

A New Clime and Place

Marine Stand-in Forces on NATO's eastern flank

by Col J.D. Canty (Ret)

China's alarming economic and military rise in recent decades has served as a catalyst for military thinking oriented toward countering the threat that China poses. This is reflected in the latest aspirational naval concepts that heavily weigh a Pacific centrality while marginalizing other potential threats and geographic environments. But, as seen repeatedly in history—most recently in Ukraine—other dangers exist. Accordingly, concepts like *Expeditionary Advanced Based Operations* (EABO) and *Stand-in Forces* (SIF)—upon which the Marine Corps may be gambling its future relevancy—must be crafted, interpreted, and employed in a manner that provides greater and more explicit utility to the Marine Corps in Europe and other theaters. While far too early to sift through all the possible ramifications for the character of future warfare, the latest conflagration in Ukraine demonstrates, arguably, that EABO and even SIF may have greater relevance in Eastern Europe than anywhere else on the planet.

First the Bad News—Acknowledging the Cons

“The choice isn't between good and evil, it's between evil and less evil.”

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Until recently at least, there has not been much focus within the Marine

>Col Canty is a retired Marine.

Corps on expanding its presence in Europe even though the Marine Corps Prepositioning Program—Norway remains viable and II MEF continues to conduct cold-weather exercises in Norway.¹ There are several possible reasons for this. First, the most anticipated potential adversary in a European scenario is Russia, which means combat would most likely be waged on land around Russia's western periphery against the Eastern-most members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).² This goes some way to explain a second reason for the dearth of Marines in Europe: land warfare is the Army's specialty. While the Multi-Domain Task Force provides the Army a capability that appears uniquely suited for the Pacific, demonstrating a level of centrality on the Army's part, the majority of its design is structured for continental warfare in places like Eastern Europe. While visions of main battle tanks rushing across and through (or out of the Fulda Gap) are long passé, the Suwalki Gap provides a new and enticing opportunity to the Army's maneuverists.³ It also helps the Army's large-scale combat operations rationale that the Marine Corps is unburdening itself of its tanks and much of its heavy engineering equipment—particularly bridging and armored breaching assets. All told then, as regards Europe and especially far Eastern Europe, the Corps is, on the face of it, less interested, less

capable, and thus less relevant. On the other hand, the main adversary, and the Marine Corps' primary focus, lies in wait in the western Pacific.⁴ This pacing threat has spawned a swath of new, seemingly Pacific-centric concepts—ink still wet—and, along with them, a fundamental force redesign to match.⁵

A Shift to the East

At first blush, a redesign of the Marine Corps favoring the western Pacific battlespace has appeal. A force characterized by mobility, small size, and dispersion, armed with precision-guided anti-ship munitions (albeit horribly short-ranged), and a focus on reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance would seem far better suited for key islands, maritime choke points, and archipelagic terrain. Concepts like EABO and SIF are heavily influenced by anticipated operations on, inside, and beyond China's so-called first island chain. Unfortunately, in application, this has meant largely ignoring any possible applicability for other elements of the Marine Corps, II MEF in particular, and perhaps even the traditional MAGTF with its doctrine and design for combined arms supported by an organic air-ground logistics team.⁶ It also assumes there will be more to a conflict with China than a long-range exchange—across and through multiple areas of operation, and possibly areas of responsibility also—of high-speed precision-guided munitions (some of which will be silent and virtual) until one or both sides run out of weapons or targets.⁷ Unfortunately, concepts as “tested” or “validated” or “proven” in wargames rely too heavily on scenarios that disquietingly drift into vignettes

and transition into scripts which then support preconceived notions through confirmation bias, culminating in foregone conclusions.⁸ No such premise needs to apply for the employment of Marines and the MAGTF in Eastern Europe.

EABO, SIF, and Other Evolving Concepts are Relevant in Eastern Europe

“Try thinking with a map in your hand ...”
—Anonymous

Maps matter. Unlike the Pacific, the geography in Eastern Europe is a bit of a contradiction. Certainly, the land as the “seat of purpose”⁹ is almost entirely a contested area and well inside the engagement envelopes of many actual and potential adversary weapons systems. However, this also means that relatively short-ranged systems like the Naval Strike Missile, the Stinger man-portable air defense system, and a variety of anti-tank/armor weapons can still have significant battlefield utility. A Naval Strike Missile battery in the vicinity of the Suwalki Gap for instance can reach into the Baltic Sea beyond Poland’s shores west of Kaliningrad. A battery in Estonia near Narva can interdict the entire Gulf of Finland including the littoral approaches to St. Petersburg. The AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task-Oriented Radar can capture a vast picture of contested airspace over virtually the whole of the Baltics.¹⁰

Maneuver and mobility across the terrain of the Baltic States and Poland (rivers, marshes, bogs, and forests notwithstanding) are generally more feasible for wheeled vehicles by an order of magnitude over many places across the globe.¹¹ Expansive, all-weather road and rail networks alongside basic infrastructure, all originally designed to support Soviet/Russian armor and its mechanized approach to war, are extensive, advanced, and well maintained. In the Baltics especially, the main supply routes and main avenues of approach

an attacking force must use are well-defined and predictable, facilitating the use of obstacles, engagement areas, and kill boxes that can give full scope to enterprising, expeditionary combined-arms forces.¹²

The historical record bears this out and shows that opportunities to canalize enemy formations into engagement areas and kill boxes abound in key terrain such as the main east-west road in Estonia from Narva to Tallinn.¹³ Natural obstacles abound on either side of the road which to this day remains marshy with numerous bogs, rivers, and thick forests. Moreover, to the north lies the Gulf of Finland, the littoral approaches to the Russian capital, and the Russian naval base at Kronstadt. In the face of concerted delaying actions or defense in depth, Russian movement along the roads would require considerable engineering capabilities and capacity. Canalization of mechanized and armored road-bound forces at numerous natural and man-made chokepoints with few if any bypass options could create a target-rich environment for air and ground forces. Low-signature, mobile, distributed forces that get to the scene of action quickly and establish well-camouflaged “micro” defenses in-depth behind dug-in machineguns, anti-tank guided munitions, and unmanned air and ground systems can impose significant, and perhaps prohibitive, costs on an adversary out of proportion to their size.

“The first point of failure, is the first point of attack.”

—Col Andrew MacMannis(Ret)

In a communications-degraded environment, as a conflict with a peer or near-peer adversary is sure to be, those same small, logistically light, mobile, distributed, and lethal forces can exercise or implement mission command and operate on mission-type orders. Here is an important caveat: even

mission-type orders have a shelf life. However, the currency of mission-type orders founded on *task* and *purpose* in an imperfect world are, if well-crafted, more enduring than those given in a static context. Commanders will have to trust in and rely on the initiative of subordinates. However, commanders will have to educate and train themselves and their Marines to the underlying philosophy of mission command, and herein lies the tension. Can the Corps inculcate mission command and a “take the initiative” ethos into the everyday lives of Marines on the one hand and yet tie into and seek to conduct missions and tasks assured of communications within the multifarious kill chains and kill webs of joint and combined commands? If indeed, as Wayne Hughes asserts in *Fleet Tactics*, “tactical complexity is a peacetime disease,” a simpler, more self-reliant MAGTF in an area of operations (AO) with organic fires, air support, and especially naval shipping could be just the foot-in-the-door enabler the combined and joint force needs. Being less of a burden to the joint force is an important consideration. Employing these types of forces in the AO frequently and well in advance of any conflict presents none of the access issues and diplomatic hurdles found in the First Island Chain. It also imposes less burden on the joint/combined force commander’s resources and freedom of action by reducing the threshold for placing EABO forces and resources on such things as the defended asset and critical asset lists.

Allies, Friends, and Partners—European Allies: A Safer Bet

“There is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies—and that is to fight without them.”

—Winston Churchill

America’s NATO allies in Europe are all established democracies that have “a

dog in the fight.” Poland and the Baltic States border Russia and, excepting Estonia, Belarus too.¹⁴ Additionally, most NATO members are in the European Union (EU), one of the most powerful economic powerhouses in the world.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, the countries of Western Europe will find alternate sources of energy, thereby reducing their dependency on Russian resources over time.

Still, Russia has cast a long and dangerous military shadow over Eastern Europe, with all the neighboring states having experienced the heavy hand of Soviet rule. This shared familiarity has cleaved deeply through any lingering historical Russian calls to Slavic or regional brotherhood. Sharp historical lines maintain the Baltic States and Poland’s separation from Russia. Underlining this, the Baltic States especially share concerns as the next potential target regarding Russia’s ambitions. Indeed, little noticed in the West at the time or even today, Poland and the Baltic States waged long, painful insurgencies against their Soviet occupiers in the aftermath of World War II. Extensive, enduring, and effective resistance to Soviet occupation was only crushed after the most severe and bloody repression. Difficult to co-opt, this suggests a strong residual basis of support from its regional NATO allies and populations for hosting U.S. stand-in forces for exercises and training to deter Russian aggression. In the event of looming hostilities with Russia, these forces could be quickly deployed and integrated with local forces to implement a slow receding, layered defense-in-depth, possibly along the Finnish “Motti” model.¹⁶

All this is in stark contrast to the western Pacific, where China’s diaspora has created large and influential émigré population pockets with strong bonds not necessarily hostile to, nor interested in, China’s so far benign long-term goals. China has an economic, cultural, and familial hold on many of America’s allies, friends, and partners in the Far East. Lacking the economic clout of China or the EU, Russia can only extort concessions from the Europeans by threatening energy supplies and rare minerals, a more tenuous and contentious hold. This means Russia is seen as



Marine forces engaging in regular training exercises with NATO allies are an essential component of deterrence. (Photo by LCpl Sarah Petrock.)

a dire and dangerous threat that drives NATO members closer together rather than further apart, meaning allies like the Baltic States and Poland are willing to consider more robust defensive measures. For that to happen, the Corps will have to make a fundamental change in its approach to how it cooperates and operates within the NATO partnership.

Working joint and combined

Periodic exercises, deployments for training, and staff rides alongside joint and combined partners in places where U.S. forces are welcomed as a clear bulwark against the looming threat to the east will only further strengthen ties among allies.¹⁷ Gaining firsthand familiarity with the terrain and infrastructure while building relationships and interacting with allies and civilian populations are good optics and support contingency planning. They also increase the value proposition of introducing or reinforcing Marine forces as flexible deterrent or response options in the eyes of the U.S. European Command and NATO. Local populations can be vested in the idea of Marines in and about their communities as partners against a very tangible danger rather than an economic opportunity. Well-established rules of law and authority make repositioning of stocks and even

weapons eminently doable, similar to the construct used for Marine Corps Prepositioning Program–Norway.¹⁸ Any degree of so-called “modern-day foraging,”¹⁹ moderated to suit the times, is more likely to prove a valid planning assumption in Eastern Europe than in most other parts of the world.²⁰

Local defensive arrangements in Eastern Europe under NATO, while small, are professional, well-organized, established, and combined or joint. Military activity is routine. Moreover, any expeditionary force entering the AO is likely to arrive under an already established and extensive fire umbrella. Perhaps odd to point out, but there are many other potentials, and on the face of it, more valuable, richer targets an adversary could attempt to engage instead of EABO forces. If these assumptions are valid, it would give truth to the aspirational assertion that an EABO force is “small enough to avoid adversarial targeting, yet significant and robust enough to be tactically and even operationally relevant.”

Finally, there is still a place for a fully integrated combined-arms and air-ground logistics team, intimately familiar with the battlespace, in the form of the MAGTF that is less reliant on a kill web of staggering complexity, intricacy, and fragility. Independent of the arcane

mysteries of assured communications and the aspirational perfect command and control (C2), an appropriately tailored MAGTF could hold the line until the full weight and complexity of a joint force enabled by joint all-domain C2 enter the fray.

Conclusion

Unlike Ukraine, NATO's members are committed to the collective defense of any or all 30 members under Article 5 in the event of an armed attack.²¹ No other international military alliance has the same majesty attached to it. That is a powerful commitment made by member states and would give any aggressor pause for thought before committing to rash action. Therefore, even in competition, the notion behind NATO is a powerful deterrent.

Consequently, an expeditionary quick-reaction force that periodically forward deploys, exercises, and trains in Eastern Europe would act as a powerful backstop to American and European foreign policy. Where small size and low signatures are advantageous, such forces would not necessarily provoke Russian angst, yet they would be an effective part of deterrence and early response portfolio. This idea also breathes life back into the MAGTF, imbued as it traditionally is with the proven art

and science skills necessary to combine arms during the ultimate stress test of combat. Small changes can reap large gains. It will take a MAGTF to accomplish EABO in Eastern Europe, but it is absolutely achievable given the inherent advantages of operating in that AO.

Moreover, the move towards smaller, special operations-like formations employing manned/unmanned teaming, third party sensing, target acquisition and custody, and high payoff precision weaponry is inexorably gaining momentum. Marines trained and equipped to operate in all domains and succeed in the event that exquisite, sophisticated, and vulnerable communications architectures breakdown will be at a premium. Mission command will have teeth, and there is no better place to bare those teeth than in the Baltics and Poland—and perhaps Finland and Sweden in the future if they join NATO.

Current and envisioned weapons suites, the Marine Corps' ethos, and the MAGTF construct are more than adequate for the task. Marines can bring to deterrence, and to combat if required, something the other Services cannot—rapier-like *speed and agility* where it matters at the moment and the ability to *fire effectively first* until the arrival of the claymore clutched in the heavy mailed fist of the other Services.

Until the fast-approaching day arrives when wars fought the American way are done largely by artificially intelligent machines, there will remain a need for Marines able to fight in every clime and place.

Notes

1. Exercise Cold Response is a biennial exercise hosted by Norway.

2. Primarily, the Baltic States and Poland bordering Russia and Belarus. However, should Ukraine fall to Russia then Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania would be subject to more direct Russian "influence."

3. The Suwalki Gap is approximately 60 miles wide, lying between Lithuania to the northeast and Poland to the southwest. To the northwest is the Russian Kaliningrad exclave or Oblast, and to the southeast is the western border of Belarus. The terrain is a flat, relatively narrow gap, difficult to defend, representing a confined two-way avenue of approach suited to the use of armor. NATO forces as well as the Russians and Belarusians have conducted military exercises in the region.

4. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, DC: 2018); Secretary of Defense James Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, DC: 2018); and Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2022 National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, DC: 2022).

5. See Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).

6. It is far too early to draw any definitive conclusions from the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, but the seeming inability to combine arms effectively appears to be at the root of the Russian military's problems.

7. The command, control, and authorities implications of weapons—many of which will be silent and virtual—are immense and worthy of further discussion.

8. What do wargames actually accomplish? Wargames generate insights (some wrong), such as "the bomber always gets through." They also acquaint players with evolving lexicons as they develop (or not) into doctrine and form catalysts for ideas regarding technology, and technology as it relates to ideas. They may contribute to concepts forming the basis for doctrine. What



Marine rotational forces such as those in Romania and Norway already form the basis of EABO in the EUCOM Area of Responsibility. (Photo by LCpl Sarah Petrock.)

wargames categorically do not do is test, validate, or prove concepts—only the furnace of combat can do that.

9. Capt Wayne P. Hughes, *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations, 3rd Edition*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

10. This in no way mandates the employment of this or any other system—the simple beauty of the MAGTF construct is its “tailorability” to the situation and the mission at hand.

11. Poland’s borders have changed many times over the centuries but one thing remained constant: the enduring curse of always laying athwart invasion-conducive terrain, whether it be horse-mounted Mongolian hordes or hordes of German or Soviet tanks.

12. The physical canalizing qualities of the road networks in Eastern Europe and the psychological qualities imposed by adherence to an almost totally mechanized force as a result of the Soviet experience during World War II, and in anticipation of conflict with NATO, have been amply demonstrated in the current Ukraine conflict.

13. See Jeremiah D. Canty, “A Case Study: Estonian Lessons for the Baltics,” (unpublished CETO Quicklook report, March 2019), available on request. An engagement area is where the commander intends to trap and destroy an enemy force using the massed fires of all available weapons. A three-dimensional target area, defined to facilitate the integration of coordinated joint weapons fire.

14. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war posits an interesting situation if Putin’s forces create a land bridge along the Black Sea coast from

the Crimea to Galati, currently in western Ukraine bordering Romania. Doing so would (1) unlock the “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic’s” (Transnistria) access to the Black Sea, (2) sandwich a former Russian satellite (a land bridge would probably lead to Russian annexation) between Ukraine and Moldova, and (3) bring Russia into direct contact with yet another NATO ally, Romania. Kaliningrad Oblast bumps against Poland and Lithuania. Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland border Belarus to their east.

15. NATO has 30 member states. European NATO members not in the EU (8) are Albania, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. See Staff, “What is NATO,” NATO OTAN, (n.d.), available at <https://www.nato.int>; and Staff, “European Union,” *Wikipedia*, (n.d.), available at <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

16. The Finns employed “Motti” tactics in the forests bordering Russia during the Winter War of 1940 against the Red Army. A Motti had three broad phases. First, reconnaissance determined the length and composition of the Soviet columns and the form of march. Then, the weakest parts of the formation would be targeted for attack. Once the attack(s) commenced, obstacle plans stopped Red Army reinforcements from joining the combat and prevented the escape of engaged segmented elements. Finally, if a segment was weakened sufficiently or broken into even smaller segments, the Finns would attack to annihilation. For an excellent general reprise of Finnish tactics during the Winter War see: Iskander Rehman’s “Lessons from the Winter War: Frozen Grit and Finland’s Fabian Defense,” *War on the Rocks*, (July 2016), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

17. Napoleon’s marshals and generals of the Grande Armée often conducted incognito “staff rides” in peacetime to fill in the gaps that their topographical maps could not fill regarding potential future lines of march. John R. Elting, *Swords Around the Throne: Napoleon’s Grande Armée*, (New York: De Capo Press, 1988).

18. Pre-staged equipment and munitions are maintained, repaired, and updated by professional contractors, and security for the most part is provided by the Norwegian military.

19. “Modern-day foraging” might be a strange term to use. Pejorative connotations are easy to attach to the word “foraging” all too easily evoking images of looting and pillaging from earlier conflicts. “Living off the economy” and/or relying on locals for food, water, and occasionally fuel may carry “optical” and informational dangers. That said, “modern-day foraging” certainly sounds more interesting and catchy than contracting, but the public affairs officers will have to be on their game.

20. There may be some examples of “modern-day foraging” going on in Ukraine.

21. The NATO treaty’s Article 5, known also as “collective defense,” obligates treaty members to protect each other—an attack on one ally is considered an attack on all. For the exact verbiage of the article see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm#5.

