be refined and repurposed as real-world operations. They should thoughtfully reveal credible kinetic and carefully selected non-kinetic warfighting capabilities to U.S. adversaries. Additionally, a sophisticated global strategic communications campaign that pushes back on adversary propaganda and disinformation in real time—delegitimizing such activities in frontline states under a bright international spotlight—should be central to all operations.

To truly disincentivize Russian and Chinese “gray-zone” operations, the United States should effectively use recurring and realistic “big J” operations to display credible American military force. A critical by-product of this approach is that joint force commanders will be able to integrate and shape the disparate service warfighting approaches.

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