

Seabasing: Expanding Access

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In the 21st Century, information can move almost instantaneously around the world via cyberspace, and people may quickly travel great distances by air, but the preponderance of materiel still moves the way it has for millennia—by sea. Whenever the United States has committed military power beyond our shores—whether to fight our foes or assist our friends—the vast majority of the U.S. joint force, its equipment, fuel, ammunition and sustenance, has been transported by sea.

For previous generations, projecting military forces and the resources necessary to support and sustain them overseas was often a hazardous undertaking. Peer competitors applying their own naval power sought to deny the oceans' crossing or, failing that, landing on the far shore. In the first half of the 20th Century, demonstrating considerable foresight and innovation, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps leaders developed the capabilities necessary to establish sea control and project power ashore where and when desired. In the latter half of the same century the importance of these capabilities waned, as the United States enjoyed the luxury of extensive basing rights, including secure ports and airfields, overseas.

In recent years this network of overseas bases has been dramatically reduced, even as the United States is confronted by a variety of strategic challenges and locked in a global struggle for influence. The ability to overcome geographic, political, and military impediments to access has re-emerged as a critical necessity for extending U.S. influence and power overseas. Fortunately, the United States possesses an asymmetric advantage in that endeavor: *sea power*. Our ability to cross wide expanses of ocean and to remain offshore at a time, place, and duration of our choosing cannot be contested today to the degree it was in previous eras. Although small in size in historical terms—and often stretched thin by current operational commitments—we have, for the foreseeable future, a Navy without peer.

This asymmetric advantage means that the Navy-Marine team can use the sea as both maneuver space and as a secure operating area to overcome impediments to access. This sea-based force—particularly its aircraft carriers and amphibious ships with embarked Marines—is capable of projecting influence and power ashore without reliance on ports and airfields in the objective area. It can do so in a selectively discrete or overt manner to conduct a range of operations—from conducting security cooperation activities, to providing humanitarian assistance, to deterring and, when necessary, fighting wars. This significant advantage does not extend to the joint force as a whole, however. The sealift which transports the preponderance of joint force materiel is still dependent upon secure infrastructure in a potential objective area. Just as the amphibious innovations championed by the Navy and Marine Corps during the 1920s and 1930s benefited the entire joint and allied force in World War II, the seabasing initiatives being pursued by the Navy-Marine team today are intended to benefit our joint, interagency, and multinational teammates.

Unfortunately, seabasing is surrounded by mythology and misunderstanding. The resulting confusion has stifled capability development. One myth is that seabasing is exclusively intended as a means of providing logistics support for major combat operations (MCO). A second myth is that seabasing is synonymous with a discarded concept for modular floating bases. Another misperception is that seabasing is intended as an overly ambitious replacement for, vice contributing element to, our global network of bases. Still another is that one specific program, Maritime Prepositioning Force-Future, (MPF-F), will satisfy the entire seabasing requirement. Seeking to alleviate this confusion and to further promote joint capability development, this article will describe the conceptual origins of seabasing, how the concept has evolved to meet the Nation's changing security requirements, and the key initiatives which will allow the joint force, as well as our interagency and multinational partners, to leverage seabasing in support of diverse operations.

Conceptual Origins

By the end of World War II the United States possessed an unprecedented ability to fight its way across the oceans and then ashore. The major components of this sea control and power projection capability were the fast attack aircraft carrier force, the submarine force, the amphibious force, and the mobile advanced base force. The scope and impact of the carriers and submarines has been well recognized, but the sheer size and key contribution of the latter two components has been less obvious. By 1945 the United States possessed 2,547 amphibious ships comprising 37.6% of the fleet.¹ These ships could deliver an attack from the sea by 13 divisions without reliance on forward land bases.² Similarly, the mobile base force was extraordinarily capable, providing an unrivaled ability to support the fleet's movement through underway replenishment, sea-based maintenance facilities, and the rapid build-up of advanced bases. "The U.S. Navy led the world in mobile base techniques...an exercise of speed and make do, a floating service station with limited shore facilities."³

At war's end, however, the United States had vanquished all naval peer competitors and the role of the Navy and Marine Corps versus the Soviet Union, a nuclear-armed Eurasian land power, was initially unclear. In a frequently quoted 1954 *Proceedings* article, Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington championed their utility:

With its command of the sea it is now possible for the United States Navy to develop the base-characteristics of the world's oceans to a much greater degree than it has in the past, and to extend significantly the "floating base" system which it originated in World War II. The objective should be to perform as far as practical the functions now performed on land at sea bases closer to the scene of operations. The base of the United States Navy should be conceived of as including all those land areas under our control and the seas of the world right up to within a few miles of the enemy's shores. This gives American power a flexibility and a breadth impossible of achievement by land-locked powers...The application of naval power against the land requires of course an entirely different sort of Navy from that which existed during the struggles for sea supremacy. The basic weapons of the

¹ Department of the Navy, Naval Historical Center, *U.S. Navy Active Ship Force Levels*, <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/org9-4.htm#1938>

² Work, Robert O., "On Sea Basing," (Newport, RI: Naval War College Newport Papers, Volume 26, *Reposturing the Force*, February 2006), p. 112.

³ Miller, Edward S., *War Plan Orange*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 210.

*new Navy are those which make it possible to project naval power far inland. These appear to take primarily three forms: ...Carrier aviation is sea based aviation; the Fleet Marine Force is a sea based ground force; the guns and guided missiles of the fleet are sea based artillery.*⁴

Huntington's article was prescient but premature. As the Cold War unfolded, U.S. strategy involved the maintenance of a large nuclear arsenal and the basing of significant Army and Air Force formations overseas to deter the Soviet threat. While a growing Soviet Navy highlighted the continued importance of sea control, especially anti-submarine warfare, the emerging naval missions of deterrence, crisis response, and strategic sealift overshadowed power projection. Faced with the need to rapidly reinforce forward-based forces, and blessed with the advantage of secure ports and airfields overseas, the United States invested in strategic sealift vice amphibious and mobile base capabilities—an understandable approach under the circumstances. The amphibious ship inventory, which in 1945 had constituted more than a third of the fleet, continually diminished throughout the Cold War until leveling off to where it stands today: roughly 11% of the fleet.

Evolving for a New Era

With the end of the Cold War the Soviet threat to U.S. maritime supremacy ended with it, causing the Navy and Marine Corps to re-assess their role in a new strategic era. This re-assessment echoed the Huntington article and provided the impetus for resurrecting the seabasing concept, in that the underlying premise of U.S. sea power changed from “The fundamental purpose of naval forces is to *achieve* command of the seas” to “The fundamental purpose of naval forces is to *use* command of the seas.”⁵

This change in premise spawned a post-Cold War naval intellectual renaissance, reflected in several Department of the Navy (DoN) “white papers.” First among these was *The Way Ahead*, published in 1991, which argued for a new pattern of deployments and force composition to maintain the forward presence required to support humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, nation building, security assistance, peacekeeping, counter-narcotics, counterterrorism, counter-insurgency, and crisis response. In 1992 “...*From the Sea*” espoused naval expeditionary operations in the littorals and joint force enabling and in 1994 “*FORWARD...From the Sea*” advocated increased flexibility through seabasing.

For more than a decade thereafter the seabasing concept continued to evolve in a number of documents. These include the *Operational Maneuver from the Sea* anthology of concepts published by the Marine Corps in the mid-‘90s, followed by *Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare* in 2001, and two editions of *Marine Corps Operating Concepts for a Changing Security Environment* released in 2005 and 2007. Similarly, the Navy published the *Sea Power 21* series of concepts in late 2002 and early 2003. In addition to the aforementioned service concepts, seabasing was prominently featured in unified Navy-Marine Corps documents such as *Naval Power 21* in 2002, the *Naval Operating Concept for Joint Operations* and *Enhanced Networked Seabasing*, both published in 2003, and the *Naval Operations Concept 2006*. For

⁴ Huntington, Samuel P., “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” (Annapolis, MD: USNI *Proceedings*, Volume 80, No. 5, May 1954), p. 491.

⁵ Barnett, Thomas P. M., *The Pentagon's New Map*, (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, April 2004), p.74.

the most part, these documents describe seabasing not as a specific platform—a “thing”—but as an approach for organizing and employing seapower to influence events ashore. While Huntington envisioned using seapower primarily to project combat power inland, these papers went beyond that notion to espouse seabasing as the means of projecting “soft power” as well.⁶ The earlier papers touted the advantages of sea-based crisis response to provide humanitarian assistance following natural disasters. In the latter papers this idea evolved even further to advocate seabasing as the means of proactively, and discretely, projecting soft power. This theme is highlighted in the recently signed maritime strategy, a tri-service effort among the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Titled *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, this strategy has a lineage that can be traced directly back to *The Way Ahead* and reflects more than 16 years of continuous conceptual development concerning the use of naval power to influence events ashore—*seabasing*.

This evolution was not without turmoil, however, and occasionally generated misperceptions which persist to this day. As an example, for a time the Department of Defense (DoD) was greatly concerned about the ability of the United States to achieve rapid victory in two nearly simultaneous MCOs. The Joint Staff concluded that U.S. forces should strive to “seize the initiative” within 10 days, accomplish initial “swiftly defeat” objectives versus one enemy within 30 days, and then commence “swiftly defeat” operations versus a second enemy in another theater within another 30 days. This became known as the “10-30-30” metric and was subsequently formalized in Strategic Planning Guidance.⁷ This emphasis on strategic speed to conduct multiple MCOs diverted intellectual focus away from the blend of capabilities required to conduct a range of joint operations. The promising but as yet unproven capabilities of MPF-F appeared to offer the only means of achieving the 10-30-30 criteria, resulting in an almost blind-faith emphasis on that program as the embodiment of seabasing. This myopia became so extreme that MPF-F came to be seen in some quarters as a replacement for, vice complementary to, amphibious ships.⁸ Even though the 10-30-30 criteria proved transitory, the misnomer that “MPF-F = seabasing” has proven perniciously persistent.

Another piece of persistent seabasing mythology stems from an initiative once undertaken by the Office of Naval Research (ONR). It explored the feasibility of creating mobile offshore bases (MOB) by assembling semi-submersible modules into a variety of floating bases, to include runways of up to 6000 feet, as much as 3 million square feet of warehousing, and housing for up to 3000 troops. The MOB was envisioned as a conduit for resources delivered by strategic sealift and airlift for further transfer ashore by a variety of landing craft. It was determined that the MOB concept was technically feasible but not as cost effective as existing naval vessels or innovative forms of sealift, such as large medium speed roll-on/roll-off (LMSR) ships.⁹ The unintended consequence of this laudable but stillborn initiative is the belief by some parties that the term “seabasing” has been forever stigmatized as synonymous with the MOB.

⁶ “Soft power” refers to the ability of a state to indirectly influence the behavior or interests of another through cultural or ideological means, as opposed to more direct, coercive means (“hard power”) such a offensive military action. It was first coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye in a 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and further developed in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power

⁷ Work, pp. 120-123.

⁸ Work, p. 125.

⁹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/mob.htm>

In spite of these challenges, what began as a naval concept has gained wider DoD consensus, formalized with the publication of the *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept* (JIC) in 2005. This document defines joint seabasing as “the rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and re-employment of joint combat power from the sea, while providing continuous support, sustainment, and force protection to select expeditionary joint forces without reliance on land bases within the Joint Operations Area (JOA). These capabilities expand operational maneuver options, and facilitate assured access and entry from the sea.” Interestingly, the *Seabasing JIC* has four supporting concepts of operation (CONOPS) covering the spectrum of operations, from humanitarian assistance to major combat. It is the first of the nine JICs to be elaborated on by such CONOPS.¹⁰

Furthermore, in March 2005 the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) emphasized “the importance of influencing events before challenges become more dangerous and less manageable.”¹¹ It described how the United States faced a time of great uncertainty and had to address an array of current and potential adversaries who would likely use a combination of traditional, irregular, catastrophic and disruptive methods against us. The NDS identified the need to enhance eight key operational capabilities, many of which appeared to make the case for a sea-based approach to a wide range of joint operations. These capabilities included: strengthening intelligence; protecting critical bases of operation; operating from the global commons; projecting and sustaining forces in distant anti-access environments; denying enemies sanctuary; conducting network-centric operations; improving proficiency against irregular challenges; and increasing capabilities of partners—international and domestic.¹² The NDS also espoused the necessity of revising our overseas force posture through a system of main operating bases, forward operating sites, cooperative security locations and, “In addition to these, joint sea-basing too holds promise for the broader transformation of our overseas military posture.”¹³ In a public address two months later, the President noted, “We are developing joint sea bases that will allow our forces to strike from floating platforms close to the action, instead of being dependent on land bases far from the fight.”¹⁴

Implementation Initiatives

The Navy and Marine Corps have been involved in a number of seabasing initiatives, both operational and programmatic, which have expanded into joint endeavors. The creation of Global Fleet Stations (GFS), for example, is an operational initiative designed to increase the capability and capacity for discrete, proactive activities as describe in the *Naval Operations Concept 2006*: “Focusing primarily on Phase 0 (shaping) operations, Theater Security Cooperation, Global Maritime Awareness, and tasks associated specifically with the War on Terror, GFS offers a means to increase regional maritime security through the cooperative efforts of joint, inter-agency, and multinational partners, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations.

¹⁰ The others are: *Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction*; *Joint Urban Operations*; *Persistent ISR*; *Joint Logistics*; *Net-Centric Operational Environment*; *Command and Control*; *Global Strike*; and *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*. The JICs can be viewed via: <http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/jic.htm>

¹¹ Rumsfeld, Donald H., *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of Defense, March 1, 2005), p. iii.

¹² Ibid, pp. 12-16.

¹³ Ibid, p. 19.

¹⁴ Bush, President George W., commencement address at the U.S. Naval Academy, 27 May 2005.

Like all sea bases, the composition of a GFS depends on Combatant Commander requirements, the operating environment, and the mission.”¹⁵ To date, GFS experiments have been conducted with our partners in South America and West Africa and have been deemed highly successful.

The Joint High Speed Vessel (JHSV) is a good example of how service initiatives have expanded to become joint programs. A Navy-led joint acquisition program, the JHSV combines the Navy-Marine Corps High Speed Connector program with the Army's Theater Support Vessel program to produce a unified—and more integrated and cost effective—solution to the commonly shared requirement for intra-theater connectors. A shallow draft vessel that can transport personnel, vehicles, equipment and supplies over operational distances at up to 45 knots, the JHSV has a helicopter flight deck and a vehicle ramp which allow rapid offloading in austere environments. Four experimental vessels have proven highly successful in a variety of assignments, to include supporting the Global War on Terrorism, Operation Iraqi Freedom, disaster relief operations in Indonesia and the U.S. Gulf Coast, and security cooperation in the Western Pacific.¹⁶

Seabasing initiatives such as these must continue to expand into comprehensive joint and interagency endeavors addressing the spectrum of operations. Doing so will provide a complementary, seagoing component to the system of main operating bases, forward operating sites, and cooperative security locations in order to overcome challenges to access and better support proactive engagement, crisis response, deterrence and, when necessary, warfighting. Toward that end, seabasing must be viewed as an interdependent and interconnected system of systems—everything from major combatants to inshore patrol craft, surface and aerial connectors to cargo handling gear, command suites to medical centers.

Building upon the cornerstones provided by amphibious ships and aircraft carriers, we must continue to refine our current and emerging platforms to enhance our seabasing capability and capacity. Exploration of the MPF-F concept, for example, has identified the ability to conduct at-sea transfer of resources, for both ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore purposes, as the key enabler for deploying, employing, and sustaining joint forces from the sea. Detailed analysis has concluded that this critical at-sea transfer capability can be achieved in a variety of sea states through the combined use of LMSRs and mobile landing platforms (MLPs). These initiatives—as well as others yet to be envisioned—will be employed in combination to continually evolve the capabilities necessary to alleviate the joint force's reliance on shore-based ports and airfields in the objective area.

Conclusion

The Navy-Marine team is already a sea-based force capable of conducting a wide spectrum of operations, and continues to hone its seabasing capabilities to better meet the challenges of the 21st Century. Although the preponderance of the joint force benefits from the mobility and capacity provided through seaborne deployment, modern challenges to access negate that advantage. These challenges may be physical, as imposed by remote geography or infrastructure that is austere, damaged by natural disasters or non-existent to begin with. In other cases they

¹⁵ Mullen, Adm Michael G., USN, and Hagee, Gen Michael W., USMC, *Naval Operations Concept 2006*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, September 2006), p. 17.

¹⁶ <http://peoships.crane.navy.mil/JHSV/default.htm>

may be diplomatic, as even long-standing allies may deny us access to ports and airfields ashore for specific operations, as some have in the past. Militarily, there are still scenarios which will require us to fight our way ashore and potential adversaries, recognizing the joint force's reliance on secure ports and airfields, will find our scheme of maneuver that much easier to predict and counter. While there is no requirement for the joint team to become as fully sea-based as naval forces, the joint team must at least be able to leverage seabasing in order to reduce reliance on infrastructure ashore and improve access. It is therefore imperative that we pursue joint seabasing as the means of not only deploying, but of also employing and sustaining select joint—as well as interagency and multinational capabilities—from the sea.

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