

PRISM *Insights*

Bridging the Convergence Gap: Operationalizing Joint Doctrine for the Competition Continuum

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A “convergent” process is one built to narrow a range of possibilities down to a single answer. The joint doctrine of the United States military is one such convergent process. However, the act of attempting to reduce a complex problem set down to a single “right” answer is a fool’s errand, a gap that joint doctrine actually admits. [Joint Publication \(JP\) 5-0](#), dated 01 July 2025, states plainly that “*the phasing construct may not be practical for a [Combatant Command Campaign Plan] CCP or [Global Campaign Plan] GCP, because campaigning is usually continuous, and that a CCP is indefinite, without expectations for conclusion*” (Ch. III, pp. III-38–III-39). These often-overlooked sentences are the Joint Staff’s own admission that its planning process is not suited to the situation it is most often asked to produce: an enduring campaign.

The joint force is told, in publication after publication, to campaign continuously across a competition continuum with no terminal state, but doctrine stops short of saying how to build these campaigns. Planners are left to apply the only tool doctrine provides: a seven-step

process built to converge on a single approved course of action and plan. That doctrinal gap is the subject of this paper, explored through the doctrine’s own language (presented *in italics*).

As an engine built for convergence, joint doctrine cannot plan for conditions without a terminal state.

This claim is simple to state, yet stubborn enough that doctrine has spent two decades circling it without a solution. The Joint Planning Process (JPP), a methodology prescribed by doctrine as *an orderly, analytical set of logical steps to approach a problem and determine a solution* (JP 5-0, EXSUM, p. ix), is at its core a convergence engine. JPP exists to narrow a field of alternatives to one, select a course of action, and produce a plan or order that closes the question it was built to answer. Campaigning, by nature, is the opposite kind of problem: a divergent challenge perpetually managed



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rather than solved. Divergent processes pursue multiple non-exclusive lines of effort at once, probing and sensing for emergent effective approaches from what the environment reveals. Campaigning is a process that is continuous, indefinite, and oriented on nations' *pursuit of the influence, advantage, and leverage necessary to advance and protect their respective interests* (JP 3-0, 18 June 2022, Ch. V, p. V-1), rather than driving to a prescribed end state. Applying a convergent tool such as JPP to "solve" a condition with no terminal point does not merely produce friction. It produces a plan that is procedurally correct but substantively wrong for its environment, leading to actions that can be irrelevant or contrary to the mission at hand.

Doctrinal Grounding

Let us start with what the Joint Planning Process was developed to provide. JP 5-0 describes JPP as an *orderly, analytical set of logical steps to frame a problem; examine a mission; develop, analyze, and compare alternative COAs; select the best COA; and produce a plan or order* (Ch. IV, para. 5.a). Elsewhere, the same publication is more direct about that architecture's purpose: *JPP focuses on defining the military mission and development and synchronization of detailed plans to accomplish that mission* (Ch. IV, para. 5.a). Seven prescribed steps carry that mission from initiation through mission analysis, course of action development, comparison, approval, and finally a plan or order.

Plan assessment is not included among the seven steps of JPP and does not sit at the end; it begins during Planning Initiation and runs as a continuous, parallel activity that persists through execution once a plan or order is produced. The seven steps of JPP close on an approved plan or order, which makes assessment's placement outside that convergent sequence worth noting rather than incidental. Each step exists to eliminate alternatives; the process is validated, in the most literal sense, when it produces exactly one approved answer.

Campaigning does not offer that kind of resolution, and doctrine does not pretend otherwise. [JP 1](#) defines campaigning as *the persistent conduct and sequencing of military activities aligned with other instruments of national power to achieve prioritized objectives over time*, work that runs through deterring, assuring, competing, preparing, and, only when armed conflict becomes necessary, prevailing (27 August 2023, Vol. 1, Ch. I, para. 5). JP 5-0 concedes the harder point more directly: the phasing construct built into JPP's outputs *may not be practical for a CCP or GCP*, because campaigning *is usually continuous*, and CCPs are *indefinite*, *without expectations for conclusion as circumstances that make for favorable conditions are always under pressure and changing* (Ch. III, pp. III-38–III-39). The

same chapter admits that commanders *will never know everything about their [operational area] and will never be able to fully define its problems*, and that *success may therefore require innovation and rapid, iterative adaptation based on assessment of results from activities and changes* (Ch. IV, p. IV-8). This statement was written to describe operational design generally rather than campaigning but remains the clearest admission in the corpus that some of what doctrine asks planners to do cannot be planned with the tools JPP offers.

Chapter VI of JP 3-0 treats that condition most fully. Adversarial competition below armed conflict, it argues, exists to *gain and sustain long-term comparative advantages (and mitigate disadvantages) indefinitely... The most successful competitor achieves objectives without invading, occupying, or destroying their adversaries but rather by subordinating, minimizing, and influencing their choices and decisions* (Ch. VI, pp. VI-20–VI-21). That is a theory of success with no armed conflict in it: a path to a durable position, not a shaping phase for a war to come.

The Domain Mismatch

Two sentences elsewhere in JP 3-0 do more work than any others in the collection, and they deserve to be read together. The first sits inside a callout titled "The Constant of Competition:" *Competition among nations is a constant and nations perpetually strive to gain influence, leverage, and advantage* (Ch. VI, callout box "The Constant of Competition"). The second describes the mission area built around that condition directly: *This mission area is not deterrence re-imagined, nor is it preparation or prelude to armed conflict. Adversarial competition is its own unique, challenging, and indefinite contest for influence, advantage, and leverage, where many aspects of malign influence and antagonistic behavior are undeterrable* (Ch. IV, p. IV-36). Read the first sentence for what it rules out: if competition is a constant, there is no equilibrium to converge toward and no definable end state stable enough to plan around. The second sentence also makes a key exclusion: competition is not, on doctrine's own terms, staging for something else. It is not a phase, but rather, a condition.

That distinction has a name. The Cynefin framework developed by [Kurtz and Snowden](#) separates problems by how cause and effect relate to one another (2003). In the Complicated domain, cause and effect exist but require analysis to find, and the correct practice is to sense, analyze, and respond. JPP is built for the Complicated domain, a direct manifestation of the sense-analyze-respond methodology. It presupposes a knowable problem that yields to expert analysis and converges on a validated answer.

In the Complex domain, however, cause and effect are visible only in retrospect. The correct practice for this domain is to probe, sense, and respond: to act to learn, to run several approaches at once, and to let the effective pattern emerge from what the environment reveals, rather than from what analysis predicted. This approach is inherently divergent. Competition, perpetual rather than preparatory by doctrine's own description, falls within the Complex domain. Competition calls for a campaign built intentionally as a divergent endeavor, with multiple non-exclusive lines of effort pursued simultaneously rather than narrowed early to one course of action. This construction requires planners and commanders to accept that many lines of effort will inevitably fail. Its consequences can be mitigated by probing early with minimal resource investment, learning quickly, and rapidly reinforcing efforts that show promise.

Conversely, JPP offers no such allowance for failure: it requires investment of resources toward a single approach, so failure carries far greater consequences, especially when misapplied to a complex problem with no terminal state.

The Downstream Effect

This mismatch would matter little if it were confined to planning process doctrine, but it also carries through in how joint forces are allocated and apportioned. JP 5-0 states that Global Force Management (GFM) and force employment decisions *weigh current use against readiness and preparedness to execute armed conflict/war or contingency plans as written*, which, *in effect, prioritizes preparedness over utilization, at the expense of executing coherent campaign initiatives* (Ch. V, p. V-6). It is the Joint Staff's own planning doctrine, conceding that the resourcing system defaults to contingency readiness at the expense of the very campaigns that JP 3-0 Chapter VI describes as contests the joint force can win without armed conflict. A campaign plan built to run several parallel competitive lines of effort must therefore compete at a disadvantage for limited resources within a system engineered to prioritize readiness for a war that may never arrive.

The Joint Staff's concept literature saw this coming but stopped short of incorporating it into actual doctrine. The 2018 [Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning \(JCIC\)](#) and the 2023 [Joint Concept for Competing \(JCC\)](#) both attempted to close the gap. The JCIC states that the thirteen elements of operational design in JP 5-0 *are still valid for individual operations, but insufficient to enable Joint leaders to campaign in cooperation, competition, and armed conflict* (16 March 2018, p. 12), and proposes twelve factors of integrated campaign design, along with a set of competition mecha-

nisms (*strengthen, create, preserve, weaken, position, inform, persuade*) built around sustaining advantage rather than achieving defeat (p. 15).

The JCC goes further still, stating outright that *strategic competition is an enduring condition to be managed, not a problem to be solved* (10 February 2023, Executive Summary), proposing a Structured Approach that breaks competition into assessable sub-areas (pp. 34–38, Annex A). But the JCC's own methodology hands the result “Down and In” to *inform, guide, and direct the operational design methodology, joint planning process, and integrating construct already in joint doctrine* (p. 36). The concept writers diagnosed the mismatch correctly but did not replace JPP's convergent core, assuming it would still do the execution-level work once handed better framing. That assumption is exactly where the gap survives, fully diagnosed and still unbuilt into doctrine or practice.

Counterpoints

The most serious critique is that the joint force is not, and should not be, the primary actor in strategic competition; the Joint Concept for Competing already names the corrective role: the joint force *will routinely play a supporting role to other USG departments and agencies and cannot, and must not, attempt to do this alone* (JCC, Executive Summary). A competition-first campaign plan should build that restraint into its structure by requiring, for every line of effort, an explicit lead-support-invited determination, reviewed through the same in-progress-review mechanism JP 5-0 already applies to campaign plan approval (Ch. IV, para. 4; see also Ch. IV, p. IV-4).

A further objection holds that the resourcing architecture criticized here runs downstream of statute: PPBE cycles and Title 10/22 authorities are built around named programs regardless of campaign design. That objection is largely correct; this paper proposes working inside it, using JP 5-0's integrated plan set and global crisis option architecture as precedent that shared-pool resourcing across named plans is already achievable under current authorities (Ch. V, pp. V-4–V-9).

Four narrower objections deserve brief answers. Readiness held in garrison deters a threshold event, but doctrine rules out treating that readiness as already discharging the competition mission. JP 3-0 states competition *is not deterrence re-imagined, nor is it preparation or prelude to armed conflict*, and involves conduct that is explicitly undeterrable (Ch. IV, p. IV-36). Readiness should not come at the complete expense of campaign activities that secure interests before a contingency arises. JPP's flexibility does not fix this, since doctrine's real effect runs through what PME teaches,

and a flexible tool nobody is taught to use differently still produces convergent habits. Treating contingency as separate from the plan risks missing an escalating line of effort; the remedy is architectural, folding it into the same assessment cycle as a standing, monitored trigger using JP 5-0's decision-point logic for branches and sequels (Ch. III, p. III-39). And a portfolio of parallel lines of effort is harder to resource and audit than one converged main effort, an answer the JCC's own requirement for continuous campaign assessment already seeds (p. 38, CRC C3).

The Way Ahead

The term "Irregular Warfare" is built on a negative prefix that assumes conventional armed conflict is the regular baseline, with everything short of it carrying its own qualifier as an exception. Doctrine's own language argues the opposite. JP 3-0 states plainly that *competition among nations is a constant and nations perpetually strive to gain influence, leverage, and advantage* (Ch. VI, callout box). Armed ("regular") conflict is what doctrine calls a branch, one of the *expected contingencies that provide a range of alternatives* built into the basic plan (JP 5-0, Ch. III, p. III-39): a contingency, not the plan itself. A more accurate label for what doctrine currently calls "irregular warfare" would be "regular competition," or more simply, support to "statecraft." This reframing makes conventional war statecraft's failure mode, not its baseline.

Flowing from this logic, if what has been mislabeled "irregular" is in fact the normal condition, the practical question is how a nation should unify effort across it. Foremost, the gap diagnosed in this paper requires an owner. Fortunately, the Department of War (DOW) already has an institution that is well-positioned to take on that work - the misnamed Irregular Warfare Center (IWC), which is well-positioned to serve as the department's Center of Excellence for Competition. The IWC should be designated DOW's champion of the Joint

Concept for Competing, tasked with developing concepts, doctrine, and training for the competition continuum. Fittingly, correcting the institution's name and assigning it this mission would be, in practice, the same act.

The first task of the newly redesignated *Competition Center of Excellence* (CCoE), formerly the IWC, should be a toolkit that helps planners understand complex operating environments, grounded in the same Cynefin-based complexity theory this paper draws on, translating a line of effort's divergent, emergent characteristics into an actual campaign design method.

The Competition CoE should then develop training and doctrinal inputs to close these gaps with Joint Staff J7, folding the new training into existing PME programs that already teach JPP. That foundation gives the Department a legitimate base for understanding the tools and methods a complex competitive environment demands.

None of this requires new legislative authority or a new planning process to stand up first. It requires an institution willing to claim a mission that already sits within its reach.

Conclusion

The joint force does not lack the vocabulary for competition. JP 3-0, Chapter VI, states its purpose without equivocation, and two joint concepts have already tried to build the tools that purpose demands. What it lacks is a planning and resourcing system constructed to diagnose, produce, and assess a plan whose primary effort is competition, rather than a plan that quietly treats competition as the shaping phase for a war that may never come. Competition is a constant and campaigning has no end state, in doctrine's own words. What remains is to build a process and doctrine for these conditions.

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