

What's in a Name?

**Implementing the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*
requires more than just adopting its terminology**

by LtCol John Berry, USMC(Ret)

By all accounts, the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG) has been exceptionally well-received. One defense journalist, Paul McLeary, observed, "Gen David H. Berger made clear he's setting a new course for the Corps, scrapping old capabilities without a trace of sentimentality." A former staff director of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Chris Brose, characterized the CPG as "one of the best defense documents I have read in a long time. The blood of sacred cows is all over this thing." A retired Navy officer and experienced naval strategist, Bryan McGrath, called it "the single most consequential piece of writing about American seapower since the combined effort of the 1980 maritime strategy. It is that big, and that important." Given our Service culture and the unique stature Commandants have within the Corps, McGrath also observed, "There are 180,000 Marines who will cite this thing chapter and verse as long as he is Commandant."¹

McGrath's observation has proven prophetic as Marines have enthusiastically embraced the direction set within the CPG. An unintended consequence of that enthusiasm, however, appears to be a propensity to embrace the Commandant's terms without fully grasping the ideas inherent in them. This is not an insurmountable problem, but is it one that needs to be understood and addressed if we are to move out effectively. As we proceed, we must keep in mind that the CPG content is *not* designed to merely improve the current force. Rather, it seeks to establish a new and disruptive competitive space, empower regional allies and partners, and regain the strategic initiative using new means and methods.

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This article will examine three terms—the first representing an operating concept, the second a new set of capabilities necessary to implement that concept, and the third an organization—to illustrate why we need to better understand the ideas inherent in the CPG's terminology in order to effectively implement it.

Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations

The *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (EABO) concept pre-dates Gen Berger's tenure as Commandant, but he certainly influenced and supported its development while he was Com-

mander, Marine Corps Forces Pacific/Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, and then Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration. Often mischaracterized as a Marine Corps product, EABO is actually a shared naval concept formally endorsed by all three 4-star fleet commanders and co-signed by the Chief of Naval Operations and Commandant of the Marine Corps in mid-March 2019. It is one of two naval concepts—the other being *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment*—endorsed within the CPG.

To grasp the essence of the EABO concept, we need to shed preconceived notions of what constitutes a "base." We are conditioned by our recent experiences to think of a base as something composed of large, fixed infrastructure that not only supports operations and forces but also provides physical security and some degree of comfort as



EABO is a shared naval concept. (Photo by LCpl Jason Monty.)

well. This is true not only stateside but in recent combat operations overseas, wherein the United States was able to create forward operating bases that, in addition to providing airfields, maintenance facilities, billeting and messing, included such luxuries as gyms, Internet cafes, and designer coffee stands. In an era of pervasive sensors and long-range missiles, that conception of a forward base is irrational.

We need to get back to a fundamental understanding of what constitutes a base, and, toward that end, the current joint definition of the term is elegant in its simplicity. “A locality from which operations are projected or supported.”

Expeditionary advanced bases are envisioned as operating areas large enough

to conduct sea denial or support sea control.²

Sea denial involves preventing an adversary the use of the sea, while sea control is the condition in which friendly forces have freedom of action to use the sea for their own purposes. Sea denial within a given seaward area can be conducted by Marines operating from the adjacent landward portion of the littorals, assuming they have the requisite capabilities; however, sea control requires a fleet to exploit the sea for friendly purposes.

Thus, in particular situations Marines can be tasked to conduct sea denial unilaterally but the same is not true for sea control. Marines can, however, support the Navy’s ability to establish sea

The anticipated value of EABO is that they will provide fleet commanders the option of persistently posturing naval expeditionary forces forward on key maritime terrain as a complement to the seagoing elements of the fleet. These naval expeditionary forces can provide additional battlespace awareness, fires, and logistics capabilities to increase fleet capacity beyond the upper limit imposed by the number of platforms afloat.

When conducted prior to conflict, EABO will be designed to reassure our friends while deterring aggression. In the event of conflict, EABO will be employed to contest *fait accompli* gambits, impose costs, deny adversary freedom of action, assist partner nations in defending sovereign territory, control key maritime terrain, and shape the operational environment in support of integrated sea control and maritime power projection operations. Ideally, EABO activities will be conducted during pre-conflict competition as a means of deterring regional aggression. In this regard, EABO are envisioned as a cooperative effort with like-minded nations.

Although developed separately, the EABO concept is very consistent with the recently published *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, Competition Continuum*, which posits that, rather than a world either at peace or at war, there is “a world of enduring competition conducted through a mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict.”³ This doctrine goes on to explain that military capabilities are applied in support of national security objectives, not just in conflict, but across the competition continuum.

Thus far, however, in our rush to embrace EABO, we have largely focused on the conflict portion of the competition continuum, thereby demonstrating a superficial understanding of the concept. Even within the focus on conflict, we have tended toward refining things we understand rather than exploring the unfamiliar. For example, a recent news item about an exercise purportedly exploring EABO included quotations from Marines about their ability to “quickly seize a limited objective” and to conduct “this type of raid.”⁴

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to allow forces—and those *essential* capabilities necessary to sustain them—to be dispersed among numerous hide sites and primary, alternate, and supplementary positions so that they can operate and persist inside a potential adversary’s weapons engagement zone (WEZ). These forces, whether Navy, Marine Corps, or from our joint or combined partners, will carefully manage signatures while conducting localized movement and maneuver, thereby complicating an adversary’s ability to find and target them while remaining positioned to achieve the desired operational effects. Where feasible, they will leverage host-nation government and commercial assets to perform select support functions.

Armed with that understanding of what constitutes the base, we are better able to grasp the EABO concept’s call for employing mobile, low-signature, operationally relevant, and relatively easy to maintain and sustain expeditionary forces from a series of austere, temporary locations ashore or inshore

control. World War II provides excellent examples of both. The Marine airfield on Guadalcanal provided the ability to operate aircraft that denied the adversary the use of surrounding seas, at least during daylight. Later in the war, the fleet commanders employed Marines to seize islands in the Central Pacific in order to provide bases to support the advance across the Pacific, thereby contributing to the Navy’s ability to control the sea.

Understanding the importance of key maritime terrain is essential to understanding EABO, sea control, and sea denial. Key maritime terrain is any landward portion of the littoral that affords a force controlling it the ability to significantly influence events seaward. Again, World War II provides an excellent example. Gibraltar and Suez comprised key maritime terrain controlling access to and egress from the Mediterranean. Both locations remained in British hands throughout the war, thereby giving the Allies the ability to contain Axis forces in the Mediterranean.

While seizing objectives or conducting raids *might* be conducted within the larger context of a joint campaign that is maritime in character, *they are not central to EABO*. The focus on tactically offensive operations shortchanges the cooperation activities aimed at setting the conditions for operational access and strategic success. It also causes some to conclude that EABO are only conducted after the initiation of hostilities, despite the fact that attempting to insert forces onto key maritime terrain inside an adversary's WEZ becomes highly problematic once a war starts.

For that reason, pre-conflict cooperation with our regional partners, to include the discrete prepositioning of assets, is essential to enabling a more persistent forward posture, expanding capacity, and competing below armed conflict so that we can collectively deter aggression and achieve the more desirable goal of conflict prevention. Gen Berger recently emphasized the linkage between cooperation and deterrence, "Critical to serving as a credible deterrent is partnership. Therefore, our new naval capabilities must empower our partners and allies as much as ourselves."⁵

Effective deterrence rests upon the ability to impose fear of failure or fear of unacceptable cost on a potential adversary. The EABO concept espouses developing the ability to impose those fears by posturing survivable, combat-credible capabilities on key maritime terrain inside the adversary's WEZ. It also adds a degree of operational unpredictability to complicate adversary decision calculus. *These* are the aspects of EABO and the larger topic of distributed maritime operations that demand innovation.

Posturing combat-credible capabilities that can contribute to deterrence and, if necessary, provide a meaningful contribution to a maritime fight infers the need to expand our tool kit—an inference confirmed by Gen Berger's reference to "new naval capabilities" cited above—yet in some quarters we have deluded ourselves into thinking we can adequately conduct EABO with today's capabilities.

While we will certainly continue to use or adapt the assets we have for some

time—or consciously use them as surrogates for envisioned capabilities during live force experimentation—we need to expedite fielding potential alternatives or entirely new capabilities. The CPG explicitly states that our current capabilities are inadequate:

It is obvious from our concept development work that significant change is required in how we organize, train, and equip our Corps for the future. Innovation will be critical, but it is in the actual implementation of our innovative concepts that we will be judged. For the Marine Corps, meaningful innovation is not just having great thoughts and concepts rather, it is about translating great thoughts and concepts into action.⁶

Gen Berger subsequently elaborated on that theme,

We must develop distributed, low-signature, lethal, networked, persistent, and risk-worthy joint expeditionary capabilities that can persist and operate within the adversary's weapons engagement zone.⁷

Stand-in Engagement Capabilities

The CPG identified the need to develop a concept for "stand-in forces" that are designed to "restore the strategic initiative to naval forces and empower our allies and partners to successfully confront regional hegemons that infringe on their territorial boundaries and interests." It goes on to explain that stand-in forces must be designed to "confront aggressor naval forces with an array of low signature, affordable, and risk-worthy platforms and payloads" that will contribute to an integrated "maritime defense that is optimized to operate in close and confined seas in defiance of adversary long-range precision 'stand-off' capabilities."⁸

In other words, while potential adversaries seek to keep us out of key operating areas and push us further away from our overseas partners by fielding stand-off engagement capabilities, we are going to counter that approach with stand-in engagement capabilities that allow us to accept risk and persist inside a competitor's WEZ to confront malign behavior and, in the event of conflict, engage the enemy at close range. Our

goal is to reverse the cost imposition by posturing numerous, low-cost capabilities that can generate disproportionate results.

As explained in the CPG,

Rather than heavily investing in expensive and exquisite capabilities that regional aggressors have optimized their forces to target, naval forces will persist forward with many smaller, low signature, affordable platforms that can economically host a dense array of lethal and nonlethal payloads [that] operate ashore, afloat, submerged, and aloft in close concert to overwhelm enemy platforms.⁹

Although a stand-in forces concept is yet to be formally published, various commands have already generated an assortment of briefs in which they have declared themselves to be stand-in forces. Their logic appears to be based entirely upon geographic location, inasmuch as they have units that frequently operate within a potential adversary's WEZ. What they have overlooked is the need for the capabilities essential to being mobile, lethal, survivable, and sustainable within a contested littoral. Lacking these characteristics, in an actual conflict, forces operating inside the WEZ will be both ineffective and highly vulnerable. This assertion is reinforced by a recent unclassified report summarizing insights from force-on-force exercises, which declared that units will "struggle to survive inside weapons engagement zones."¹⁰

The Commandant has acknowledged that we do not yet have the requisite stand-in engagement capabilities:

The Navy and Marine Corps together will need to fight for sea control from within contested spaces. Our war games highlight the real threat of long-range missiles; to succeed, we must possess the capability to persist within the arc of adversary fires. We must evolve into the nation's 'stand-in' force.

As the foregoing extracts from the CPG and subsequent statements from the Commandant make clear, the EABO concept and the need for stand-in engagement capabilities are intertwined and fundamentally naval in character: "The Marine Corps will



Frequent training with partner nations may give us a slight advantage when faced with an adversarial stand-off force. (Photo by SSgt Joshua Jackson.)

be trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness and prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations.”¹¹ The Marine Corps’ contribution to fleet operations will be provided by a reinvigorated Fleet Marine Force, but it is not at all clear the implications of that organizational title are widely understood.

Fleet Marine Force

Reinvigoration of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) appears to be the most enthusiastically embraced element of the CPG. Almost overnight, Marine references to the “operating forces” and “OPFOR” disappeared and have been replaced by “FMF” or “the fleet” in daily conversation, formal briefs, and official correspondence. Inasmuch as the Marine Corps—more than any other Service—cherishes its history, and the fact that the FMF was essential to preparing for and winning the Pacific War, this should not be surprising. Creation of the FMF was a watershed event. In their 1951 study *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific*, historians Jeter Isley and Philip Crowl declared:

The year 1933 marked the most crucial turning point in Marine Corps history ... the way was at last open

for a continuous program of training and indoctrination in advanced base or expeditionary work with the fleet. Before any such scheme could be practically realized however, one preliminary step was essential—a sizeable body of marines would have to be permanently attached to the fleet for this purpose.¹²

Subsequent historical studies¹³ have elaborated on the motives for, and impact of, creating the FMF. These can be summarized as:

- It tied the Marine Corps to a unique role and specific set of naval missions associated with the Navy’s pacing threat.
- Recognizing that the fleet has historically been the Navy’s venue for innovation, it provided the fleet commander an organization focused on developing the equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures needed for those missions.
- It established a clear distinction between the Army and Marine Corps and provided a sound argument for preventing the latter from being absorbed by the former, in whole or in part, during an era of budgetary challenge.
- It sent a strong message to both Navy admirals and Marine generals (which included some opponents to the FMF)

that the Commandant had committed the Marine Corps to a new focus. Arguably, the same logic can be considered pertinent today.

So, what is the problem?

The FMF inherently connotes specific organizational and command relationships that today apply only to a relatively small portion of Marine Corps Operating Forces. The formal definition of FMF makes this apparent:

A balanced force of combined arms comprising land, air, and service elements of the United States Marine Corps, which is an integral part of a United States fleet and has the status of a type command.¹⁴

Today, the FMF is composed only of those forces actually embarked afloat or temporarily projected ashore from, and expected to re-embark aboard, the ships on which they deployed. These forces are under the operational control (OPCON) of the fleet commander. Both *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* and the EABO concepts envision expanding the number of forces under the fleet commander’s OPCON to include Marines operating ashore—untethered to ships lingering offshore—on key maritime terrain to conduct sea denial or support sea control. The rationale is that modern sensors and weapons have eliminated the seam between operations on land and sea to the point where the fleet commander must have the ability to integrate forces operating from the landward portion of the littorals to friendly advantage. This is not a novel idea. The last time the United States fought a peer competitor in the maritime domain, World War II, the fleet commander had OPCON over Marines. In the immediate post-Cold War era, the maritime domain was uncontested, and we migrated to a support relationship as the norm. That era is waning and increasing threats into and within the maritime domain make a return to the unity of command inherent in OPCON a logical action.

In light of these developments, reinvigorating the FMF makes sense, but it will involve much more than just claiming the title and issuing new guidons. The CPG said as much,

identifying measures such as assigning more Marine Corps forces to the fleet, putting Marine Corps experts in the fleet maritime operations centers, and also shifting emphasis in our training, education, and Supporting Establishment activities. These are ambitious measures that will take some time and much coordination to achieve. More significantly, the CPG explained,

Refining the component relationship, within the framework of Goldwater-Nichols, is a more complicated issue that must be explored in partnership with the Navy.¹⁵

Therein lies the rub. Since the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the Navy and Marine Corps have evolved different component command and major subordinate command structures that are not well aligned. For example, we currently have two major Marine component commanders, Marine Corps Forces Command and Marine Corps Forces Pacific, which are respectively dual hatted as CGs FMF Atlantic and FMF Pacific. These positions are holdovers from when the Navy had only two major operational commands, the Atlantic Fleet and the Pacific Fleet. Today, however, the Navy has three major 4-star commands: Fleet Forces Command, the Pacific Fleet, and Navy Forces Europe and Africa.

As the Commandant indicated, we cannot solve this unilaterally. Our organizational alignment must be studied and assessed in partnership with the Navy and within the boundaries of the 1986 legislation. It must be considered globally rather than solved regionally. There are many options to be considered: Should we create fully integrated naval components? Administratively separate but operationally integrated components? Separate but collocated? All Marine Corps forces OPCON to the fleet commanders or only a portion of them, and if the latter, what portion? There are many more questions but few answers yet.

So, What Is to Be Done?

The first step in solving a problem is recognizing it exists. Promoting that

recognition was the primary purpose of this article. In simple terms, we need to collectively become conversant with what is—and is not—articulated in official concepts so we can do a better job in testing and implementing them.

With respect to EABO in particular, the three-page vignette included as an appendix at the end of the document has been identified by many readers as essential to fully grasping the “big ideas” of the concept; they recommend reading it before the main body of the text.

With respect to terminology, whether doctrinal or conceptual, it is always best to check the sources before putting pen to paper or icons to slides. We have a professional lexicon; let’s use it.

With respect to tougher issues, like the component relationship, we need to acknowledge that complex problems cannot be solved without a deep understanding of the issues involved and the facts bearing on the topic—to include an appreciation of competing ideas or organizational positions and the underlying reasons for them. The number one topic in the CPG is force design, and within that heading, the number one issue is naval integration.

Naval integration starts with every Marine officer or civilian employee in a position of responsibility involving naval matters figuring out who their Navy counterpart is and reaching out to establish a sound, professional working relationship. Our general officers have reached out to their flag officer counterparts and reportedly the common response from the admirals has been, “How can we help you help us?” We could not have asked for a better response. We need to build on that.

Notes

1. Paul McLeary, “Sacred Cows Die As Marine Commandant Changes Course On Amphibs,” *Breaking Defense*, (July 2019), available at <https://breakingdefense.com>.
2. This paragraph and the EABO section as a whole were informed by the “Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) Playbook Card,” (Washington, DC: HQMC, March 2019).

3. Department of Defense, *JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum*, (Washington, DC: June 2019).

4. Megan Eckstein, “How to Seize Islands, Set Up a Forward Refueling Point: Marine Corps Recipes for Expeditionary Operations,” *USNI News*, (September 2019), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

5. Gen David H. Berger, “Together We Must Design the Future Force,” *Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: November 2019).

6. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* (CPG), (Washington, DC: July 2019).

7. “Together We Must Design the Future Force.”

8. CPG.

9. CPG.

10. CG, Marine Air-Ground Task Force Training Command, “MAGTF-TC Force on Force Observations from 2019,” (Twentynine Palms, CA: October 2019).

11. CPG.

12. Jeter A. Isley and Philip A. Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951).

13. See; Robert D. Heinl, *Soldiers of the Sea*, Annapolis, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1962); Alan R. Millet, *Semper Fidelis*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1980); and Alan R. Millet and Jack Shulimson (Editors), *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2004).

14. Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 1-02, DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, August 2017. The fleet employs two basic organizational constructs, “type organization” and “task organization.” The purpose of type organization is to prepare and provide forces for operations. The type commands have titles that are self-explanatory, such as Commander Surface Forces, Commander Submarine Forces, and Commanding General Fleet Marine Force. The purpose of task organization is to group forces provided by the type commands into formations tailored to accomplish specific operational missions or tasks.

15. CPG.

