

Briefing Memo

Feasibility of the “One Plus” Force Construct in the US Defense Strategy

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Introduction

In recent years, the United States has been at a crossroads in terms of defense policy. In particular, the so-called 'one plus' force construct of defeating one aggression while deterring one other aggression means a fundamental shift from the post-Cold War force construct of fighting and winning two major regional conflicts (2MRCs) at the same time. On the other hand, there are hurdles that must be overcome to realize this force construct, and it is necessary, to a certain degree, to make tradeoffs by giving up a program in order to advance a different program, that is, readjusting resource allocation within the Department of Defense in order to drastically change US military forces without expecting large budget increases.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the issues involved in implementing this 'one plus' force construct, especially the problems related to tradeoffs, and to confirm how this concept is reflected in actual policies. Deriving their essence through (1) looking at the great power competition force structure the US is aiming for and (2) the problems inherent in it will prove valuable in considering Japan's defense policy which, like that of the US, is at a turning point.

1 Priorities for the Department of Defense

Force constructs are basic guidelines that indicate the scale and composition of the US military forces necessary to achieve the goals set in various strategy documents, and have been actively discussed in recent years following the military revival of China and Russia. Since the *Bottom-Up Review* in 1993 showing the US defense strategy during the post-Cold War period, the US has maintained the 2MRC force construct as basic policy for a quarter century in order to simultaneously respond to and win conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and in the Middle East.¹ On the other hand, the 'Desert Storm' model, which the US showed in the Gulf War and the Iraq War, has large-scale troop deployments over several months and projects military power based on overwhelming sea and air superiority; it is considered to be less effective against countries such as China and Russia which have highly sophisticated air defense capabilities and precision striking power and which are aiming

¹ Mark Gunzinger, *Shaping America's Future Military: Toward a New Force Planning Construct* (Washington DC: CSBA, 2013); Raphael S. Cohen, *The History and Politics of Defense Reviews* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

to make a *fait accompli* in a short period of time.² Therefore, the necessity of a force construct that can handle competition and conflict with China and Russia is widely recognized, and since the latter half of the 2010s, there have been discussions on the possibility of a new force construct, such as a construct that specializes in great power competition with China and Russia,³ a construct that envisions two major conflicts with any adversaries,⁴ or a construct that is capable of simultaneously responding to conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia.⁵

The so-called 'one plus' force construct presented by the 2018 NDS is one answer to these arguments. As for the level of military force required by the US military, the 'one plus' force construct discusses defeating a great power aggression and deterring another opportunistic aggression, limiting the number of simultaneous conflicts to a single great power conflict with either China or Russia.⁶ Although the NDS talks of 'defeating' and 'detering', what is meant by the latter is somewhat ambiguous, and there is an interpretation that merely but ambitiously adds a potential conflict with China and Russia to the previous 2MRC standard.⁷ However, as some of the former officials directly involved in the NDS pointed out, the Department of Defense's priorities are placed on China and Russia, which have the ability to militarily defeat the United States, while North Korea, Iran, and terrorism are placed on their periphery, being "significant, but lesser threats that are no longer the principal drivers of U.S. strategy or the overall size and shape of the joint force."⁸ In fact, there is a shared perception in the Department that it would be willing to tolerate a certain degree of risk in lower-priority areas such as the Middle East, which arises from the focus on great power competition.⁹

In the new force construct, long-term capability investments will be given the highest priority. The previous construct, which considered simultaneously dealing with multiple conflicts, required to ensure capacity of force, irrespective of which states are envisioned, potential enemies. This is because the considerable amount or capacity of troops and equipment are essential in the first place to conduct wars against multiple enemies at the same time.¹⁰ In contrast, the 'one plus' construct

² Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, *Strategy for a Post-Power Projection Era*, Paper Prepared for OSD Net Assessment, December 2010; Mark Gunzinger and Bryan Clark, *Winning the Salvo Competition: Rebalancing America's Air and Missile Defenses* (Washington DC: CSBA, 2016); Elbridge Colby and Jonathan F. Solomon, "Avoiding Becoming a Paper Tiger: Presence in a Warfighting Defense Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 82 (July 2016).

³ Mark Gunzinger, et al., *Force Planning for the Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington DC: CSBA, 2017).

⁴ David Ochmanek, et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

⁵ Thomas Donnelly, et al., *To Rebuild America's Military* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015).

⁶ Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (January 19, 2018), p. 6.

⁷ Timothy M. Bonds, et al., *America's Strategy-Resource Mismatch: Addressing the Gaps between U.S. National Strategy and Military Capacity* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019); Rick Berger and Mackenzie Eaglen, "'Hard Choices' and Strategic Insolvency: Where the National Defense Strategy Falls Short," *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2019.

⁸ Christopher M. Dougherty, "Strategy or Straitjacket? Three Reasons Why People Are Still Arguing about the National Defense Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, August 9, 2019; Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 2019), pp. 7-30.

⁹ Eric Edelman, et al., *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (November 14, 2018), p. 20.

¹⁰ Ochmanek, et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces*, pp. 97-109.

assumes dealing with a single conflict, relatively decreasing the necessary level of force capacity, while on the other hand demanding modern, sophisticated capabilities as the US now puts emphasis on the conflicts with highly advanced military powers, China and Russia. This point has in fact been made clear by then Secretary of Defense James Mattis and then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford.¹¹

2 The Trilemma of Readiness, Capability, and Capacity

However, the leaders of the US need to consider resource allocation trade-offs in order to build more capable military force while facing defense budgetary limitation and keeping global security commitment. Among these tradeoffs, in many cases, there are contradictions between strengthening readiness today, enhancing capability for the future, and expanding force capacity.¹² For example, focusing on future capability investments such as research, development, testing & evaluation (RDT&E) and tests of future concepts will damage readiness with relatively lower investments in personnel, training, fuel, ammunition, spare parts, and the like. The reverse is also true. In addition, expanding the force capacity may lead to lower investments in the quality of force due to the focus on quantitative aspects of it, but even worse, if sufficient level of budget is not allocated to such elements as personnel, training, and ammunition, then the military is at risk of falling into a large-scale but 'hollow' military force.¹³

Given these tradeoffs, allocating a budget for capability investments is not easy. Senior officials and officers in the Department of Defense tend to be absorbed in ongoing operations and existing programs at the expense of long-term investments in capability.¹⁴ Kathleen Hicks of the Center for Strategic and International Studies also pointed out that programs related to capability investment, which is the least urgent among readiness, capability, and capacity, tend to be postponed, calling this problem the "iron triangle of painful tradeoffs."¹⁵ In other words, the Department needs to make "hard choices" within this triangle, and prioritizing or strengthening capability investments is particularly difficult.¹⁶

In fact, this trade-off problem has had a considerable impact on US defense policy since the NDS was announced. In terms of force posture, the US needs to carry out daily operations, such as regular exercises, presence activities, deployments in Europe, and operations in Afghanistan. The problem here is that trying to reduce the personnel and training necessary for maintaining a high degree of

¹¹ DOD, "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy," January 19, 2018; Matthew Beinart, "Dunford: More Wargames, Exercises Needed To Better Inform Modernization Budgeting Priorities," *Defense Daily*, October 29, 2018.

¹² Mark Cancian, "Military Force Structure: Trade-offs, Trade-offs, Trade-offs," *Defense Outlook 2018* (February 2018).

¹³ Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Science of War: Defense Budgeting, Military Technology, Logistics, and Combat Outcomes*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 31-43.

¹⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, et al., *The U.S. Department of Defense's Planning Process: Components and Challenges* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

¹⁵ Kathleen H. Hicks, *Defense Strategy and the Iron Triangle of Painful Trade-offs* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2017).

¹⁶ Berger and Eaglen, "'Hard Choices' and Strategic Insolvency."

readiness will increase the burden on the troops currently engaged in ongoing activities. The healthy deploy-to-dwell ratio, an indicator of the US military's operational tempo, is generally understood as 1:3, but in the Army and Air Force in recent years, for example, it has been at about 1:2 or less.¹⁷ As seen in a series of collision accidents in the Indo-Pacific fleet in 2017, an excessively high operational tempo brings about degraded military readiness.¹⁸ Given these risks, cutting the budget for readiness would not be a reasonable option for the Department of Defense.

Expanding force capacity tends to reflect the political dynamics, including those between the White House and Congress.¹⁹ President Trump laid out a planned force size of 540,000 soldiers, 350 ships, and 1,200 aircraft before he took office. These numbers were most likely to be drawn from a Heritage Foundation study, whose index was in effect founded on the 2MRC standard.²⁰ The Navy revised its target number of ships upward from 308 to 355 in the December 2016 Force Structure Assessment (FSA) which was released immediately before President Trump's inauguration,²¹ and thereafter this 355 goal has been incorporated into the FY2018 National Defense Authorization Act, now legally obliging the Navy's commitment to that goal.²² As previously mentioned, the goal that focuses on force size is not necessarily consistent with the 'one plus' force construct, but when Congress scrutinizes the defense budget, whether this goal remains achievable often comes to a hotly-debated topic.²³

On the other hand, it is also true that maintaining and strengthening present readiness and expanding force capacity can be a hedge against the risk of future 'unanticipated' conflicts. Even if the US realized the 'one plus' force construct and succeeded in deterring a great power conflict, there remains the possibility of low-intensity insurgencies and regional conflicts with North Korea or Iran. If sized and equipped exclusively for a short-term, high-intensity conflict with a great power, then it is not hard to imagine that the US military will face difficulties responding to lower-end intrastate insurgency as well as regional conflicts with such states North Korea and Iran, which are expected to be long-term operations. In fact, during the Cold War, the US Army, which was mainly designed on the premise of fighting Soviet armored units in the European front, suffered a heavy toll when it was

¹⁷ Alan J. Vick, et al., *Is the USAF Flying Force Large Enough? Assessing Capacity Demands in Four Alternative Futures* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); Bradley Bowman, "Why We Should Grow the Active Duty Army," *Real Clear Defense*, February 14, 2020.

A ratio of 1:3 means a non-deployment period (including training) of 18 months is instituted for every 6 months of deployment.

¹⁸ Michael Bayer and Gary Roughead, *Strategic Readiness Review 2017* (December 3, 2017).

¹⁹ David Ignatius, "The Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex Is Holding Our National Security Back," *Washington Post*, March 15, 2019.

²⁰ Shigeo Kikuchi and Hiromu Arakaki, "Chapter 7 The United States: Addressing the 'Return to Great Power Competition,'" *East Asian Strategic Review 2017*, National Institute for Defense Studies (Tokyo: Urban Connections, 2018), pp. 228-229.

²¹ U.S. Navy, *Executive Summary: 2016 Navy Force Structure Assessment* (December 14, 2016).

²² U.S. Congress, *H.R.2810: National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018* (December 12, 2017).

²³ Joseph Trevithick, "Congress Pushes Back On Stunning Navy Plan To Cut Destroyers, Cruisers, Subs, And More," *The Drive*, December 26, 2019.

thrown into the guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam War.²⁴ The National Defense Strategy Commission, established under the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act, precisely points these risks. Namely, if a military crisis on the Korean Peninsula or Middle East or a large-scale terrorist attack on the US breaks out, “unanticipated force demands” will strain the US military, resulting in a decline in competitiveness and deterrence against China and Russia.²⁵

3 'Hard Choices' in the FY2021 Defense Budget Request

Given these trade-off problems and risks, to what degree is the 'one plus' force construct reflected in actual policies? The FY2021 defense budget request (\$705.4 billion) can be a useful indicator to explore the question. This budget is 2% lower than that of FY2020 in real terms, making it difficult for the Department of Defense to increase investments in readiness, capability, and capacity all together.²⁶ In other words, FY2021 defense budget requires some tradeoffs among these three categories.

A detailed examination will be left for another paper, but in this paper, the broad budget allocation trends for readiness, capability, and capacity for the FY2021 request is analyzed from the three perspectives of (1) operations and maintenance (O&M), (2) RDT&E, and (3) end strength and procurement. To draw the conclusion first at the risk of oversimplification, more budget is allocated for readiness and future capability, while on the other hand, a relative decline in investment for force capacity can be observed (see Table 1).

Readiness is one of the areas that the Department of Defense emphasized in the FY2021 budget request. The Navy and Air Force seek to increase readiness by requesting O&M funding of \$70.6 billion (+3.8% year-on-year) and \$65.9 billion (+3.2%), respectively. The Army's total requested budget fell about \$2.4 billion from the previous fiscal year and the total amount for O&M funding decreased, but the training accounts in the budget came to \$5.4 billion, which is more than \$200 million higher than the funding enacted in FY2020.²⁷ This increase could make it possible for the Army to achieve its goal of ensuring the highest level of readiness for more than two-thirds of its brigade combat teams (BCTs).²⁸

The Department of Defense's emphasis on readiness can also be seen in the trend of manpower. The Air Force decided to retire more than 100 legacy aircraft early without waiting for delivery of new ones, and meanwhile, their mechanics will be assigned to other aircraft to keep up the readiness

²⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

²⁵ Eric Edelman, et al., *Providing for the Common Defense*, p. 21.

²⁶ David Vergun, “Esper: DOD Budget Request Reflects Readiness Priorities, Tough Choices,” *DOD News*, February 26, 2020.

²⁷ Assistant Secretary of the Army (Financial Management and Comptroller), *FY 2021 President's Budget Highlights* (February 2020), p. 15.

²⁸ Frederico Bartels, et al., *Assessing the Pentagon's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request* (Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2020), p. 5.

level.²⁹ In terms of the Navy, the request for an increase of 5,331 personnel may stand out, but this too is understood as a measure to sufficiently man each ship in the fleet.³⁰

Although the increase in the RDT&E accounts in the FY2021 budget proposal is a promising trend, whether it is consistent with the NDS remains to be seen. In the list of top ten items on a monetary basis, a new \$3.6 billion classified Space Force program ranked third, and this program—along with the Air Force's ground-based strategic deterrence system (\$1.5 billion) and the Navy's precision strike system (\$1.1 billion), which are roughly tripled and doubled respectively from the FY2020 budget—seem to be the principal sources of boost in a the overall RDT&E budget.³¹ In addition, the total amount related to the emerging technology of hypersonic weapons increased by \$600 million over the previous fiscal year to \$3.2 billion,³² and the 5G-related budget has also increased from \$200 million in FY2020 to \$450 million.³³

On the other hand, the overall amount requested for programs related to future technologies for which there are concerns of falling behind China, such as artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons, directed energy weapons, biotechnology, and quantum computers among others, is more or less flat when compared to the previous fiscal year.³⁴ Furthermore, the FY2021 draft budget also cuts science and technology (S&T) funding (\$14.1 billion), including basic research, by \$2 billion from the previous fiscal year, which is not necessarily a good trend from the perspective of investing in future capacity.³⁵

²⁹ Rose L. Thayer, “Air Force Makes ‘Tough Choices’ to Retire Old Aircraft Early, According to 2021 Budget Request,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 10, 2020.

³⁰ Bartels, *Assessing the Pentagon's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request*, p. 4.

³¹ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/CFO, *RDT&E Programs (R-1): Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2021* (February 2020).

³² OUSD, *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request* (February 2020), 1-8.

³³ OUSD, *RDT&E Programs (R-1)*.

³⁴ Chad Peltier, “Put Your Money Where Your Strategy Is: Using Machine Learning to Analyze the Pentagon Budget,” *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2020.

³⁵ OUSD, *Defense Budget Overview*, 4-12.

Table 1: Budget Allocation Trends in Major Fields

Item		Military Branch	FY2020 Enacted	FY2021 Requested	FY2020-FY2021 Comparison
Readiness	O&M	Army	705	681	-24
		Navy	680	706	+26
		Air Force	638	659	+21
		DoD Overall	2,896	2,889	-7
Capability	RDT&E	Army	125	128	+3
		Navy	202	215	+13
		Air Force	454	477	+23
		DoD Overall	1,045	1,066	+21
Capacity	Active Troops	Army	485,000	485,900	+900
		Navy	342,469	347,800	+5,331
		Marine Corps	184,692	184,100	-592
		Air Force	333,822	327,266	-6,556
		Space Force	38	6,434	+6,396
	Equipment Procurement	Army	244	241	-3
		Navy	616	572	-44
		Air Force	500	490	-10
DoD Overall	1,438	1,369	-69		

Source: US Department of Defense documents.

Note 1: Units for active forces: people. Other units: \$100 million (rounded down).

Note 2: The numbers include the base budget, overseas contingency operations (OCO), and emergency costs.

Finally, the expansion of force capacity has been slowed down. The Army, which for some time has been making a case about the necessity of more than 500,000 active duty troops, announced in its FY2021 budget request that it will increase troops by 5,500 over five years to 490,500 by FY2025, but the pace of increasing troops has significantly slowed when compared to the five-year plan's increase of 19,500 troops in FY2019 and 10,000 troops in FY2020.³⁶ However, there is a strong view that this reflects a difficult recruiting environment and does not necessarily mean a change in the scale of troops that the Army thinks is necessary.³⁷ The Air Force is aiming to realize 386 squadrons by increasing its air forces by 25% by 2030, but the amount of funds requested in the FY2021 budget decreased from FY2020. In particular, the request to procure fighter aircraft for the necessary 72 aircraft per year became 60 aircraft, and the planned procurement of 60 F-35A aircraft per year remains at 48.³⁸

The Navy is facing similar problems as the Army and the Air Force. According to the Navy's

³⁶ OUSD, *US Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request* (February 2020), p. 13.

³⁷ Kyle Rempfer, "Army end-strength goal gets bump this year, but growth to slow in the future," *Army Times*, February 10, 2020.

30-year shipbuilding plan from 2019, the 355 ship fleet is planned to be achieved by 2034, and although the Navy has shown their willingness to commit to expanding the scale of their military force,³⁹ a large slowdown can be seen as the shipbuilding plan in the FY2021 National Defense Program (FY2021-FY2025) has decreased to 42 ships, 12 ships less than the number of ships indicated in the same period in the 30-year plan.⁴⁰ Although the 2016 FSA is currently being reviewed (as of April 22, 2020), it is likely that there will be some adjustments to the 355-shipgoal in the new “Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment” (INFSA), which also takes into account the Marines.⁴¹

Incidentally, the Marine Corps does not always seek to strengthen its quantitative military strength, as they have a slightly different nuance than the Army, Air Force, and Navy's appeals on the necessity of expanding their scale.⁴² General David Berger, who assumed the duties of Commandant of the Marine Corps in July 2019, revealed in the “Commandant's Planning Guidance” that he is willing to sacrifice the scale of the Marines to build a modernized force construct capable of responding to conflicts, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region,⁴³ and the Marine Corps FY2021 budget requested a proposed reduction in active personnel over the previous fiscal year of nearly 600 people.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In the FY2021 defense budget proposal, “hard choices” were made, especially regarding the scale of military forces, and that surplus was invested to a certain extent in future capabilities, including RDT&E. In that sense, the budget proposal has no major contradictions with the ‘one plus’ force construct shown in the NDS. On the other hand, the most important point in the NDS is to change the mindset of the defense elites who are in military leadership and to build “capable capacity,” premised on a competitive relationship with China and Russia.⁴⁵ Based on this point, there is room for improvement in terms of readiness, capability, and capacity, and in that sense, it cannot be said that the FY2021 budget request has undergone a dramatic shift in line with the NDS. It is expected that the shift towards realizing the new force construct will proceed gradually and conservatively due to the difficulty of the trade-offs considered in this paper, and it could be slowed down even further

³⁸ John A. Tirpak, “USAF Budget Request Flat in 2021,” *Air Force Magazine*, February 10, 2020.

³⁹ Office of the Chief of Naval Operation, *Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2020* (March 2019), p. 5.

⁴⁰ Unknown, “Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, RL32665 (April 13, 2020), pp. 4-6.

⁴¹ Mark Cancian and Adam Saxton, “The Spectacular and Public Collapse of Navy Force Planning,” *Breaking Defense*, January 28, 2020.

⁴² Mark Cancian, *U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: The Struggle to Align Forces with Strategy* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2019), p. 43.

⁴³ David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps* (July 1, 2019), p. 2.

⁴⁴ OUSD, *US Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2021*, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Elbridge Colby, *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Implementation of the National Defense Strategy* (January 29, 2019), pp. 4, 7.

or set back depending on the impact of COVID-19, Congress' reaction to the Department of Defense's budget proposal, or even the outcome of the US presidential election.

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