

# Stand-In Forces

Disrupting the current struggle for dominance

by Col Art Corbett, USMC(Ret)

**T**he *nature* of war is constant, and war will forever remain a violent contest of human will. In contrast, the *character* of war is constantly changing and persistently subject to the human dynamics of tactical creativity, technical innovation, and conceptual insight. Consequently, institutions dedicated to deterring and waging war must be similarly dynamic and recognize the essential truth that *change is a medium of advantage in war*. The greater the change, the wider the aperture for generating new advantage. A warfighting organization that is not constantly adopting, adapting, or initiating new means and methods of warfare is standing still, and most assuredly will be passed by more ambitious, creative, or sinister forces.

Our strategic competitors recognize that dynamic force innovation is a critical part of continuous military competition, and they have demonstrated a coherence in force development be-

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tween new tactical means and more ambitious strategic ends that has largely eluded the United States. China, for example, has invested heavily in long-range fire capabilities in pursuit of their publicly declared *counter-intervention* strategy. This strategy appears designed to negate the ability of U.S. forces to persist forward in the Pacific, thereby compromising the credibility and deterrent value of the force to achieve desired strategic ends. The U.S. and regional allies have been compelled to accede to the illegal but expanding Chinese infrastructure supporting aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea. All make appropriate protest but,

ultimately, confrontation is limited to gestures in consideration of the vulnerability of the current combined force posture and structure relative to Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The most valuable U.S. military capabilities are now concentrated or dependent on highly vulnerable bases within the potential adversary's weapons engagement zone (WEZ) and face either destruction or withdrawal in the event of war. These conditions fail to offer credible force deterrent options or assure allies. Given the global proliferation of A2/AD capabilities, similar challenges exist in other theaters as well. The growing mismatch between U.S. strategic objectives and the tactical means required to ensure force credibility and effectiveness demand increasingly prudent, favorable, and affordable options.

There are two readily apparent but divergent paths to resolve this dilemma. The first option, reflexive and familiar, is to double down on the long-evolved means and methods of war and request additional funding for traditional capabilities with improved performance and additional capacity. The basic presumption of this option being that fundamental assumptions need not change, and the joint force can off-set adversary weapons and sensor range and capacity with greater capabilities and capacities of our own. In essence, we attempt to play "catch-up" and eventually regain the lead. The inherent danger with this option is that it risks giving the com-



**The character of war is constantly changing.** (Photo by LCpl Dalton Swanbeck.)

petitor a complementary cost imposing strategy.

The second option is more difficult, but holds much greater promise, as it presumes that fundamental assumptions regarding the character of war have changed, and that considering mathematic and geographic realities, it is better to defeat an adversary's strategy than defeat his many forces through attrition. However, this option is hard. It requires devising new methods of warfare, innovating new and different capabilities, initiating new forms of competitive advantage—all with a focus to restoring the strategic initiative.

One potential approach aligned to the second option is the development and employment of resilient “stand-in” forces equipped with disruptive new tactical capabilities that will persist and operate forward within a peer adversary's WEZ. Informed by the constraints of both physics and economics, stand-in forces could be advantaged by exploiting emerging technology to enhance mobility and lethality and employing new design and manufacturing techniques to enhance platform numbers while reducing size and cost. They need to be deliberately designed to obviate the utility of adversary investments in long-range precision fires and impose time and cost impediments to deter their hegemonic ambitions. These new, smaller and more risk worthy capabilities will generate a new force structure that is relevant in both countering malign behavior and deterring general war. Stand-in forces will support recent strategic guidance for force innovation as well as current and emerging joint and naval operating concepts.

During day-to-day “competition,” stand-in forces will enable the U.S. and our partners to confront *fait accompli* gambits and malign behavior with proportionate, responsive, and credible military options to match adversary aggression with commensurate force and risk. During conflict, stand-in forces may be employed as one of several simultaneous operational efforts within a wider joint campaign to defeat the counter-intervention strategy of peer adversaries. These forces will

take advantage of partner geography to conduct an integrated maritime defense of the straits that control access to close and confined seas. Stand-in forces will conduct engagements that contrast sharply with the more familiar *stand-off* approach long preferred by technologically adept western forces. Stand-off engagements are designed to minimize “*risk to force*” by confronting enemy formations with greater accuracy, over further distance, for a longer period of time. For centuries, military innovators and practitioners have sought to generate and sustain disproportionate tactical advantage through stand-off engagements; iterating and employing increasingly lethal and precise weapons systems from ever greater distance against enemies who require close proximity to effectively engage in combat. Stand-in engagements deliberately contradict this long-evolved pattern.

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**... it is better to defeat an adversary's strategy ...**

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From the longbow and Minnie ball to the bomber and today's long-range precision weapons and their supporting precision navigation and timing architecture, much of the modern military technical revolution has centered on extending the range and precision of stand-off weapons. The U.S. joint force has perfected this over generations with ever more exquisite and expensive weapons and systems. Some adversaries, like the Iraqis during Operation DESERT STORM, never successfully adapted to negate these advantages. Others, however, were able to learn from their losses. The Vietnamese, for example, focused on avoiding detection and giving battle on their own terms by “grabbing the Americans by their belts” to render stand-off weapons irrelevant.

A portion of future U.S. forces could follow the Vietnamese example by making a virtue of proximity, stealth, ambiguity, simultaneity, and quantity to close with and destroy enemy forces before they can bring their own ad-

vantages to bear. This requires arming our stand-in forces with relatively smaller, less expensive, hard to find, risk worthy platforms in all domains. This low signature force structure is the antithesis of the current high signature, expensive, exquisite, and vulnerable joint capability set. This resilient new force structure will likewise need to be supported by an equally low signature and difficult to target expeditionary sustainment system that can support forward deployed warriors and their weapons systems without advertising critical vulnerabilities and generating single points of failure. The combination of resilient, low signature, forward infrastructure supporting similarly low signature, but highly lethal and dense, arrays of minimally manned and autonomous capabilities builds the next joint force on new and more realistic assumptions concerning the character of future war. Equally important, it enables the U.S. to shape the character of future war into an innovative competitive space where we will still dominate.

While the U.S. still has an advantage in technological innovation, we need to acknowledge that we have lost our long-standing competitive advantage when it comes to building major warfighting platforms. Considering the broad difference in the numbers of shipyards and the annual production of ocean-going bottoms between China and the United States, why would we consider a war that requires the risk, expenditure, and replacement of ships to still be a competitive space for the United States? The large platform *industrial base* that provided the sinew to win the Second World War is now in the hands of our strategic competitors. What still remains a dynamic and competitive space for American ingenuity is the fast emerging *innovation base* that already uses computer assisted design, additive manufacturing, robotics, and many new manufacturing techniques to produce many smaller and more resilient platforms at significantly reduced cost. When equipped with autonomy packages, these resilient platforms offer the opportunity to create and field a significant number of lethal, affordable, and hard to detect and kill unmanned

and minimally manned weapons platforms. Unmanned systems are low signature, risk worthy assets that could be boldly employed in overwhelming numbers against expensive, exquisite, large signature platforms to achieve disproportionate result at minimal cost. They enable naval forces to shift investment away from expensive to produce and maintain ships and reinvest in the many payloads that will be necessary to win a war in the missile age. Autonomous and minimally manned surface, subsurface, and air platforms clearly meet the criteria of *disruptive technologies that establish a new competitive space* for America's emerging innovation base and may provide capabilities optimized for stand-in forces.

While the concept of stand-in engagement is as old as war itself, the establishment of 21st century stand-in forces will be disruptive because it creates what John Boyd called a "fast transient maneuver," an "Irregular and rapid/abrupt shift from one maneuver event/state to another." By disrupting the evolved and anticipated pattern of force development and engagement we may generate highly exploitable asymmetries and provide new opportunities for cost effective advantage. Adding stand-in engagements to the tactical mix will cause the enemy to hazard expensive offensive platforms against a lethal and dense mix of inexpensive, risk worthy, defensive platforms, and payloads—imposing disproportionate cost and asymmetric risk to enemy forces designed to strike against large signature standoff ships and infrastructure.

Since the operational level of war is designed to link tactical action to strategic ends, it follows then that the proper ambition of a *future* operational concept is to describe how *new tactical capabilities*, used in *new ways*, will provide future decision makers *better strategic options*. A proper operational concept has many components and points of consideration, but it is essential that it describe how investment in new tactical means will enable better strategic consequences, preferably at reduced cost in blood and treasure. Credible operational concepts are dependent on cred-



**Combat credibility and demonstrated resolve equates to deterrence effectiveness.** (Photo by Cpl Aaron Henson.)

ible forces that are sustainable in battle and sufficient in lethal capability and relative capacity.

An optimum strategy—particularly one versus a nuclear-armed adversary—will be *adequately coercive, but not vertically escalatory*. To avoid provoking vertical escalation, the military operations associated with such a strategy will exploit off-shore naval operations to generate coercive conditions. Toward that end, stand-in forces may fully exploit the many advantages of the tactical defense, which is the far stronger form of contemporary naval battle.

The *strategic offensive* complemented by an *integrated maritime tactical defense* provides unique and relevant advantages. Stand-in forces may be *highly coercive* when employed to deny adversary access to commerce or counter fait accompli gambits yet, when employed from treaty partner terrain using largely defensive capabilities, they are *not vertically escalatory*.

Combat credibility and demonstrated resolve equates to deterrence effectiveness. Stand-in forces stand forward with partners. Stand-in forces can persistently and resolutely declare intention. These forces may be regionally aligned and assigned. They will not withdraw upon indications and warning and their platforms and payloads

can be proliferated in large numbers at affordable cost. The comparative ease of hiding their signature and masking their disposition leads to uncertainty and compounds the variables when calculating correlation of force, perhaps the greatest deterrent when facing an adversary who regards war as a scientific endeavor with computable results.

The development of a stand-in forces offers the potential for innovative change to disrupt the current great power competition and *regain the strategic initiative*. They will do so by satisfying the operational requirement to *create credible combat forces* to persist and operate inside the adversary's WEZ with sufficient capability and capacity to restore deterrence and produce favorable strategic outcomes.

The pattern and reality of war in the missile age makes the concept of stand-in forces inevitable. First to the force development blackboard wins.

