The Future of the Joint Warfighting Headquarters: An Alternative Approach to the Joint Task Force

Eric Bissonette, Thomas Bruscino, Kelvin Mote, Matthew Powell, Marc Sanborn, James Watts, Louis Yuengert

How will the United States military maintain a competitive advantage in future wars? As its adversaries are developing the capabilities to fight and win more rapidly, the US military must be a superior and sustainable Joint Force sooner than its adversaries and move toward establishing standing expeditionary headquarters as its primary warfighting headquarters in lieu of Joint Task Forces. The US military should formalize the American Expeditionary Force as the principle Joint warfighting headquarters to respond to crises requiring military intervention. Successful implementation would require these headquarters to align with the nature of Joint warfighting, take advantage of the strengths of the services, minimize additional force structure requirements, and aid current Joint and service concept development.

Existing combatant commands have not been optimal Joint warfighting headquarters because they devote most of their time to military diplomacy, theater security cooperation, and support to great power competition. Current reliance on Joint Task Forces to fill the gap is problematic because the postcrisis activation of such formations requires significant formation time, and Joint Task Force headquarters are primarily drawn from single-service headquarters that lack the experience and training necessary to conduct complex, Joint operations.

The US military should establish American Expeditionary Forces as the principle Joint warfighting headquarters. These headquarters should be standing; numbered; regionally aligned with geographic combatant commands; and drawn from existing, regionally aligned service headquarters and formations. The proposed American Expeditionary Forces would function with American Expeditionary Force component commanders in Joint command decision making in a command council with the American Expeditionary Force commander; be organized with a functional staff, rather than by J-codes; and use a Joint warfighting operations process whereby the command council and their functional staff develop the Joint operational approach and component command staffs engage in detailed planning and orders production.

A principal benefit of the American Expeditionary Force concept beyond Joint warfighting in a contingency is the ability to align and experiment with both service and Joint operational concepts to enable force management. Standing American Expeditionary Forces are ideally suited to experiment with, evaluate, and develop Joint warfighting concepts and service-specific concepts and integrate the space and cyber domains in Joint warfighting. As regionally aligned, continuously established, Joint formations, the American Expeditionary Forces could most effectively test these concepts against the doctrine and capabilities of potential adversaries.

In the future, the US military’s ability to respond to its adversaries’ actions quickly, effectively, and Jointly will be a strategic deterrent. Although establishing standing warfighting headquarters that are modeled after the current Joint task force organization would help address some of the efficiency and effectiveness inadequacies of the current approach, this solution is not a complete one. In addition, receiving service buy-in, aligning with current Joint concept development initiatives, or undergoing successful implementation without adding additional force structure would be unlikely. Therefore, the US military should formalize the American Expeditionary Force as the principle Joint warfighting headquarters to respond to crises requiring military intervention.