



# Force Planning Scenarios, 1945–2016

## Their Origins and Use in Defense Strategic Planning

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[www.rand.org/t/RR2173z1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR2173z1)

This report describes the forces that shaped conventional ground force planning during the 1945–2016 period, with an emphasis on the strategic concepts and contingency scenarios used. It identifies broader lessons that are likely to be of interest to contemporary force planners. Finally, the report identifies potential opportunities for the U.S. Army to influence the future selection of defense planning scenarios.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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- How has the role of scenarios in conventional force structure planning evolved over time with each presidential administration?
- What considerations from each presidential administration have shaped scenario selection in the post-Cold War period?
- Historically, on what basis were contingencies identified as sufficiently important to justify defense preparations?



### KEY FINDINGS

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The role of scenarios in defense planning has evolved over time

- Scenarios used in defense planning have generally derived from each administration's prior conclusions about the relative importance of national security interests, and threats and challenges to these interests; national security policies and strategies; and the strategic concepts that have provided a framework for relating military forces to strategic ends.
- Once these matters were settled, scenario choice appears to be a fairly simple problem, both during the Cold War and in the decades after.

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The factors in short-term, midterm, and long-term scenarios have expanded along with the range of military problems of concern for policymakers

- In combination with assessments of the strategic environment, statements of national policy and strategy have provided a basis for identifying which contingencies are important enough to justify defense preparations, including defense and military strategies, while strategic concepts have helped to guide and narrow the range of scenarios requiring consideration in conventional force planning efforts.
- In the present environment, it is argued that the nation faces a more uncertain and diverse set of threats and challenges than the conventional threats of the past.
- The author suggests that the most important factors driving conventional force planning are the strategic objectives and priority missions, the strategic concept and related force sizing construct, which scenarios and scenario combinations are used to assess the capabilities of the force, and the associated assumptions about the simultaneity or temporal overlap of operations that derive from the strategic concept and force sizing construct.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- As hybrid threats are not yet well understood, computer modeling may be less suitable for these analyses in the present environment because they are not yet well-formed enough to represent in simulations.
- Although the principal conclusion of the research is that scenarios may be less important in determining planning outcomes than prior decisions about strategy, strategic concepts, force sizing constructs, and other matters, “the devil is in the details” of the assumptions that go into the scenarios.
- Scenarios in the short term (one to two years) may help to reveal gaps and measures that can mitigate threats at the margin to improve operational performance but are unlikely to substantially affect force structure.
- Scenarios dealing with midterm planning (five to seven years) may help to identify new joint operational concepts, for example, and force structure changes that might affect up to 10 percent to 20 percent of the force over the period.
- Scenarios in longer-term planning (seven to 20 years) are far more likely to be useful in identifying desirable new capabilities that can guide research and development and underwrite more-futuristic operational concepts and formations. Over the long term, they can be the most consequential of all in reshaping the force.

