For the last generation, the American military has prepared to fight two simultaneous wars against regional powers, rather than defeat large-scale aggression by a peer competitor. While appropriate in the era of Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-il, the old method of American force planning is poorly suited to an age of great power competition. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) moves beyond the “two-war construct” to reprioritize the efforts of the U.S. Department of Defense (the Department, or DOD) on competition with China and Russia, both of which possess sophisticated military capabilities capable of challenging U.S. global interests. For a growing number of U.S. and allied defense planners, this change has been long overdue. For others within the defense community, the two-war construct and the requirements it set for force capacity remain the principal measure of U.S. military capabilities and force structure. Adhering to the old construct, however, is not only dated, but potentially dangerous in an era demanding more effective use of scarce defense resources to compete with rapidly evolving great powers.

The DOD’s force-planning construct, of which the two-war construct is perhaps the best known example, describes how the Department sizes, shapes, and develops U.S. military forces. It often becomes the shorthand way of describing entire defense strategies. The DOD’s 1993 Bottom-Up Review became known as the “Two-War Strategy” and the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance the “Defeat/Deny Strategy” because these phrases reflected the force planning construct laid out within those strategy documents. These phrases are reductive, but they get at the point: the Department’s force planning construct identifies what is
important, what U.S. military forces should be able to do, and where the DOD should prioritize its spending.

The two-war construct guided development of the U.S. Armed Forces for most of the past three decades. Under this construct, the DOD made investment decisions about the overall size and shape of U.S. forces to build a military that, in aggregate, could defeat two regional powers in overlapping timeframes. Engaging in a major war in one theater would not render the United States and its partners elsewhere vulnerable to opportunistic aggression by a second attacker. This construct was reasonable when the principal threats to U.S. security came from “rogue states” such as Iraq, North Korea and Serbia as was the case during the 1990s. During that period, there was little real threat from Russia or China, U.S. forces retained military dominance over likely state adversaries, had an abundance of relevant operational experience, and faced few obstacles to projecting power abroad. None of these conditions hold today.

China and Russia are now rapidly closing the gap with the United States in key capability areas. Both states are increasingly capable of projecting power within their near-abroad and beyond. Further, after decades of studying the American way of war, both competitors are also pursuing means to disrupt U.S. power projection into their respective theaters while threatening forward-deployed forces. They have also both demonstrated the intent to use force to achieve their aims. Recent examples include Russia’s invasion and annexation of parts of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and China’s development of military bases on disputed territory in the South China Sea. These developments demand a change in how the Defense Department develops its future military forces.

In January, Secretary of Defense James Mattis released the 2018 NDS, the preeminent strategic guidance document intended to organize Departmental activities toward common purpose. The 2018 NDS marks a transition into a new era of force planning for great power competition.

The new geopolitical reality of great power competition was the primary driver behind changing the force planning construct. The challenges China and Russia pose to U.S. interests are more complex than those the United States confronted in the immediate post-Cold War era. Furthermore, the performance of U.S. military forces in future conflicts is less well understood because the DOD has not recently fought a great power and a range of emerging technologies are changing the character of war. The new “Great Power War” NDS force planning construct consequently shifts priority from maintaining the Joint Force’s ability to fight two simultaneous major wars, in separate theaters against mid-tier enemies, to defeating aggression by a great power.

Continuing to use the two-war construct would result in a future force ill-suited to facing a great power rival. Emphasizing the demands of two nearly simultaneous wars necessarily leads to a focus on how many forces the United States needs, which
tends to lessen focus on quality or productivity. It places a floor under the overall size of the force, in effect prioritizing resources for force capacity (i.e., the overall number of personnel as well as major force elements such as aircraft carriers and brigade combat teams). The consequence is fewer resources for force capability (i.e., improving the ability of the force to execute certain tasks like precision-strike or maintaining the integrity of its communications). Without relevant capabilities, unified by an appropriate vision for how to fight, additional capacity simply provides an adversary with additional targets to destroy.

The DOD needs both capability and capacity, yet it must make tradeoffs between them given limited resources. Exquisite capabilities, if procured in small numbers, may still be insufficient to defeat aggression. However, it is unrealistic in the current fiscal environment to expect the Department to be given enough money to avoid tradeoffs between maintaining the old two-war construct and preparing for great power competition. Given the sophistication of China’s and Russia’s militaries, when compared to North Korea or Iran, modernizing U.S. forces provides the greatest return on investment and must be the priority if the United States is to retain a credible deterrent against great powers. The shift in force planning constructs presented in the 2018 NDS signals a transition from retaining force structure to prioritizing the development of capabilities necessary for future conflicts.

This article argues that the two-war construct is, and should no longer be, the central basis to evaluate the potential performance of the U.S. military, and that the 2018 NDS force planning construct for great power war is more appropriate for an era of great power competition. It explains what a force planning construct is, and why it is important to the Defense Department. The article then summarizes the evolution of the DOD’s force planning constructs and places the two-war construct in a historical context. It provides an assessment of the two-war construct’s influence on force planning, noting its benefits and limitations. Next, the article explains why the two-war construct is no longer appropriate for the modern era of great power competition. Finally, it presents the 2018 NDS force planning construct for great power war, and notes why it is necessary for the military challenges the United States faces today.

**Why the Force Planning Construct Matters**

The fundamental purpose of the Defense Department is to defend the United States and its interests. But what does that require? What are the threats? What
should U.S. military forces do about them? How much should be spent to prepare for them? In many respects, answering these questions is the core business of the Pentagon because resources, while abundant relative to other U.S. government expenditures, are limited in comparison to the broad scope of U.S. security commitments and interests.

Defense strategies guide the answers to these questions by identifying the priority missions current and future forces are expected to be able to conduct during day-to-day activities (e.g., defend the homeland, counterterrorism, counter-WMD proliferation), as well as during contingencies (e.g., defeat aggression, conduct stabilization operations). They also include a force planning construct that identifies the subset of missions the strategy expects U.S. military forces, in aggregate, to execute concurrently (e.g., win two wars at the same time). The force planning construct—alternately termed “force sizing construct” or “force sizing and shaping construct”—sheds light on the overall size, shape, capability and readiness of armed forces, including the global defense posture.

To understand the force planning construct’s influence on the overall size and shape of the military, one must understand the fundamentals of how the DOD conducts force planning. David Ochmanek, a premier expert on force planning, defines force planning as “the art and science of determining the military capabilities, posture, and forces appropriate for the nation.” "Art" considers the operational concepts undergirding how forces will be employed against adaptive adversaries to defeat enemy forces. "Science" signifies physics-based computer simulations and other quantitative methods used to evaluate how U.S. forces would perform against enemy forces in force-on-force interactions.

As Ochmanek is quick to point out, the operative word is “appropriate,” not “required”—there is no “right answer” for what future forces the Department should develop. The ambiguity inherent in the future means that the DOD cannot know with certainty how to optimize its forces to defend the nation. The best that can be done is to examine how well U.S. military forces would perform the strategy’s priority missions across a range of alternative futures and make informed resource tradeoff decisions to improve force performance in those areas most central to the strategy’s execution. Determining the forces “appropriate for the nation” is therefore a judgment on the level of capacity and kinds of capabilities military forces should have in order to execute the defense strategy well enough to satisfy political leadership.

As a tool for force planning, the force planning construct is the concrete reflection of what the military must actually be able to do in extremis. It is particularly important because it articulates the level of ambition political leadership has when the entirety of the DOD’s resources is brought to bear. Decisions today about the force planning construct will become realities for
the future. They develop the military that future presidents will be able to go to war with, to paraphrase former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Because it takes so long to shift an enterprise as large as the U.S. Defense Department, decisions about the force planning construct have enormous ripple effects. Defense expert Christopher Dougherty notes “The force planning construct is like the wind. It is a fundamental force that shapes the broad contours of the military force. On a daily basis, it can go unnoticed. Over years, it carves mountains.”

As such, the force planning construct is the standard, or “yardstick of sufficiency,” the DOD uses to answer former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s quintessential question for force planning: “How much is enough?” As McNamara put it: “You cannot make decisions simply by asking yourself whether something might be nice to have. You have to make a judgment on how much is enough.”

Decisions about the force planning construct have enormous ripple effects.

Evolution of the U.S. Force Planning Construct

The “two-war construct” may be the best known force planning construct, though it has not been the only one. Although the United States arguably had no national force planning construct prior to World War II, the Military Services had visions for likely threats to the national interest and how future conflicts might be fought. After World War II, the growth of U.S. global obligations and the increased threat posed by the Soviet Union demanded a new, more organized approach to U.S. force planning. Force planning since World War II can be broken into three eras with defense strategies that vary with respect to the salience of great power competition:

1. Cold War Era (1950s-1990): The Defense Department was almost exclusively focused on the challenge of the Soviet Union and sought to retain the ability to counter Soviet expansionism in Europe and Asia.


3. Strategic Competitions Era (2014+): Starting in 2014, the DOD started to reprioritize great power competition in force planning. The 2018 NDS marks the return of great power competition as the principal feature of the force planning construct.
Cold War Era (1950s–1990)

The idea of sizing the military to fight two simultaneous wars is likely a result of the Korean War. In the Fall of 1950, while engaged in major combat operations in Korea, the United States feared the Soviet Union might strike into Western Europe. Rather than reallocating forces from Europe to the Korean peninsula to support the war, President Truman increased U.S. forces in Western Europe to deter Soviet aggression. In the aftermath of the Korean War, the two-war construct emerged to inform future force planning.

In the 1960s, the DOD developed a “2-and-½ war” standard wherein conventional forces were expected to simultaneously address a Warsaw Pact attack in Europe and a Chinese attack in Asia, while maintaining the ability to meet a minor contingency in the Western Hemisphere. The construct informed the overall size and shape of conventional forces, not the nuclear arsenal, yet both were necessary to deter aggression by the Soviet Union. This standard had important caveats. First, it did not apply to any two wars. Given that forces were postured in Europe and Asia, the two wars were one in each region. It did not, for example, plan to address two wars in Asia (e.g., North Korea and Vietnam). Second, the scenarios selected were not always the most stressing. The Warsaw Pact scenario assumed that NATO forces would have some warning of an attack; it was not designed to prevent a full-scale surprise attack. Third, the wars were expressly assumed to be limited to a period of three months. Conventional forces were expected to halt the first wave of an invading force—that is, not lose the war quickly—and buy time for senior leadership to consider escalation options. Conventional forces were never expected to win the war on their own. Deterring the Soviets from invading NATO depended on persuading them that such an attack would require a huge invasion force, large enough to threaten NATO’s vital interests and thereby run the risk of rapid escalation to nuclear war.

In the 1970s, following the Sino-Soviet split and the opening of relations with China, the DOD dropped one of the contingencies and established a “1-and-½ war” standard. This force was intended to outlast the first phase of a Warsaw Pact assault and win a smaller conflict against North Korea. In the late 1970s and 1980s, following the Vietnam War, growing realization that the Soviets had made major advances in both their conventional and nuclear forces shifted the yardstick again from 1-and-½ wars to one global war with the Soviet Union, albeit one that could potentially be in multiple theaters.
The Cold War era introduced the concept of sizing conventional forces for multiple wars. Those forces were designed to meet the minimum U.S. political objectives—not comprehensively defeat the Soviet Union. If the wars were more stressing or more prolonged, the Department expected to call upon a strategic reserve and/or potentially resort to nuclear weapons. Until the 1980s, the United States and its allies could not afford to maintain conventional forces sufficiently sized and shaped to defeat conventional Soviet forces outright. Therefore, the theory of warfighting that underpinned these force planning constructs was that conventional forces would frustrate certain Soviet activities, and create time and space for senior leaders to consider other responses to Soviet aggression, including escalation to nuclear conflict. The deterrent impact of conventional forces was not to demonstrate sufficient capacity to “win the war,” but rather to present a credible path to nuclear escalation.


The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it went the “yardstick” against which U.S. conventional forces had long been measured. On August 2, 1990, President George H. W. Bush unveiled a new defense strategy that shifted the focus of defense planning from countering the global challenge posed by the Soviet Union to responding to threats in three major regions—Europe, Southwest Asia, and East Asia. That same day, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. By 1993, after the first Gulf War, the DOD coalesced around a new yardstick: having a conventional force large enough to fight and win two regional wars in overlapping timeframes. This construct became the central plank of U.S. defense strategy for the next 25 years.

The Defense Department’s official policy was that having the ability to fight and win two wars nearly simultaneously was the sine qua non of a superpower. The logic was that the United States was the preeminent global power with global interests. To protect these interests, the United States needed a military able to defend them abroad, hence the ability to fight and win at least one overseas war. While doing so, however, there was a chance an “opportunistic aggressor” would take advantage of the situation and initiate conflict elsewhere if U.S. military forces were fully engaged. Therefore, the U.S. military had to be able to deter such opportunistic aggression. In the post-Cold War era of U.S. military dominance, the best form of deterrence was a credible ability to fight and win the second war as well.

The benchmark for credible deterrence consequently increased considerably. U.S. forces were expected to deter by demonstrating the ability to dominate the forces of any other nation with which the United States might conceivably go to war. Given that the United States was the preeminent power, the threats it planned for were much weaker than the Soviet Union. Rogue powers like Iraq and North Korea lacked sophisticated conventional weapons, let alone nuclear...
Conventional U.S. forces were held to a higher standard in each fight; they were expected to fulfill U.S. security commitments by being able to comprehensively win wars and impose U.S. will against potential adversaries, not just provide a minimum political commitment. Moreover, given that these wars were against weaker powers, U.S. forces were expected to win quickly with relatively little loss. The United States was now in a position to literally buy down risk, both to its military personnel and political objectives, in a manner unimaginable during the Cold War.

Table I: Evolution of the Force Planning Construct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Two War Description</th>
<th>Level of Ambition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>“2-and-½ wars”</td>
<td>Sets standard for Cold War conventional forces, which are not expected to defeat adversaries without nuclear forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>“1-and-½ war”</td>
<td>Lowers standard by dropping China contingency following US-China détente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Global war with Soviet Union</td>
<td>Raises standard but conventional forces still not “war winning” forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991/2 Base Force</td>
<td>Major regional contingencies</td>
<td>Lowers standard from global war with the Soviet Union to major regional threats which conventional forces can “win”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 Bottom-Up Review</td>
<td>Two Major Regional Conflicts (MRCs)</td>
<td>Clarifies standard as two overlapping wars culminating with regime change in North Korea and Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997 Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
<td>Two Major Theater Wars (MTWs)</td>
<td>Raises standard by including force demands for peacetime “shaping”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
<td>Swiftly defeat two aggressors, win one decisively</td>
<td>Lowers standard by stating that regime change and occupation is for only one of the two wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
<td>Two conventional campaigns; or one conventional and one irregular campaign</td>
<td>Raises standard by including long war on terrorism and post-regime change stabilization and reconstruction efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
<td>Two regional aggressors; or a major stabilization operation and either a highly capable regional aggressor or a long-duration deterrence operation</td>
<td>Raises standard by presenting three alternative futures, only one of which includes two conventional wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Defense Strategic Guidance &amp; 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
<td>Defeat one adversary and deny—or impose unacceptable costs—on another</td>
<td>Lowers standard by refocusing on two-war and accepting greater risk in stabilization operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018 National Defense Strategy</td>
<td>Defeat a major power; deter opportunistic aggression</td>
<td>Raises standard by prioritizing great power war above simultaneous regional conflicts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ones. Conventional U.S. forces were held to a higher standard in each fight; they were expected to fulfill U.S. security commitments by being able to comprehensively win wars and impose U.S. will against potential adversaries, not just provide a minimum political commitment. Moreover, given that these wars were against weaker powers, U.S. forces were expected to win quickly with relatively little loss. The United States was now in a position to literally buy down risk, both to its military personnel and political objectives, in a manner unimaginable during the Cold War.
The 1991 Gulf War helped to fashion this model. It set expectations for how U.S. forces should perform against regional powers. First, U.S. forces were expected to be able to flow forces into a theater at will and build an abundance of warfighting equipment—an “iron mountain”—with impunity. Second, as in the Gulf War, U.S. forces would dominate the adversary, with loss-exchange ratios on the order of 100 to 1 in the U.S. favor. Third, select forces in high demand were expected to quickly finish their work in one war and rapidly redeploy to a second potential war in a timely manner.

The two-war construct was crystallized in the 1993 Bottom-Up Review. It planned for U.S. forces to defeat Iraq and North Korea by halting their aggressive invasions, mounting a counteroffensive to remove them from allied territory, and if necessary, conducting regime change to ensure aggression could not reoccur. The two-war construct evolved over the years, becoming more sophisticated and incorporating lessons from real-world events that it failed to anticipate. In 1997, to more accurately reflect how the force was used in practice, it accounted for demands on the force during peacetime to “shape” the environment prior to engaging in two wars. In 2001, a new construct developed prior to the 9/11 attacks clarified that not all major regional wars would require regime change and occupation—lowering the level of ambition. Following 9/11, it was broadened to include different types of war beyond major regional wars, starting with the “long war” against terrorism. After the insurgency in Iraq, for which U.S. forces were ill-prepared, the force planning construct expanded to include post-regime change stability operations. Its most elaborate articulation was in 2010 when the two wars, and other scenarios, were placed within a range of alternative future security environments that presented a mix of challenges from across the spectrum of conflict.

The Asia-Pacific Rebalance in 2012 was a realization that the DOD was overly invested in Iraq and Afghanistan relative to the nation’s greater long-term interests in the Asia-Pacific. For force planning, the consequence was to deprioritize counterinsurgency and stability operations. This was a necessary and important step to free up resources to safeguard U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific, but redesigning the force for a future conflict with China was not yet prioritized above retaining capacity for two concurrent regional wars. The “defeat/deny” construct of the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance had no meaningful change to the two-war standard. The principal two war scenarios remained the same as in the 2010, 2006, and 2001 Quadrennial Defense Reviews. As then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Ash Carter explained, “Next, while our forces will still be capable of prevailing in more than one conflict at the same time—and I want to make clear that this is not changing—we are continuing to evolve our approach to this capability, since the nature of those conflicts has changed, since we will be able to apply to them advanced and agile new kinds of forces, and since in
some cases we can best meet our objectives and deny the aggressors’ objectives in ways other than by land invasion and occupation.”22 Ironically, despite the public commentary that the Department had departed from the two-war standard to a “1.5-war standard,” with fewer alternative scenarios to consider between 2012 and 2014, the DOD increased efforts to retain capacity for two conventional wars.

U.S. force level ambitions throughout the unipolar era were characterized by decreasing demands on the force for major combat operations in two simultaneous wars and increasing demands for nontraditional warfighting such as peacetime “shaping” missions and stability operations that followed regime change. The two wars the force were expected to be able to fight and win in the 1993 Bottom-Up Review were not the same two wars called for in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Nonetheless, the trend toward greater sophistication of this era’s later constructs did not meaningfully shift force planning away from the two-war construct. The elaborateness of the later force planning constructs exceeded the DOD’s analytic competency. The most stressing case for force sizing—and to justify capacity—remained two near-simultaneous wars against mid-tier, regional powers.

**Assessment of the Two-War Construct**

The two-war construct of the unipolar era was marked by relative consistency in force design. It largely served as a basis to preserve status quo force levels. There were only modest changes to the two-war construct throughout this period, and modest and fleeting changes to U.S. force levels as well (see graph and table 2).

**Implications for Force Planning**

Political necessities of addressing near-term operations (i.e., post-9/11, Iraq surge) guided decisions to grow or shrink the force, rather than strategic directions based on judgments about future wars. Over time, the two-war construct retrospectively adapted to incorporate hard lessons learned from real world events. Yet, the modest variations in the force planning construct reflected politically driven end-strength decisions more than it anticipated or prescribed them.

The most striking consistency across this era is the preservation of capacity for major force elements (see comparison of unipolar era bookend strategies (1993-2014) in table 2 below). There are important changes in force structure between these two strategies, declines of approximately 20 percent in active Air Force fighter aircraft23 and 18 percent in Navy ships, substantial increases in special operations forces,24 and development of a cyber mission force. However, the major building blocks of the Armed Forces projected by the 2014 QDR were roughly the same types of units and of roughly the same overall size as those in the 1993 Bottom-Up Review.
There are numerous reasons why overall force levels and major force elements of the U.S. Armed Forces were so similar after a 25-year period. Attention and resources were understandably focused on the pressing problems of terrorism and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. When the DOD could concentrate on the future, such efforts were subject to a sclerotic acquisition process as well as institutional and cultural impediments to innovation. Also, members of Congress were reluctant to support force structure changes that led to lost jobs in their districts.

Perhaps the most significant reason explaining the similarity of U.S. military force structure throughout this era is the absence of a peer challenger demanding new capability and concept development. The two-war construct biased the Department’s force planning processes to maintaining force structure and capacity over developing capability.

The two-war construct did not lend itself to capability development because conventional forces were expected to dominate militarily inferior regional

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**The Unipolar Era had no peer challenger demanding new capability and concept development.**

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adversaries. After the Gulf War, U.S. defense planners were self-assured in the U.S. method of warfare and in their ability to determine the forces necessary to defeat potential adversaries in conventional conflicts. The United States was the sole superpower, the U.S. way of war was dominant, and the future of warfare seemed certain. Scenario assessments were generally based on a high degree of confidence in estimates about the strength of adversary forces, how adversaries would employ their forces, how U.S. forces would be employed against them, and how U.S. forces would perform in force-on-force interactions.

In this environment, there was no compelling reason to seriously explore alternative concepts of operations against regional powers—why revisit the art of warfare when the current palette is dominant? Moreover, maintaining a military capability advantage was not an issue against mid-tier states like Iraq or Serbia. New concept development stalled, old assumptions ossified, and capability development was simply not a priority. Force planners assumed that if scenario force demands were met, the concept of operations could be executed and the war won. The only challenge was preserving sufficient force capacity to execute the concept. The “force demand” in the scenario, therefore, became a hard floor beneath force structure that could not be violated. As the post-Cold War period progressed and no peer challenger emerged, the pressure to maintain sufficient force structure for two concurrent wars became the main goal for DOD force planning.

**Legacy of the Two-War Construct**

Notwithstanding substantial increases in the defense budget following 9/11 and for the Iraq Surge, the general climate for the DOD in the unipolar era was to resist defense budget cuts. The bookend strategies for this era were both developed under budgetary pressure. During the Bottom-Up Review, the DOD attempted to stem the force drawdown from the end of the Cold War. For the 2014 QDR, the Department argued against the Budget Control Act and automatic budget sequestration. The added resources for counterterrorism and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were culled out in a separate account—the Overseas Contingency Operations budget. They were not intended to improve the ability of the force to deter and defeat two regional powers simultaneously.

In light of this budgetary pressure, maintaining the two-war construct and the force capacity it justified became the litmus test for the adequacy of any defense strategy. For many defense leaders and strategists, the ability to defeat two regional aggressors simultaneously, in separate theaters, remained the condition for U.S. superpower status. Notional strategies that proposed deviating from the two-war construct—potentially trading capacity for capability—generally failed to influence the defense community. They were often seen as a ruse to lower defense investments, even if the result could potentially lead to better warfighting performance.
The two-war construct that drove force planning decisions during the unipolar era was a success for those aiming to preserve force structure in an era of fiscal constraint. Given U.S. military dominance, this capacity contributed to deterring rogue states—including Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—from using conventional force to achieve their aims. As leading defense strategists Dr. Kathleen Hicks and Samuel Brannen observed, however, “From almost the beginning, [Major Theater War]-centered force planning came crashing into the reality of how U.S. forces were deployed across an evolving threat spectrum that defied easily categorized forms of conflict. Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, the 9/11 attacks, and more recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate clearly that the post–Cold War world demands vigilance and, when necessary and appropriate, a willingness to act, adapt, and prove flexible across a wide range of military operations.”

The force planning construct led to two problems in matching the American military to the evolving geopolitical environment. First, defense strategies of the 1990s failed to anticipate the post-war counterinsurgency and stability operations that U.S. forces had to conduct in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. The force was ill-equipped, untrained, and wholly unprepared for the type of counterinsurgency and stability operations it was primarily called upon to conduct. Further, the construct set an expectation that U.S. forces would conventionally defeat an adversary and then quickly reset for another potential conflict. This exacerbated post-conflict stabilization and nascent counterinsurgency efforts as in-country forces were withdrawn rather than used to manage unfolding events. The consequences in terms of blood and treasure lost are profound.

### Table 2: Beginning and End of Unipolar Era Force Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1993 Bottom-Up Review Recommended end-of-FYDP Force</th>
<th>2014 QDR Recommended end-of-FYDP Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Army</strong></td>
<td>10 divisions (active)</td>
<td>10 divisions (active)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5+ divisions (reserve)</td>
<td>8 divisions (reserve)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Navy</strong></td>
<td>11 aircraft carriers (active)</td>
<td>11 aircraft carriers (active)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 aircraft carrier (reserve)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45-55 attack submarines</td>
<td>51 attack submarines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>346 ships</td>
<td>283 ships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Air Force</strong></td>
<td>13 fighter wings (active)</td>
<td>26 fighter squadrons (active)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 fighter wings (reserve)</td>
<td>22 fighter squadrons (reserve)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Up to 184 bombers (B-52H, B-1, B-2)</td>
<td>96 bombers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marine Corps</strong></td>
<td>3 Marine Expeditionary Forces</td>
<td>3 Marine Expeditionary Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic Nuclear Forces</strong></td>
<td>18 ballistic missile submarines</td>
<td>14 ballistic missile submarines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Up to 94 B-52H, 20 B-2 bombers</td>
<td>60 nuclear capable bombers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>500 Minuteman III (single warhead)</td>
<td>Up to 420 Minuteman III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, the two-war construct failed to develop a more modern American military able to stay ahead of emerging competitors China and Russia. This is not a result of a failure of imagination. There were unipolar strategies that aimed to plan for long-term competition with China, such as the 2001 QDR—largely written before the 9/11 attacks—and the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and corresponding Asia-Pacific Rebalance. Yet, these efforts were undermined by the fact that security challenges from China and Russia were broadly perceived as remote and abstract, especially in light of the tyranny of the immediate, real-world problems facing the DOD in daily headlines. For example, in 2009, Secretary Gates decided to curtail procurement of F-22s partially so that the Department could devote more resources to drones and mine-resistant vehicles to better protect soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. While it was perfectly rational to prioritize resources for real rather than prospective wars, such decisions had consequences on the long-term competitiveness of the Armed Forces by arresting force modernization.

The legacy of the two-war construct is evident in today’s force, characterized by eroding military advantages against China and Russia that, if unaddressed, challenge the United States’ ability to deter aggression. As a notable December 2017 RAND report finds, “the United States now fields forces that are, at once, larger than needed to fight a single major war, failing to keep pace with the modernizing forces of major power adversaries, poorly postured to meet key challenges in Europe and East Asia, and insufficiently trained and ready to get the most operational utility from many of its active component units.”

Inappropriateness for Major-Power Competition

The two-war construct may have been appropriate for planning against regional powers over whom the Defense Department held military dominance. It is dangerously ill-suited for a world marked by great power competition where military dominance is not assured. The old construct assumes a level of U.S. control over a potential conflict that is simply unlikely to exist, and it privileges maintaining what the DOD has, over what it may need.

First, the two-war construct implicitly assumes a high-degree of certainty in how the first war will unfold. This assumption is necessary to have deliberations about how many forces are available for the second war, along what timeline, and in what condition. During the unipolar era, force planners had high confidence in their calculations regarding the forces necessary to defeat Iraq (later Iran) or
North Korea, given the relative military overmatch the United States enjoyed. The two-war construct was based on the assumption that U.S. forces in the first fight would dominate opposition so much that the United States could largely dictate the pace of operations. They would quickly achieve their objectives, suffer little if any attrition, and then swing select “high-demand, low-density” units to a second theater in a timely fashion to deter or defeat potential opportunistic aggressors. If this hubris was ever justified, it certainly strains credibility when confronted with a potential great power conflict with either China or Russia.

China and Russia are vastly stronger military adversaries than the regional powers of Iraq, Iran, or North Korea that the two-war construct was meant to address. In great power war, the U.S. military will have to endure loss, will have to compete for domain advantages, and will have to confront greater uncertainty regarding the pace and scope of conflict. How that conflict could unfold is highly uncertain. This is new territory for U.S. defense planners. Whereas the first Gulf War served as a ready example of what conventional war during the unipolar era may have looked like, there has yet to be a clash of great powers armed with modern military technology. We have to try and anticipate what war may look like when the advanced capabilities the United States employed with so much success against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 are in turn wielded against us.

Secondly and relatedly, the two-war construct equates deterrence (against nation states from initiating a conflict) with dominance (the ability of U.S. forces to dictate the geographic bounds and intensity of the conflict). This assumption is also necessary to understand the contours of the second potential war. If the United States is challenged to contain the geographic scope of an initial conflict or faces competitive asymmetries at varying levels of escalation, the first conflict could plausibly escalate from a regional to a global fight or from conventional to nuclear war. Such escalations in the first fight would shape a host of geopolitical and operational dynamics influencing opportunistic aggressors and the U.S. ability to deter or defeat them.

Deterrence by dominance has utility against non-nuclear regional powers with limited escalation options. It is a problematic concept when confronted with the military sophistication of today’s great power competitors. As Elbridge Colby, distinguished strategist and deterrence theorist, explains, “if the United States makes war against Russia or China without serious regard for their red lines, as the logic of dominance would dictate or at the very least strongly suggest, it risks greatly increasing the chances of both inadvertent and deliberate
escalation and the use of nuclear weapons by its adversaries. Blithely adhering to
the American way of war from the era of military hegemony, that is, will push con-
ventional wars towards becoming nuclear ones.”

Colby observes a key lesson of the Cold War that has to be resuscitated is
“deterrence without dominance—even against a very great and fearsome
opponent—is possible.” During the Cold War, the United States knew it was
unable to maintain escalation dominance against the Soviet Union, given the
latter’s nuclear force. Yet with its NATO allies, the United States nonetheless
had a credible deterrent, one that posed significant quandaries and costs to the
Soviets in the event of aggression. This lesson was forgotten in the unipolar era.
The escalation dominance assumption of the two-war construct no longer
works. A central question for this new era of strategic competitions is how to main-
tain a credible deterrent without escalation dominance.

Third, as discussed previously, the two-war construct inherently favors force
capacity over force capability. In a resource-constrained world, there are necessary
tradeoffs between how large a force is and how well it can operate (i.e., between
quantity and quality). Given the DOD’s eroding military advantage relative to
China and Russia, capability must be prioritized over capacity to enhance the
lethality of the force and retain credible conventional deterrence.

Proponents of the two-war construct argue that resources need not be con-
strained. To remain a superpower, they argue, the United States must invest suffi-
ciently more than the President’s FY 2019 request of $686 billion in defense to be
able to defeat two simultaneous aggressors. This is a question of what level of risk
is acceptable. The answer depends on one’s assessment of the probability and con-
sequence of potential wars, the U.S. military’s potential to deter them, expec-
tations of allied and partner contributions, and the opportunity cost of investing
these resources elsewhere in the U.S. economy.

There is always a case to make for how additional resources could further mitigate
risk. The reality is that no war is ever risk free. But barring a massive increase in defense
spending, the Department must make difficult resource tradeoffs between force capacity and
force capability. If the DOD’s force planning construct still centers on the ability to fight
two simultaneous wars, particularly two wars against great powers, that could lead to invest-
ments in more capacity that detract from the resources necessary to modernize the
force to fight more effectively against great powers and future challenges. The
worst-case outcome is for the Department to build a force that is bigger, and
more expensive, than necessary to fight one war with a great power, yet still be incapable of defeating it in the future due to limited capabilities.

**A Fundamental Shift toward Great-Power Competition**

A number of striking events in 2014 marked a clear return of great power competition. Russia invaded Ukraine, rattling Europe and calling into question the credibility of NATO’s collective security commitments against Russian aggression. China increased land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, in contravention of international law, and began building military facilities across the region. The DOD began to appreciate that it was potentially experiencing an erosion of U.S. competitive military advantage relative to great powers and that its traditional way of war was outdated.35

**Strategic Competitions Era (2014+)**

The then-Deputy Secretary of Defense, Bob Work, launched the Third Offset in 2014: an initiative to develop a new suite of technologically sophisticated capabilities to counteract China’s and Russia’s anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities and ensure the credibility of U.S. conventional deterrence.36 The Third Offset appropriately diagnosed the operational problems confronting the DOD, as well as the imperative to explore novel concepts and capabilities based on emerging technologies. But as an idea that was just taking shape and biased toward long-term solutions, the Third Offset was not the central feature of the force planning construct or fully embraced in the force planning process.

Although China and Russia were not new security challenges in 2018, the 2018 NDS marks a fundamental shift in the DOD’s strategy by prioritizing those two countries above all other security challenges. The NDS takes the Third Offset’s operational problem statement and subsumes it within a broader strategic problem to U.S. prosperity and security—the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia. The unclassified summary of the 2018 NDS describes the force planning construct as:

*Prioritize preparedness for war.* Achieving peace through strength requires the Joint Force to deter conflict through preparedness for war. During normal day-to-day operations, the Joint Force will sustainably compete to: deter aggression in three key regions—the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and Middle East; degrade terrorist and WMD threats; and defend U.S. interests from challenges below the level of armed conflict. In wartime, the fully mobilized Joint Force will be capable of: defeating aggression by a major power; deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere; and disrupting imminent terrorist and WMD threats. During peace or in war, the Joint Force will deter nuclear and non-nuclear strategic attacks and defend the homeland. To support these missions, the Joint Force must gain and maintain information superiority; and develop, strengthen, and sustain U.S. security relationships.37
This “Great Power War” force planning construct reorients the DOD to prioritize great power competition in three principal ways.

First, as the heading notes, it prioritizes preparedness for war over counterterrorism operations and other daily activities. The National Defense Strategy creates a singular construct that covers force management of the existing force and force planning to develop the future force. This confronts the Department with tradeoffs across timeframes, putting it in a better position to understand the long-term implications of decisions authorizing near-term deployments. By doing so, the DOD can curb the daily use of the force and conserve resources to improve force readiness (training and equipment condition) for high-end warfare against great powers. Near-term operational requirements may still be prioritized on a case-by-case basis, but such decisions should be informed by the opportunity costs.

Second, it prioritizes the force’s ability to win any one war against any adversary above the ability to conduct two simultaneous wars. It does so by essentially bifurcating the canonical two-war standard and elevating “defeating aggression by a major power” to make it the focal point of the wartime missions. This construct sends a clear signal that the DOD will prioritize exploration of novel concepts and capabilities to ensure it maintains military advantage over China and Russia above capacity to simultaneously dominate two regional powers. It also reintroduces the art of war as a variable to be explored, rather than a fixed input to be maintained. To this end, the 2018 NDS states, “We must anticipate how competitors and adversaries will employ new operational concepts and technologies to attempt to defeat us, while developing operational concepts to sharpen our competitive advantages and enhance our lethality.”

Third, it has a more appropriate standard of deterrence for great power competitors. It expressly notes that U.S. military forces cannot be assumed to enjoy “uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain.” The NDS theory of deterrence is predicated on having a military advantage over China and Russia, including combat-credible forces able to delay, degrade, or deny adversary aggression. U.S. forces are expected to be able to deter aggression without dominating all domains at the onset of a conflict. This calls for the Department to apply greater thought in how conventional forces will contribute to deterrence, how they will fight limited wars, and crucially, how they will manage escalation.

**Appropriateness for Great Power Competitions**

The NDS “Great Power War” force planning construct is more appropriate than the two-war construct for great power competition because it appreciates the scale of the challenge against a sophisticated great power adversary, provides a more credible deterrent, takes seriously threats to the U.S. homeland, and embraces uncertainty in how such great power war could unfold. It does so by placing greater weight on hedging—limiting the risk of failure—for the first war.
First, the NDS construct asks more of the U.S. military in great power war than the two-war construct, which in large part treats challengers as of equivalent priority. It sends a clear signal that the U.S. military must be able to deter and, if necessary, defeat a great power adversary in war before resources are devoted to other missions, be they wars against opportunistic regional adversaries or day-to-day missions. This also presumes greater attention to protracted conflicts with great powers and mobilization of personnel and materiel needs beyond the Active Component.

Second, the NDS force planning construct has a more credible deterrent because it demands more of conventional forces to defeat great power aggression. The last time great powers were the focal point of the force planning construct—and U.S. forces were expected to deter without dominance—was during the Cold War. The Cold War theory of deterrence for Western Europe assumed that conventional forces would be sufficiently engaged in a conflict to have a credible path to nuclear escalation. That is, if U.S. conventional forces were losing, there would be a credible step for the United States to be the first to escalate to nuclear use. Conversely, the NDS theory of deterrence expects more from conventional forces. For force planning purposes, they must be able to deny adversaries’ successful use of aggression to achieve their aims, not just facilitate credible escalation. This is critical to deterrence because it firmly places on the adversary, not the United States, the burden of being the first to escalate the conflict to a nuclear war—with all the accompanying political costs.

Third, this construct accounts for the fact that the homeland is no longer a sanctuary. Great power competition already extends into the U.S. homeland on a daily basis. Great power conflict likely would as well. The NDS, therefore, ensures that sufficient resources are dedicated to protecting the American people. This includes traditional missions such as strategic deterrence, missile defense, and cybersecurity, as well as support to civilian authorities.

Fourth, it more seriously embraces uncertainty. Unipolar era force planners recognized the uncertainty of future war. For example, the 1997 QDR succinctly stated, “We can never know with certainty when or where the next major theater war will occur, who our next adversary will be, how an enemy will fight, who will join us in a coalition, or precisely what demands will be placed on U.S. forces. Indeed, history has repeatedly shown that we are often unable to predict such matters.”40 The DOD had a two-war construct to deter opportunistic aggression and to serve as a hedge in case the first war was larger or more difficult than expected.
If they were wrong about how the first war would transpire, the force structure remaining for the second war could be applied as a reserve.

When compared to the old two-war construct, the new NDS force planning construct increases emphasis on hedging for uncertainty in the conduct of the first war. If the United States cannot afford to lose such a conflict, its military force development cannot rest on brittle assumptions about wartime performance and conduct. With their advanced weaponry, robust nuclear arsenal, and ability to threaten a fait accompli (rapidly use force to achieve their objectives before U.S. forces can be brought to bear), China and Russia present a military challenge of much greater magnitude than that of two regional conflicts against Iran or North Korea. Put plainly, great power war will be considerably more difficult than regional wars, and critically, U.S. forces must be able to succeed across a broader range of scenarios and conditions reflecting the breadth and sophistication of adversary abilities.

To say that the NDS prioritizes force planning for war against a potential great power adversary does not remove the necessity to deter an opportunistic aggressor. The United States is still committed to defending its interests and honoring defense treaties, even if the bulk of its forces are at war elsewhere. As expert strategist and force developer Dr. Mara Karlin explains, “The U.S. military must be able to fight and win multiple conflicts. Anything short of that is reckless. A force that can only wage one conflict is effectively a zero-conflict force since employing it would require the president to preclude any other meaningful global engagement.”

How the DOD will deter opportunistic aggression is highly context-specific. The impact of the first war on the reputation for U.S. willingness to adhere to its security commitments and ability to see them through will matter. Performing well in the first war and showcasing the awesome might of American military power should give an opportunistic aggressor pause. Conversely, losing quickly, exhibiting incompetence, or completely exhausting the force may increase an opportunistic aggressor’s perception of the likelihood of success. The geopolitical context within which the opportunistic aggressor arises will also matter considerably. Which states are involved, to what extent, the potential aggressor’s objectives, and potential bounds of the conflict, etc., are all highly relevant. Moreover, the character of war—the way war manifests itself and is fought—will be of utmost relevance. And, the character of warfare is changing considerably and uncertainly as creative application of rapid technological advances—in artificial intelligence, directed energy, hypersonics, and unmanned systems, among others—give rise to new, innovative military operational concepts and capabilities. U.S. defense planners need to maintain a healthy respect for the unknowns accompanying any future great power conflict, including their impact on other would-be challengers.
Recognizing this, the NDS is therefore not a “one-war strategy.” The NDS ensures that the United States, working with allies and partners, will always be ready to counter aggression from multiple adversaries through the full spectrum of its capabilities, and will be able to credibly reverse adversary aggression if necessary.

R.I.P. Two-War Construct

Strategic solvency requires a careful balancing of ambition and ability. Well before the development of the 2018 NDS, esteemed strategist and scholar Dr. Frank Hoffman observed that, “Our present strategy hinges on sustaining deterrence but without the same degree of military dominance enjoyed in the past and with an admitted declining margin of technological superiority, producing appreciably increased risk.” Yet, continued use of the two-war construct would lead to the worst possible outcome: overinvestment in forces inappropriate for future wars, missed opportunities to explore concepts necessary to defeat great powers, and security guarantees to partners and allies predicated more on bluff than demonstrable military capability.

The reemergence of great power competition, coupled with technology-driven changes in the character of warfare, should humble force planners determining the force demands necessary to defeat potential great power aggression. Having witnessed U.S. forces dismantle the Iraqi military in 1991, it is understandable that post-Cold War force planners had a high degree of confidence in their estimates on how to do so again. No such recent signpost points the way along the paths of the new era of renewed strategic competition, and Cold War benchmarks may provide more comforting nostalgia than they do actionable, modern force planning criteria. The bounds of uncertainty are simply much greater at present than in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Force planning under the new NDS “Great Power War” construct should break from old assumptions, and it should give a fresh look to how war might unfold by asking purposeful questions of both operational art and military science. The DOD must genuinely explore new operational concepts to exploit weaknesses in adversary defenses, attack from multiple vectors, and reintroduce the element of surprise into U.S. warfare—concepts designed to foil the adversary’s preferred way of war more than trying to maintain the preferred U.S. way of war. Moreover, the Department must better leverage its analytic community to determine how well U.S. military forces fight across a range of scenarios, when potential adversaries call more and more of our assumptions into question. We must better understand risk to make informed force trades; force sufficiency for narrowly prescribed scenarios can no longer be the DOD’s primary metric for decision.
The 2018 NDS force planning construct is not an answer to the challenge of long-term strategic competition, or a prescription for what kind of force the Department should build to effectively deter and, if necessary, defeat China or Russia in a future war. It instead provides a prioritization framework to clarify the DOD’s force management and force planning activities. It introduces opportunities for new warfighting concepts into the Department’s force planning, while better positioning the future force to adapt to an uncertain future. And, it provides the next generation of force planners an appropriate “yardstick” with which to measure the Defense Department’s investments against the United States’ great power competitors.

Endnotes

2. David Ochmanek, email correspondence with author, July 2018.
7. William F. Kaufman, “Planning Conventional Forces 1950-80,” The Brookings Institution (1982): 6-7. This was based on the assumption that the Soviet Union and China could each only launch one major attack at a time. China could not, for example, simultaneously launch a large-scale invasion of Korea and Southeast Asia.


16. Aspin, "Bottom-Up Review," 19. Identifies “certain specialized high-leverage units or unique assets might be ‘dual tasked,’ that is, used in both MRCs. For example, certain advanced aircraft—such as B-2s, F-117s, JSTARs, and EF-11 Is—that we have purchased in limited numbers because of their expense would probably need to shift from the first to second MRC.”

17. Ibid., 14.


23. The 1993 BUR provides the number of fighter wings it seeks by the end of FYDP, but not the number of squadrons or aircraft. Since the FYDP is five years, an approximate of the 1993 BUR and corresponding FY 1994 budget’s projection is the actual FY 1998 inventory number of 1,613 active fighter aircraft. The 2014 QDR provides the number of end-of-FYDP fighter aircraft at 971, but with a caveat that this is only for “combat coded” units for wartime performance, not the entire active inventory. Using a similar estimation, therefore, the actual FY 2018 inventory number is 1,297 active fighter aircraft. The difference between 1,613 and 1,297 is 316 (approximately 20 percent). “The Air Force in Facts and Figures,” Air Force Magazine 82, no. 5 (May 1999): 61; Air Force Almanac 101, no. 6 (June 2018): 48, http://www.airforcemag.com/Almanacs/Pages/default.aspx.


32. Ibid.


38. Ibid., 7.

39. Ibid., 3.


45. The 2014 QDR stops counting in wings in favor of fighter squadrons, a subset of wings. Traditionally, a wing contains three squadrons, and a squadron contains between 12–24 aircraft, but the Air Force regularly adjusts the ratio of wings to squadrons to aircraft and varies them across different types of aircraft. This has made elusive direct comparisons of the 1994 BUR end-of-FYDP wings to the 2014 QDR end-of-FYDP squadrons. The most recent accounting of wings is in the 2010 QDR, which recommended: 10–11 theater strike wings equivalent and 6 air superiority wing equivalents. However, it is unclear to what degree the BUR and 2010 QDR wings are composed of equivalent units.