

The Conceptual Basis for Seabasing

Introduction

Over the past quarter century the U.S. Marine Corps has been actively engaged in producing a robust and comprehensive body of seabasing concepts and supporting concepts of operation (CONOPS). Most of this effort has been in partnership with the U.S. Navy and has, in recent years, also included the joint community. These products have been remarkably consistent in espousing seabasing as an asymmetric advantage for the United States, wherein the diverse elements of sea power could be combined in complementary ways to conduct a broad range of operations ashore. This work can be divided into three phases.

The first phase ran from 1991 to 2001. For most of that era seabasing's utility was usually described relative to war and, reactively, to what was then called military operations other than war (MOOTW).¹ By 2000 the description of seabasing's utility expanded to include proactive engagement.

The second phase ran from 2002 to 2004 and was driven by guidance from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to increase strategic speed for two near-simultaneous major combat operations (MCO)—guidance that came to be known as the “10-30-30” metric. This guidance narrowed the seabasing discussion to delivery of a Marine Expeditionary Brigade within ten days and an emphasis on maritime prepositioning force (future) (MPF(F)) as the primary means of doing so. Further analysis and operational experience revealed the flawed logic of 10-30-30, with the result that the second phase proved to be a brief but not insignificant disruption to conceptual clarity and consistency.²

The 2005 *National Defense Strategy* described the diverse challenges of the strategic environment and emphasized the importance of influencing events before they got out of hand. This strategy effectively ushered in the third, and current, phase, of seabasing concept development—a return to, and expansion of, the idea that complementary naval capabilities could be integrated in creative ways to conduct a broad range of operations. Ultimately, these concepts provided the stepping stones to a new maritime strategy.

The significant Marine Corps, Navy, naval, and joint documents and activities associated with each phase are summarized below.

¹ “Military operations other than war” (MOOTW) was an approved joint doctrinal term frequently used in the 1990's. At the time, the JP 1-02 defined it as “Operations that encompass the use of military capabilities across the range of military operations short of war. These military actions can be applied to complement any combination of the other instruments of national power and occur before, during, and after war.” MOOTW is no longer an approved doctrinal term.

² Work, Robert O., “On Sea Basing,” (Newport, RI: Naval War College Newport Papers, Volume 26, *Reposturing the Force*, February 2006), pp.120-123.

Phase I: Conceptual Underpinnings

The end of the Cold War provided the initial impetus for seabasing concept development, in that it caused the underlying premise of U.S. sea power to change 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.”³ This premise is rooted in a 1954 *Proceedings* article by historian Samuel P. Huntington, the essence of which is:

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 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

This change in premise spawned a post-Cold War naval intellectual renaissance, which produced 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 1993 “...*From the Sea*” espoused naval expeditionary operations in the littorals and joint force enabling. In 1994 “*FORWARD...From the Sea*” added emphasis on power projection, strategic nuclear deterrence, combat-credible forward presence, and increased flexibility through seabasing.

These white papers inspired a family of twelve Marine Corps operating concepts published between 1996 and 1998, eventually compiled in an anthology popularly referred to as “the white book.” *Operational Maneuver from the Sea* (OMFTS) served as the capstone concept and noted that,

Though their definitive task is always to prepare for and fight the nation's wars, deployed naval forces are often called upon to do such things as evacuate noncombatants, assist disaster victims, and protect the delivery of relief supplies. Like today's Navy-Marine team, naval expeditionary forces of the future will not be designed specifically for such tasks. Nonetheless, future naval expeditionary forces will, thanks to the equipment and training associated with Operational Maneuver from the Sea, have a significantly enhanced ability to conduct operations other than war.⁵

³ Barnett, Thomas P. M., *The Pentagon's New Map*, (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, April 2004), p.74.

⁴ Huntington, p. 491.

⁵ Rhodes, LtGen John E., USMC, *United States Marine Corps Warfighting Concepts for the 21st Century*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998), p. I-15.

A supporting concept, *Maritime Prepositioning Force 2010 and Beyond*, described how maritime prepositioning had proved its worth during recent combat and humanitarian assistance operations but that it had to “evolve in order to fully support OMFTS. New technologies must be pursued and existing technologies exploited to permit the next generation of MPF to contribute to operational employment of MAGTFs across the full range of operations, to include the rapid reinforcement of forward-deployed amphibious forces.”⁶ It also noted that,

MPF 2010 and Beyond has particular relevance in the context of military operations other than war... Sea-based medical support and billeting may be especially important in environments where contagious diseases are a threat to friendly forces or when the host nation does not desire a large U.S. presence. Additionally, the prepositioned stocks of supplies and equipment carried on board the ships could be made useful in a wide range of military operations other than war. Rations, medical supplies, tents, earth-moving equipment, communications equipment, vehicles, and water purification devices will be useful in many humanitarian assistance or disaster relief scenarios.⁷

Shortly thereafter, *Marine Corps Strategy 21* provided the vision, goals, and aims of the 32nd Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC), continuing the theme espoused in the OMFTS family of concepts:

Amphibious and maritime prepositioning forces play an ever increasing role in supporting the attainment of our national objectives while protecting our national interests. As our operational reach increases so do the depth and degree to which we can influence events ashore. Whether supporting stability through forward presence and engagement, reducing human suffering due to natural or manmade disasters, or winning battles, our unique capabilities offer the Nation an unparalleled ability to seize opportunities and respond to challenges.⁸

A year later, *Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare* (EMW) continued the same themes with more specific reference to seabasing and the other elements of the sea-based force:

Marine forces, as an integral component of a larger naval force, will be prepared to influence events within the world’s littorals using the sea as maneuver space and as a secure “base”...Seabasing supports versatile and flexible power projection. Seabasing enables forces to move directly from ship to objectives deep inland and represents a significant advance from traditional, phased amphibious operations. Seabased operations maximize naval power projection and enhance the deployment and employment of naval expeditionary forces by JFCs. More than a family of platforms afloat, seabasing will network platforms and promote interoperability among the amphibious task force, carrier battle group, maritime prepositioning force, combat logistics force, and emerging high-speed sealift and ligherage technologies.⁹

⁶ Ibid, p. III-4.

⁷ Ibid, p. III-10.

⁸ Jones, Gen James L., USMC, *Marine Corps Strategy 21*, (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 3 November 2000), p. 4.

⁹ Jones, Gen James L., USMC, *Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare*, (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 10 November 2001), p. 4.

Phase II: 10-30-30 and the MCO Myopia

In 2002, a Joint Staff planning effort titled “Operational Availability 2003” examined 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 by OSD in Strategic Planning Guidance. This emphasis on strategic speed to conduct multiple MCOs diverted intellectual rigor away from the blend of capabilities required to conduct a range of operations, leading one informed observer to remark “a decade or more of thinking about the strategic and operational implications of uncertain access and the need to improve joint sea-based maneuver options had come down to this: a single-minded DoN pursuit for an ability to conduct a brigade sized forcible entry in approximately ten days.”¹⁰

This emphasis on strategic speed for MCO, and a corresponding focus on MPF(F) as the means of achieving it, can be seen in a number of documents. First among them was *Sea Power 21* (SP 21), the service vision of the 27th CNO published in the October 2002 Naval Institute *Proceedings*.¹¹ SP 21 binned Navy capabilities under three headings, *Sea Strike*, *Sea Shield*, and *Sea Basing*, with *ForceNet* as the key enabler networking them together. While it does briefly acknowledge the threat posed by terrorist organizations, the tone and content of SP 21 is heavily weighted towards improving the application of traditional combat power and expediting its arrival at the scene of crisis. Its discussion of seabasing reflects that focus:

Sea Basing accelerates expeditionary deployment and employment timelines by pre-positioning vital equipment and supplies in-theater, preparing the United States to take swift and decisive action during crises. We intend to develop these capabilities to the fullest extent. Strategic sealift will be central to this effort. It remains a primary mission of the U.S. Navy and will be critical during any large conflict fought ashore. Moreover, we will build pre-positioned ships with at-sea-accessible cargo, awaiting closure of troops by way of high-speed sealift and airlift. Joint operational flexibility will be greatly enhanced by employing pre-positioned shipping that does not have to enter port to offload.¹²

In the same month SP 21 was published the Secretary of the Navy, CNO and CMC signed *Naval Power 21* (NP 21), which articulated a unified naval vision, emphasized the utility of naval forces across a range of operations, and highlighted the importance of seabasing:

As part of a Joint War Fighting Team, the United States Navy and Marine Corps will control the sea and project power, defense, and influence beyond the sea. Our forces will use the sovereignty of the sea and enhanced networked seabasing to operate without restriction...to influence events ashore and advance American interests across the full spectrum of military operations... Transforming to fuller seabasing capabilities will provide even greater expeditionary capabilities across the naval and joint force... Looking toward the decades ahead, we will enhance our seabasing capabilities across the

¹⁰ Work, pp. 120-123.

¹¹ Clark, Adm Vern, USN, “Sea Power 21,” (Annapolis, MD: U. S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, October 2002), pp. 32-41.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 37.

entire naval force...In addition to strike capabilities, we will require maritime prepositioning, and combat logistics capabilities.¹³

Unfortunately, portions of NP 21 were disjointed and the document never received the visibility of SP 21. In addition to the initial public dissemination of SP 21 via *Proceedings*, its themes were reinforced by articles bearing flag officer by-lines in the five subsequent editions of that journal, giving the CNO's vision much greater prominence than the parent DoN vision. NP 21 was marginalized even further by the DoN transformation roadmaps linking concepts to programs as mandated by the now defunct Office of Force Transformation. The 2002 *Naval Transformation Roadmap* (NTR) referenced EMW and OMFTS but stated, "Sea Basing will maximize the ability of the naval services to conduct sustained, persistent combat operations" without a corresponding mention of the wider, non-combat related applications of sea-based capabilities.¹⁴

Naval Transformation Roadmap 2003 (NTR 03) declared, "Seabasing, a national capability, is our overarching transformational operating concept" but limited the description of its utility to "the global power projection of offensive and defensive forces from the sea...to execute combat operations ashore."¹⁵ In the same year the Navy and Marine Corps published a *Naval Operating Concept for Joint Operations* (NOC). It described "in broad terms how the Navy and Marine Corps will operate across the full range of military operations in the near, mid, and far terms through 2020."¹⁶ It characterized seabasing as "the foundation upon which offensive and defensive power are projected, making Sea Strike and Sea Shield realities."¹⁷ It also introduced the term Maritime Prepositioning Group (MPG), which would consist of the Combat Logistics Force, MPF(F), and high-speed sealift. "The MPG provides both operational reinforcement and sustained endurance to the ESG, CSG, and theater assets, and together they will form a sovereign sea base, operating primarily in international waters or from coalition bases and waters."¹⁸ As NP 21 had been overshadowed by the first NTR, the NOC was overshadowed by the program specifics of the NTR 03.

Another Navy-Marine Corps document, *Enhanced Networked Seabasing* (ENS) was supposed to lend "additional conceptual depth to Sea Basing as described in the *Naval Operating Concept for Joint Operations*"¹⁹ but actually undermined it by claiming to be "a new way of projecting, operating and sustaining expeditionary naval forces to support and enhance the enduring

¹³ England, Secretary of the Navy Gordon; Clark, Adm Vern, USN; and Jones, Gen James L., USMC, *Naval Power 21...a Naval Vision*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, October 2002), pp. 1-3.

¹⁴ England, Secretary of the Navy Gordon; Clark, Adm Vern, USN; and Jones, Gen James L., USMC, *Naval Transformation Roadmap; Power and Access...From the Sea*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, 2002), p. 24.

¹⁵ England, Secretary of the Navy Gordon R.; Clark, Adm Vern, USN; and Hagee, Gen Michael W., USMC, *Naval Transformation Roadmap 2003; Assured Access & Power Projection...From the Sea*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, 2003), p. 2.

¹⁶ Clark, Adm Vern, USN; and Hagee, Gen Michael W., USMC, *Naval Operating Concept for Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, September 2003), p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Hanlon, LtGen Edward, Jr., USMC, and Route, RADM R. A., USN, *Enhanced Networked Seabasing*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, 2003), p. 1.

missions of the naval services: sea control, deterrence, forward presence, and power projection” with no mention of proactive engagement or non-traditional naval missions.²⁰

Furthermore, the list of seabasing capabilities provided in Annex A of ENS closely resembled the attributes of the proposed MPF(F), leading some to mistakenly conclude that “seabasing equals MPF(F).” That conclusion, coupled with the promising but as yet unproven ability of MPF(F) to meet the capability and capacity requirements imposed by 10-30-30, resulted in the unintended consequence that MPF(F) began to be seen in some quarters as a replacement for, vice complementary to, amphibious ships. This confusion became pernicious until 2007 when the 34th CMC and the 28th Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) clarified for their respective staffs that MPF(F) was not capable of forcible entry and would serve to reinforce, vice replace, amphibious ships.

Neither the Navy nor the Marine Corps were particularly satisfied with the NOC or ENS. Some of the ideas espoused, such as the MPG, were not well-received by the operating forces. Others viewed these publications skeptically as largely focused on trying to preserve the status quo force structure. On a positive note, however, the Navy and Marine Corps had re-energized naval concept development and were eager to articulate the unique contribution naval forces could make to national security in the post 9/11 era.²¹

Additionally, during this period Navy and Marine Corps planners engaged with the wider joint community to begin production of the *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept* (JIC). This document described how combinations of forward deployed, pre-positioned and immediate/rapid response forces could provide strategic speed, access, and persistence for a range of military operations. Published in 2005, the *Seabasing JIC* was amplified by four detailed, illustrative CONOPS set in the 2015 to 2025 timeframe. Informed by two joint war games, Sea Viking and Nimble Viking, these CONOPS included: MCO; preemptive MCO with limited forward access; humanitarian assistance; and counterinsurgency. These products were in turn used to inform capabilities based assessments and a number of subsequent joint war games, such as Unified Course and Unified Quest.

Phase III: On Course

In March 2005 the new *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) emphasized “the importance of influencing events before challenges become more dangerous and less manageable.”²² 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.²³ It identified the need to enhance eight key

²⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

²¹ Interview with LtCol Michael J. Raimondo, USMC(Ret), former director of Concepts Division, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 5 October 2007.

²² Rumsfeld, Donald H., *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of Defense, March 1, 2005), p. iii.

²³ *Traditional* challenges are posed by states employing recognized military capabilities and forces in well-understood forms of military competition and conflict. *Irregular* challenges come from those employing

operational capabilities, most of which appeared to make the case for a sea-based approach to joint operations. (These included: strengthen 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.)²⁴

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,” noting that “Prepositioned capabilities afloat are especially valuable.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

Based on the guidance provided by the NDS, *Marine Corps Operating Concepts for a Changing Security Environment* (MOC) articulated an updated family of concepts. It noted:

Operational Maneuver from the Sea is our conceptual foundation for littoral power projection. The concept of *Seabasing* advocates a means of rapidly deploying, employing and sustaining globally sourced forces in a manner that provides the President and the joint force commander additional political and military options for overcoming challenges posed by a changing security environment. Another concept, *Distributed Operations*, builds upon our warfighting philosophy and understanding of that environment to generate training, education, and equipment innovations that will prepare Marines for the challenges ahead...informed by *Operational Maneuver from the Sea*, and enabled by *Seabasing* and *Distributed Operations*...this volume describes Marine Corps forces that will be organized, based, trained and equipped for *forward presence, security cooperation, counterterrorism, crisis response, forcible entry, prolonged operations* and *counterinsurgency*.²⁷

Assuming that naval force structure would not change appreciably in the near future but recognizing that the NDS required greater capacity for forward presence, security cooperation and counterterrorism, the MOC proposed additional sizing options for more integrated Navy-Marine Corps forces and associated shipping. These included more frequent use of special-purpose MAGTFs and Marine detachments afloat, along with various combinations of surface combatants, amphibious shipping, prepositioning ships, and high-speed vessels. Two sets of classified CONOPS, one occurring in 2015 and the other in 2025, were subsequently developed to illustrate each of the concepts in the MOC. These CONOPS used approved Defense Planning Scenarios that addressed a broad range of military operations.

unconventional methods to counter the traditional advantages of stronger opponents. *Catastrophic* challenges involve the acquisition, possession, and use of WMD or methods producing WMD-like effects. *Disruptive* challenges may come from adversaries who develop and use breakthrough technologies to negate current U.S. advantages in key operational domains.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 12-16.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁶ Bush, President George W., commencement address at the U.S. Naval Academy, 27 May 2005.

²⁷ Mattis, LtGen J. N., USMC, *Marine Corps Operating Concepts for a Changing Security Environment*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, March 2006), p. 1.

Even as the MOC was nearing completion, the Navy and Marine Corps began work on *Naval Operations Concept 2006* (NOC 06). NOC 06 reflected the logic of the MOC and called for “more widely distributed forces to provide increased forward presence, security cooperation with an expanding set of international partners, preemption of non-traditional threats, and global response to crises in regions around the world where access might be difficult.”²⁸ It described the challenge facing the Navy and Marine Corps as one of remaining “capable of traditional naval missions while simultaneously enhancing our ability to conduct non-traditional missions,” and posited that “U.S. Naval forces are adaptable and have utility across the spectrum of operations. By adaptively task-organizing current and emerging Navy and Marine Corps capabilities into closely integrated force packages tailored to the needs of the Combatant Commanders and their component commanders, we can enhance our capability and capacity to balance the varied and competing demands of the national strategy.”²⁹ Specifically, NOC 06 espoused seabasing as the means of supporting both expeditionary power projection and proactive security cooperation. With respect to the latter, it advocated the use of global fleet stations (GFS) as one manifestation of seabasing:

GFS is a persistent sea base of operations from which to coordinate and employ adaptive force packages within a regional area of interest. 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. Like all sea bases, the composition of a GFS depends on Combatant Commander requirements, the operating environment, and the mission.³⁰

GFS has been put into practice with three different platforms thus far: amphibious ships, a modified MPF ship, and a joint high-speed vessel.

A second edition of the MOC was published in June 2007 in order to incorporate the 34th CMC’s planning guidance in the preface as well as to nest Chapter 1 more closely with NOC 06. Within a section titled “The Central Idea: Selective Distribution and Re-aggregation” Chapter 1 states:

Employed in concert with the other elements of national power and an expanding set of multinational partners, U.S. Naval forces will contribute to denying transnational actors their freedom of movement and action, deterring state support of such actors, providing an effective counter to extremist ideology and winning the war of ideas. Concurrently, U.S. Naval forces must remain capable of deterring regional aggression by state actors, precluding operational/strategic surprise, and effectively responding to the unexpected.

U.S. Naval forces will...provide a distributed, persistent, sea-based presence throughout the arc of instability to expand U.S. influence without the increased destabilization that can be the unintended consequences of a heavy footprint ashore. Leveraging our ability to operate from international waters, seabasing will provide both operational maneuver and assured access. Sea-based forces will establish and maintain military to military relationships to increase the number, capabilities, and capacities of our multinational partners. These operations will demonstrate U.S. commitment to such partnerships

²⁸ Mullen, Adm Michael G., USN, and Hagee, Gen Michael W., USMC, *Naval Operations Concept 2006*, (Washington, DC: Dept. of the Navy, September 2006), p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

and provide a positive message by helping the local people to improve their security, infrastructure, economic opportunity, and living conditions.

...While these globally distributed forces will collectively constitute an economy of force operation, their ability to rapidly re-aggregate gives them the concurrent ability to act as a strategic reserve for crises and contingencies. U.S. Naval forces are likely to deploy in a given configuration, disperse to accomplish missions such as forward presence and security cooperation, and then be called upon to merge with other Navy, Marine Corps, joint, interagency or multinational elements to assume different missions such as crisis response or expeditionary power projection.³¹

MOC 2nd Edition calls for “a more flexible and innovative approach toward organizing and deploying naval resources to provide the capabilities and capacities required by the combatant commanders. Current naval force packages must be complemented by alternative, non-standardized options appropriate to a broader range of missions. Smaller, more numerous naval task forces—creative combinations of people and sea-based platforms—must be tailored to meet the ongoing, varied, and specific needs of the combatant commanders. Potential options might include deploying Marine Expeditionary Units in a modular fashion; embarking Marine detachments aboard cruisers, destroyers, submarines or littoral combat ships; the creation of new formations focused on specific tasks; or the reconfiguration of maritime prepositioning modules.”³²

Conclusion

The ideas contained in both editions of the MOC as well as NOC 06 informed development of the recently signed maritime strategy, a tri-service effort among the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. This document, titled *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, has a lineage that can be traced directly back to *The Way Ahead* and reflects more than 25 years of continuous conceptual development concerning the use of naval power to influence events ashore—*seabasing*. As is true of any strategy or concept, the true challenge lies not in its crafting, but in its implementation.

³¹ Amos, LtGen James F., USMC, *Marine Corps Operating Concepts for a Changing Security Environment, Second Edition*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, June 2007), pp. 9-10.

³² *Ibid*, p. 11.