

# Not Yet Openly at War, But Still Mostly at Peace

Exploit the opportunity to become the 21st century force that our Nation needs<sup>1</sup>

by LtCol Scott Cuomo, Capt Olivia Garard, Maj Jeff Cummings, & LtCol Noah Spataro

The Marine Corps' current amphibious paradigm was born almost a century ago. At the time, bold leaders recognized a compelling need for change and exploited an opportunity to make our Service relevant to the needs of the Navy and our Nation.<sup>2</sup> Ever since, capability advancements have been integrated with new concepts and nested within our amphibious doctrine. From the Higgins boat—which enabled large-scale amphibious forcible entry operations—to close air support, air reconnaissance, radio communications, helicopter-borne assaults, and AAVs, all of these evolutionary changes helped to make the Navy-Marine Corps Team a significant value add for U.S. policymakers. The progression in the 1960s to incorporate Marine Amphibious Units and then to episodically rotating MEUs in the 1980s did the same.

Today, we believe our Service has another once-in-a-century opportunity to return to being the most relevant for the Navy and our Nation. Exploiting this opportunity, however, will first require our Service to accept that the current national security and defense strategies now describe a threat environment that limited capacity, episodic MEUs and reactionary, large-scale MEBs are unable to adequately address.<sup>3</sup> These strategies grapple with a world where authoritarian regimes—including one whose economy might eclipse the size of our own within

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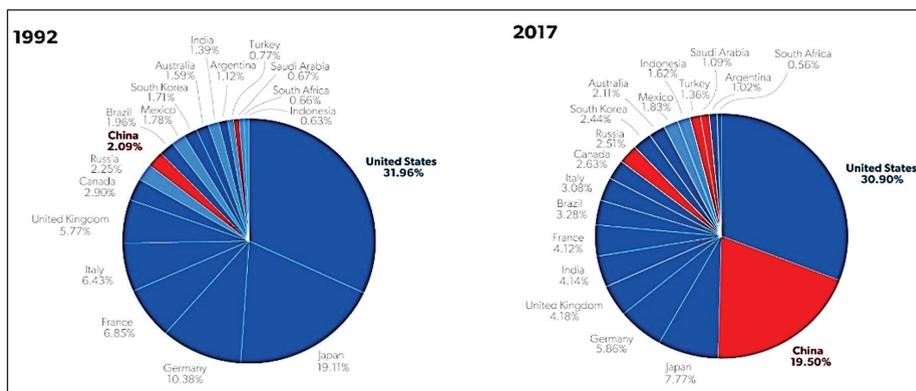
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**Persistently forward-partnered and distributed amphibious close combat units located throughout key maritime terrain and integrated with all elements of national power are essential to our Corps' future. (Photo by Sgt Devin Andrews.)**



**Figure 1. The charts illustrate a comparison of G-20 member country share of the “total G-20 gross domestic product” between 1992 and 2017. China’s impressive growth has heavily influenced the new U.S. national security and defense strategies.<sup>4</sup>**

the next decade—increasingly challenge the rules-based international order that has benefitted our Nation for the past 70-plus years. (See Figure 1.) They also grapple with a situation where we are challenged by “an ever more lethal and disruptive battlefield, combined across domains, and conducted at increasing speed and reach.”<sup>5</sup>

Our Service’s current force design remains inherently framed by a large-scale, two MEB amphibious joint forcible entry operation (JFEO) foundation. This framework must evolve concomitant to these new challenges and their “increasing speed and reach.”<sup>6</sup> The current force design framework has not been updated to incorporate the threat’s compressed O-O-D-A loop where ubiquitous sensing is not militarily unique but commercially enabled leading to sense-to-decision loops (human or otherwise) occurring at machine speed.<sup>7</sup> Nor does it account for the reality that the threat’s lethality ranges are now measured in hundreds to thousands of miles.<sup>8</sup> As such, our Corps’ current approach to manning, equipping, and training largely disregards the threat our Navy must face to get us into a position of operational relevance. It also disregards what the Navy must do to provide sustenance and protection for the projecting force.<sup>9</sup>

With these facts in mind, this article’s purpose is four-fold: (1) to further explain why our Service’s current two MEB amphibious JFEO organizing construct is antiquated, (2) to present

a new “big idea”<sup>10</sup> for our Corps based on the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* intent and its “global operating model” framework, (3) to help visualize the big idea moving from theory to practice, and (4) to provide eight recommendations to implement this new big idea opportunity on behalf of the American people.

### **A Valuable Amphibious Paradigm That No Longer Solves the Right Problem**

When assessing future U.S. maritime capability requirements, a 2017 Center for a New American Security (CNAS)

report stated, “The Marines need to find a new role for themselves, separate and distinct from joint forcible entry/ amphibious operations or once again risk extinction.”<sup>11</sup> Defense experts from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) previously reached a similar conclusion. In a report written for the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, titled “Strategy for a Post-Power Projection Era,” they wrote:

Given projected resource constraints ... as well as the decreasing value of many instruments of traditional power projection, the United States should also divest of those legacy forces that are unlikely to be survivable or effective in robust A2/AD environments: large surface combatants that are intended to project power against land-targets from close-in ranges ... short-range tactical aircraft that depend on vulnerable forward bases ... high signature amphibious assault forces that deploy vulnerable landing craft and require large, secure beachheads; [and] heavy ground combat brigades that have immense logistical requirements.<sup>12</sup>

During his tenure in charge of the Pentagon, former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates reinforced both reports’ conclusions when sharing his skepticism of policymakers *ever* ordering Marines



**Does this February 2018 COBRA GOLD amphibious forcible entry operation exercise appropriately account for the current strategic guidance and operational environment? (Photo by Sgt Olivia Ortiz.)**

to conduct a large-scale storming of a beach again.<sup>13</sup> That skepticism would likely only be attenuated by our principal competitor's ongoing intensive military modernization program and the resulting erosion of comparative advantage long enjoyed, if not assumed, by our policymakers.<sup>14</sup>

Crashing head-first into this surface, the 2016 *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: HQMC) describes the Service's requirement to conduct "large-scale, forcible entry operations ... provided by up to two MEBs."<sup>15</sup> A year later, writers assigned to the staffs of Combat Development and Integration Command and Marine Corps Intelligence Activity similarly explained their belief in the Service narrative position associated with fighting "in major operations to include two MEB JFEO."<sup>16</sup> In 2018, our Service's posture statement to Congress stated, "38 L-Class Amphibious warships are required to meet a 2.0 MEB Joint Forcible Entry requirement."<sup>17</sup> What may come as a surprise to some *Gazette* readers, this two MEB amphibious JFEO force design foundation, despite the occasional indications<sup>18</sup> that our Service would embrace prioritizing disaggregated,<sup>19</sup> dispersed,<sup>20</sup> or distributed<sup>21</sup> operations, has remained the force development aim point for decades. As just one case in point, in 2006 Service leaders explained to Congress that "to support Joint Forcible Entry Operations, the Marine Corps shipbuilding requirement is two amphibious MEB Assault Echelons."<sup>22</sup> In other words, regardless of what and how much has changed in the international security environment, the Marine Corps still holds steady to the belief that our force design must be married to multi-MEB amphibious JFEO. This framework is constraining the necessary conceptual and organizational adaptation required to honor the threats our Nation currently faces.

This is not a new problem for the Marine Corps. Let us rewind the clock 73 years. In July 1946, Gen Roy S. Geiger, a Marine legend who commanded III Amphibious Corps a year earlier in the Battle for Okinawa, was the senior Marine present at an atomic weapons test at the Bikini Atoll in the western

Marshall Islands. The test was named OPERATION CROSSROADS and the purpose was to determine the effects of a potential adversary's atomic weapons on warships.<sup>23</sup> More than 90 ships and other craft served as the targets during the test. After one of the atomic weapons exploded 520 feet above the objective area, five ships sank and 80 percent of those remaining received severe physical damage. Had the ships contained Ma-

long-range precision weapons that did not exist when Gen Geiger wrote his letter.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Michael Beckley recently explained, "The geographic reality is that Chinese forces can occupy North Korea before U.S. reinforcements even mobilize for an attack." The myriad challenges mount, "China has at least 150,000 troops perched ... only sixty miles from North Korea's main nuclear sites and two-thirds of its missile sites."<sup>27</sup>

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lines and Sailors embarked, observers concluded that radiation effects would have incapacitated the majority of them. After observing the test and contemplating a world with increasing numbers of such destructive weapons, Gen Geiger sent a letter to the Commandant. He stated, "future amphibious operations will be undertaken by much smaller expeditionary forces, which will be highly trained and lightly equipped, and transported by air or submarine."<sup>24</sup> Notably absent, is any mention, much less overwhelming budgetary prioritization, of any type of high-water speed, amphibious armored fighting vehicle.

Since Gen Geiger sent his letter 73 years ago, U.S. policymakers have only ordered a *single* large-scale amphibious forcible entry operation that even remotely fits a multi-MEB JFEO description. This mission occurred 69 years ago, at Inchon in South Korea against North Korean Army troops.<sup>25</sup> The North Korean Army remains one of the potential adversaries used by our Corps to justify why American taxpayers should continue to invest in a two MEB amphibious JFEO capability. Yet, today its military has both anywhere from 20 to 60 nuclear weapons and

The context in and technologies with which the only large-scale amphibious forcible entry operation took place are vastly different from any perceived operations that might take place today to the point that such context, like what is described by Beckley, negates its very political feasibility.

The overall global proliferation of long-range precision weapons, early warning surveillance systems that can track ship movements by the second, and especially nuclear weapons, are likely the primary reasons why Secretary Gates and the CNAS and CSBA scholars challenged our Service's decades-old multi-MEB amphibious JFEO organizational design and associated investments. These facts are also likely why Congress, in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), mandated that the Pentagon provide the American people with an assessment describing the "ability of power projection platforms to survive and effectively perform the highest priority operational missions described in the *National Defense Strategy*."<sup>28</sup> Additionally, they are likely why the Senate-approved 2019 NDAA language required the Pentagon to both describe "the feasibility of the current

plans and investments by the Navy and Marine Corps to operate and defend their sea bases in contested environments” and to determine “whether amphibious forced entry operations against advanced peer competitors should remain an enduring mission for the joint force considering the stressing operational nature and significant resource requirements.”<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, Congressional pressure is mounting to explain why American taxpayers should continue spending more than \$43 billion annually on a Marine Corps. The pressure has reached a level such that, after reading the Senate’s recent NDAA challenge to our Service’s multi-MEB amphibious JFEO foundation, one long-time defense observer wrote an article, “Wither the Marines.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Congress’s overall confusion about our Corps’ future value has led to multiple members openly questioning what we do for the Nation.<sup>31</sup> For example, Representative Mike Gallagher, a Marine intelligence officer and one of our legislative branch’s most ardent Naval Service advocates, has recently written multiple articles repeatedly requesting “a new story about what the future fleet will do and how it will differ from today’s fleet.”<sup>32</sup> He has also expressed in testimony his serious concerns about how our Corps’ operational concepts and budgetary priorities are “always on the wrong side of the cost curve at every step,” especially with respect to our primary competitors.<sup>33</sup>

In short, our Corps’ two MEB amphibious JFEO mission focus and organizing construct, while at one time incredibly innovative and in demand by U.S. policymakers, has increasingly fewer friends given changes in the international security environment and our reluctance to evolve with the changing character of warfare. One of our Corps’ legends predicted this would be the case more than 70 years ago. It is time to reimagine ourselves—and our Corps now has the perfect opportunity to do so.

### A New Marine Corps Big Idea to More Effectively Enable the NDS

Fortunately, the NDS provides the structure through which our Corps

can creatively destroy and reimagine itself to become an essential component of the joint force for many decades to come.<sup>34</sup> Its global operating model is built on four layers—contact, blunt, surge, and homeland—and highlights the necessity of continuous global coverage in key strategic locations.<sup>35</sup> The NDS describes forces in the contact

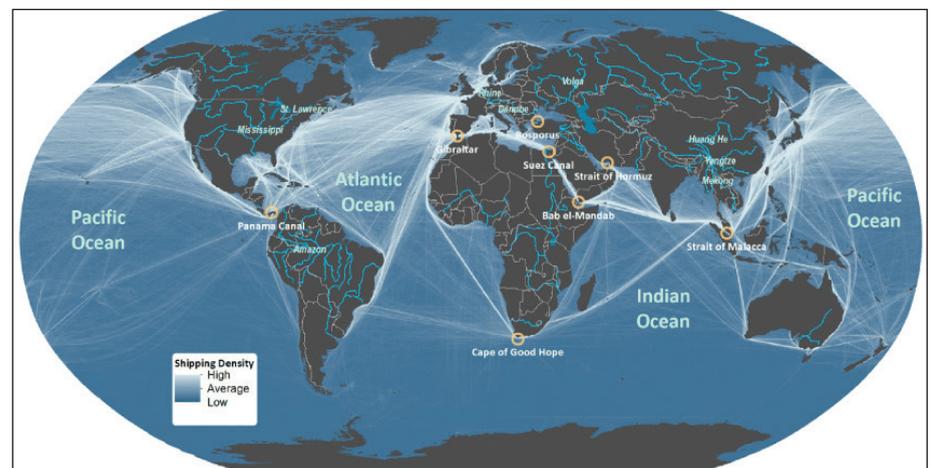
**“For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.”**  
—Sir Walter Raleigh

layer as those “designed to help us compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict.” Those in the blunt layer are to “delay, degrade, or deny adversary aggression.” Surge layer forces are described as “war-winning” and able to “manage conflict escalation.” Finally, forces in the homeland layer are specifically focused on defending United States’ territory.<sup>37</sup>

Our Corps’ senior leaders have explained that to operate effectively in

the contact and blunt layers “Marine forces must be combat-credible and oriented on warfighting to provide credible deterrence.”<sup>38</sup> They have also explained that these forces “must posture in a manner consistent with being the Nation’s sentinels—preventing large-scale war and managing crises as an extension of the Naval force.”<sup>39</sup> We argue that fully embracing these words—and prioritizing first and foremost dominating the time domain through a persistent offensive defense-in-depth force design—are the foundation of what should be our Corps’ new big idea. This persistent engagement<sup>40</sup> will afford our Corps the ability to leverage our maneuver warfare philosophy through the use of small, independent, comprehensively lethal units. Properly employed, these units will be more than capable of deterring the potentiality of revisionist powers attempting to seize strategic terrain as part of a *fait accompli* strategy.

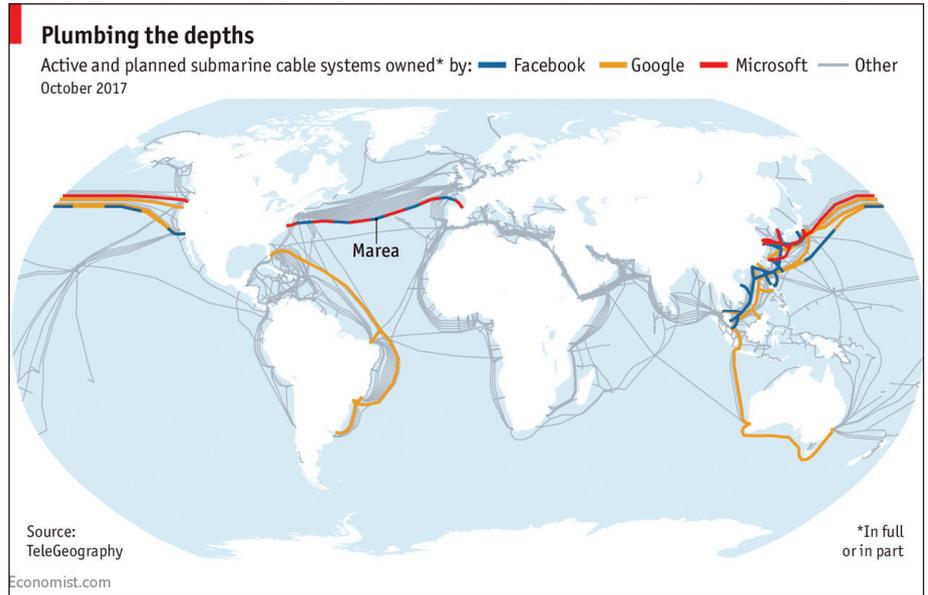
The NDS global operating model (See Figure 2.) is a significant departure from the previous joint operations construct in which operations were episodically employed and phased in spatially circumscribed and predetermined areas.<sup>41</sup> In the past, phases ended along prescribed timelines. It was contingent. The underlying assumption was that forces were able to step outside of the construct itself, to remove themselves from the portion of the world where violent political action transpired. But as Robert Kaplan observes in *The Re-*



**Figure 2. Maritime traffic flows throughout the world, particularly in and out of the United States, help explain the Global Operating Model logic.<sup>36</sup>**

*venge of Geography*, “The core drama of our own age ... is the steady filling up of space, making for a truly closed geography where states and militaries have increasingly less room to hide.”<sup>42</sup> This is one reason why the new model is global in contrast with yesterday’s theater operating model. (See Figure 3.)

But there are other reasons. As the *National Cyber Strategy* elucidates, “Economic security is inherently tied to our national security.”<sup>43</sup> Americans cannot afford for the Pentagon to segment a battlespace when U.S. global trade with foreign countries totaled \$5.2 trillion in 2017 and relies on worldwide instantaneous connectivity via a limited number of strategic maritime choke-points.<sup>44</sup> Nor can Americans afford for the Pentagon to try to completely cordon off the homeland as immune from the same persistent competition and potential conflict indicated by the model’s layers. We exist in a world with global interconnection, persistent surveillance, and ubiquitous signals that challenge the freedom to maneuver to which the U.S. military has become accustomed.<sup>46</sup> Consider, for example, that commercial satellite companies such as



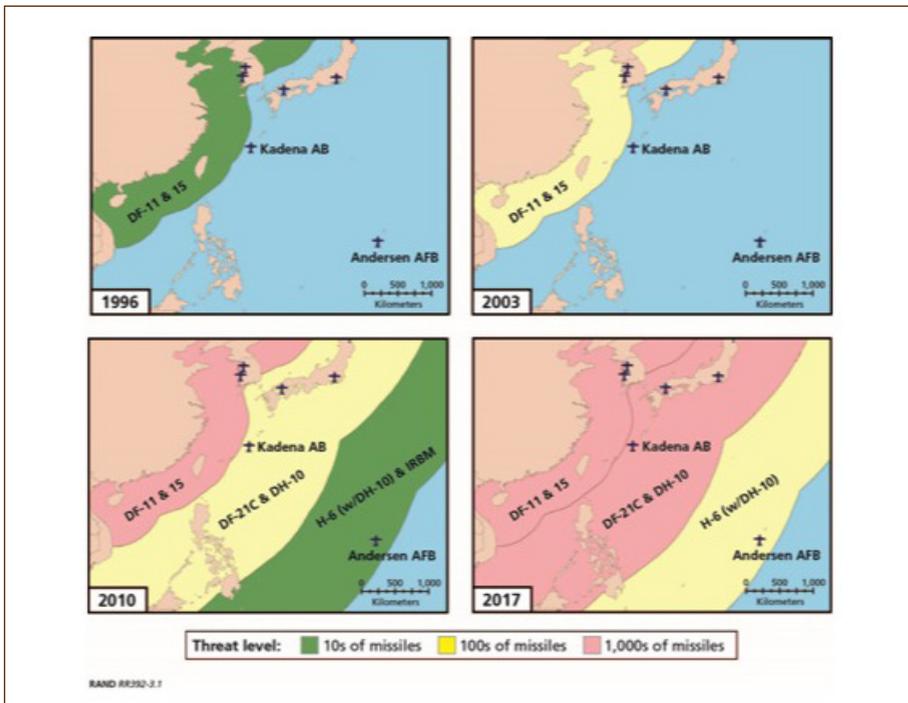
**Figure 3. More than 99 percent of global digital communication traffic moves via undersea cables, including those owned by U.S. companies such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft.<sup>44</sup>**

*Planet Labs* capture “every square foot of the globe, sending 1.4 million images ... to Earth for processing, generating unprecedented perspective, awareness, and insight about the world below” every day.<sup>47</sup> Consider, as well, that such sensing and connectivity technologies have enabled ordinary citizens to reveal in real-time both the highly classified

Osama Bin Laden raid and the most recent U.S. presidential visit to Iraq.<sup>48</sup>

When military planners were able to circumscribe “over there” from the continental United States, the Marine Corps was afforded a temporal freedom for mobilization. The time and effort required to deploy forces, including the dozens—if not hundreds—of ships needed for multi-MEB-sized amphibious JFEO, were uncontested *until* the forces were in the area of operations. This is no longer an acceptable nor a realistic planning assumption, as RAND’s most recent U.S.-China military scorecard makes abundantly clear.<sup>50</sup> This is why we believe our Commandant has emphasized the future challenging nature of “needing to fight to get to the fight,” if Marines are not already where they need to be when the fight begins.<sup>51</sup> (See Figure 4.)

This is also why we believe the foundation of our Corps’ new big idea should anchor on dominating the time domain<sup>52</sup> by employing highly maneuverable, forward-partnered amphibious close combat units<sup>53</sup> that operate persistently throughout the contact layer’s key maritime terrain<sup>54</sup> with a Clausewitzian attack-defense<sup>55</sup> mindset.<sup>56</sup> These units’ Marines should maximize the emerging technological spectrum, including but not limited to remotely piloted, artificial intelligence-enabled scalable



**Figure 4. Chinese missile capabilities developments in the Western Pacific between 1996 and 2017.<sup>49</sup>**

autonomous, and loitering munitions systems.<sup>57</sup> They should also be seamlessly integrated with the Navy as part of a Department-wide combined littoral warfare strike force effort, similar in

mobile ground-launched cruise missile system with a range of between 500 to 5,500 kilometers,” and the distributed amphibious close combat units’ sensing and communications skills, would

interests, they would quickly find “the width of the killing zone” that they have to maneuver through “would be measured, not in hundreds or thousands of yards, but in hundreds or thousands of miles.”<sup>64</sup>

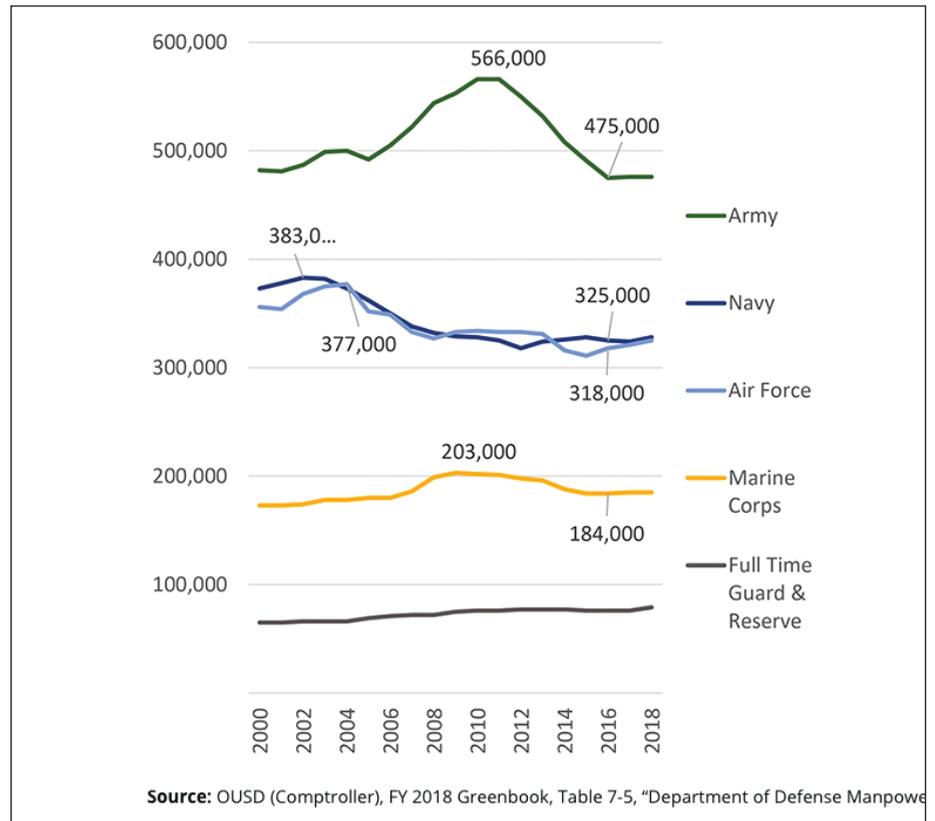
The hours away capabilities would incorporate a variety of sea- and air-delivered strike capabilities, if not already located in potential firing positions at the start of the crisis. The few days or weeks away capabilities would include L-class ship-based, Navy-Marine Corps units that would have increased potential to execute missions such as long-range raids, TRAP, and embassy reinforcement due to the Service implementing key changes such as the Close Combat Lethality Task Force guidance,<sup>65</sup> fielding Block IV upgrades for the F-35B,<sup>66</sup> and fully embracing manned-unmanned teaming.<sup>67</sup> (See Figure 5.) Importantly, the amphibious close combat units would decrease the total capacity need for L-class ships while increasing their survivability. Reducing from the current goal of 38 to

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many ways to Wayne Hughes’ Minute-men<sup>58</sup> squadron concept and what Milan Vego recommended in his seminal article on the world’s littoral regions.<sup>59</sup> In this case, these persistently forward-partnered littoral strike forces would actively deny key terrain while leveraging relatively inexpensive amphibious fast attack combatants,<sup>60</sup> some of which would be equipped individually with fifteen to twenty Marine-sized close combat units capable of collecting on, striking, and maneuvering against adversaries at unprecedented ranges both at sea and ashore.<sup>61</sup> The other amphibious fast attack combatants would be equipped with long-range anti-ship missiles to target adversary ships.<sup>62</sup>

We envision this new littoral strike contact layer capability to be supported by a variety of blunt layer forces. These forces can be anywhere from mere minutes, to hours, to potentially a few days or weeks away. The mere minutes away blunt layer capabilities would include theater- or global-range joint force cyber and all-weather sea-based and ground-launched conventional missile fire support. The latter of these two capabilities, enabled by the anticipated U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (particularly the conventional missile aspect), Congress’s 2018 NDAA mandate for the Pentagon to “establish a program of record to develop a conventional road-

create a daunting situation for potential adversaries.<sup>63</sup> If they attempted to use overt military force to overrun one of the contact layer units, to challenge a U.S. mutual defense treaty, or to threaten any other vital U.S. security



**Figure 5. While USMC end strength has increased since 2001, the Navy’s has decreased by ~60,000 Sailors.<sup>68</sup>**

25 L-class ships makes available “blue-green” force structure, procurement dollars, and sustainment resources to field the more than 100 amphibious fast attack combatants required for the close combat units that would anchor the contact layer force. What’s more, this change, like a fractal, enables the Naval force to exponentially increase persistent and cost-imposing power projection.

Of course, these contact layer forces, as well as those that might be called in from the blunt layer to support them, would be backed by America’s superior nuclear arsenal, diplomatic acumen, and economic strength. They are but one element, albeit an essential one, in a multi-layered, multi-dimensional approach to compel our adversaries to our will in the service of our national interests. Overall, this new big idea focused on dominating the time domain and leveraging a persistent, forward-partnered offensive defense-in-depth mindset would allow the joint force to turn current revanchist powers’ A2/AD [anti-access/area denial] advantages upside down and inside out. The big idea would also categorically deny a swift military victory to any irredentist action against our joint force, U.S. treaty ally, or strategic partner.

### Moving the Big Idea from Theory to Practice

To see how this new persistent amphibious capability would fit into the *NDS*’s global operating model, let us imagine a world in which the Marine Corps embraces its implementation in at least five strategic locations: the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el Mandeb Strait, the Barents Sea, and the Bering Strait.

The South China Sea is simultaneously a place where more than \$1.2 trillion of the U.S. economy flows annually and one of the top potential great power conflict flashpoints in the world.<sup>69</sup> It is also a region where the U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander has testified China now controls “in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”<sup>70</sup> Recalling Thucydides, Frank Hoffman described Beijing exploiting its position in the region in similar manner to a modern day Melian Dialogue with Chinese

***“It follows then as certain as that night succeeds the day, that without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious.”***

**—General George Washington**

characteristics: “The mighty do what they can and the small suffer what they must.”<sup>71</sup> Recently, a Chinese warship sailed within 45 yards of a U.S. Navy destroyer as it was executing a freedom of navigation exercise in the area.<sup>72</sup> A few days prior to that incident, U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers conducted a show of force in this same region.<sup>73</sup> These actions were in response to China’s growing militarization of artificial islands in the strategic region and subsequent threats to U.S. and allied military and civilian vessels operating in it.<sup>74</sup> These exchanges are clear examples of “gray zone” or “below the threshold of conflict” contact layer activities. Despite all the attention these actions have gained, Patrick Cronin and Hunter Stires recently identified a critical problem with them: without persistence, U.S. military activities that attempt to reinforce freedom of navigation or object to Chinese territorial claims are ineffective because they are “inherently transitory.”<sup>75</sup> Consequently, they argue, these actions “do not have an appreciable impact on the behavior of local civilian mariners and aviators, who will once again be subject to Chinese harassment as soon as the Americans sail [or fly] away.”<sup>76</sup>

The foundational problem with the current U.S. approach is the lack of an integrated strategy that appreciates the competition with China is, first and foremost, one over the rules-based order, especially in the global maritime commons. Implementing the new big idea will help fix this problem. Rap-

idly maneuverable Marine close combat units embarked with Naval forces on fast-attack combatants and serving under a joint force maritime component commander (JFMCC) would enable executing a generational littoral “counterinsurgency campaign” similar to the one for which Cronin and Stires called.<sup>77</sup> This capability would be “coupled with vigorous diplomacy” focused on achieving, as they describe, “an essential victory for U.S. and allied arms and the rules-based international order they defend.”<sup>78</sup> It is important to emphasize that what we are proposing can only work if these amphibious close combat units are persistently located and thoroughly integrated with the rest of the elements of national power and our allies and partners.

Let us now shift 1,250 nautical miles to the southwest to the Malacca Strait. This strait is described as the 21st Century “Fulda Gap.”<sup>79</sup> More than 15 million barrels of oil pass through the strait each day, including around 82 percent of China’s 9 million-barrel daily import requirement. (See Figure 6.)<sup>80</sup> Beyond oil, around 25 percent of total global trade by volume moves daily through the strait, along with more than 30 terabits per second of transoceanic data.<sup>81</sup> Needless to say, the Strait of Malacca is strategic maritime terrain—to the extent that to control the Strait of Malacca is to control the South China Sea. Thus, Beijing’s efforts to economically sway into its orbit countries located adjacent to the strait, such as Malaysia, should not be a surprise.<sup>82</sup> Nor should China’s efforts to develop closer relationships with the Royal Malaysian Navy, which currently includes providing littoral missions ships, a variety of weapons, and increased bi-lateral training exercises.<sup>83</sup> Beijing’s aggressive push to establish a foothold adjacent to the Strait of Malacca is not isolated to Malaysia though. It is increasingly expanding across the countries of Southeast Asia, many of whom are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>84</sup> Ominously, a recent poll of ASEAN member countries found two-thirds of the respondents believe U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia has declined and one-third have “little or

no confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and regional security provider.<sup>85</sup>

Now let us imagine a Marine Corps that embraces the proposed new big idea in a geo-strategic crisis where China sought to seize part of a treaty ally or partner's territory near the Strait of Malacca. This location possesses Reliable Acoustic Path arrays that provide

embarked on naval shipping, are sailing toward the location at approximately sixteen knots.<sup>92</sup> This force is 300 miles from its expected objective. At this point, the JFMCC has around twenty hours to develop and implement a plan that helps U.S. policymakers blunt the attack.

A forward-partnered amphibious close combat company—composed of around 200 Marines trained to oper-

MAGTF—is prepared to sense, swarm, and if necessary, neutralize adversary naval vessels at ranges out to multiple dozen miles.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, this unit has a limited number of platforms that range out to 500 miles while carrying up to 20-pound payloads.<sup>94</sup>

Simultaneous with this mini-MAGTF's actions, the JFMCC orders three more close combat companies to insert into a larger offensive defense-in-depth. MV-22s fly one of these units in from an amphibious ship located 500 miles away and it arrives 3 hours later. A second close combat company inserts as part of a littoral strike force from a separate ship and is in position within a similar timeline. This company is prepared to blunt the adversary attack on land or from their fast attack combatants with long-range anti-ship missiles. And in coordination with our allies, the third close combat company launches via MV-22s from a new British naval base in another part of the contact layer and covers 1,200 miles to arrive 5 hours later.<sup>95</sup>

The JFMCC, along with U.S. and allied policymakers, now has a force of more than 1,000 personnel on the ground, armed with nearly 1,000 loitering munitions, as well as grenades, rifles, machine guns, rockets, mortars, and long-range anti-ship missiles. This force is supported by the MAGTF's growing medium-altitude long-endurance UAS capabilities and prepared to engage the adversary from every direction, at ranges as far out as 500 miles.<sup>96</sup> It also has the capability to instantly leverage theater- and global-range joint cyber and conventional missile fires. Moreover, because of the innovative efforts of young logistics Marines, this force can 3D print hundreds more loitering munitions from locations near their defensive positions.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, autonomous vehicles can deliver these weapons directly to the distributed close combat units.

At this point, the adversary has ten hours remaining on its movement across the ocean. American and allied policymakers communicate to leaders in Beijing that a force is in position and prepared to uphold international law and U.S. mutual defense treaty obligations. What do you think the Chinese leaders

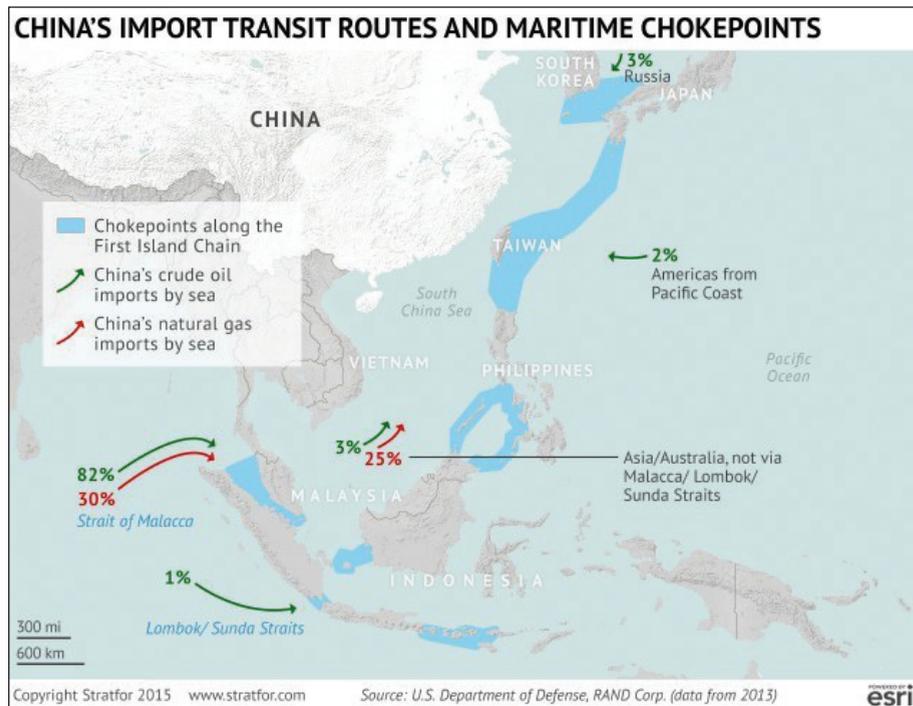


Figure 6. Key maritime terrain and how the Chinese economy is fueled by way of the sea.<sup>86</sup>

intelligence on submarine movements<sup>87</sup> and undersea network nodes.<sup>88</sup> More than 220 undersea cable systems are responsible for over 99 percent of all transoceanic digital communication.<sup>89</sup> Of the 685 undersea cable network nodes—where the cables transition between land and sea—366 are located on islands, many of which are located in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>90</sup> U.S.-based digital communications' companies, who make millions of dollars daily due to these cables, protest against China's intentions and encourage the White House to respond.<sup>91</sup>

From U.S., allied, and commercial surveillance capabilities, imagine in this scenario the JFMCC responsible for the area receives information that many thousand Chinese assault troops,

ate in more than 12 separate teams—is already on the ground operating with special operations and allied forces in the country where the attack is expected. This is not a disingenuous scenario inject, but a fundamental aspect of this strategy and the Marine Corps' persistent engagement mindset. The JFMCC, in conjunction with the "country team," orders the Marines to move into positions to blunt the adversary assault. The Marines, with their partner forces who have trained to this scenario in previous exercises, move via organic all-terrain vehicles and local transportation to assume these positions three hours later. With more than 100 loitering munitions, located in dense vegetation, this close combat company—in essence, a revolutionary airfield-less mini-

would do next? We are inclined to think these Chinese policymakers would re-evaluate the outcome of their decisions and call off the attack. Regardless, our Corps' new amphibious forward-partnered capability would have strategic effects for our Nation. If the Chinese troops continue their movement, our reimagined mini-MAGTFs can monitor and affect them in real-time. This includes bringing overwhelming swarming firepower to bear should the Chinese troops cross our ally's twelve-mile international territorial boundary, or well beforehand. Additionally, if any of the adversary troops ever gets ashore, the Marines can then close with and destroy them with rifles, grenades, and bayonets. This is precisely the type of persistent capability that we envision our Corps, based on the proposed new big idea, possessing for our Nation.

Switching from this strategic vignette, let us move 4,000 nautical miles west to the Bab-el Mandeb Strait and see more opportunities to leverage the new big idea in the contact layer. Nearly 10 percent of the global oil supply—4.7 million barrels per day—passes between the 18 miles separating Ras Menheli, Yemen and Ras Siyyan, Djibouti.<sup>98</sup> Referred to as a “deadly geopolitical cocktail,” the strait is subject to everything from Somali pirates to Houthi anti-ship missile attacks spilling over from Yemen's ongoing civil war.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, China's first overseas military base, for “international obligations,” is located in Djibouti.<sup>100</sup> Unsurprisingly, China's “Belt and Road” initiative has significant infrastructure investment in Djibouti funded by predatory loans that indebt the country.<sup>101</sup> China also recently secured a 99-year lease for a port in Sri Lanka, providing its growing maritime force access to a key location along the main shipping route between the Bab-el Mandeb Strait (as well as the Strait of Hormuz, another piece of key maritime terrain) and the Malacca Strait.<sup>102</sup>

China's base in Djibouti is only eight miles away from American forces at Camp Lemonnier and, as the U.S. National Security Advisor recently highlighted, is already interfering with their activities by conducting laser interference against pilots operating in the

region.<sup>103</sup> The same counterinsurgency model recommended by Cronin and Stires applies here, as do the combined force littoral strike capabilities for which Hughes and Vego have called. By embracing the new big idea, Marines will be able to simultaneously help support the Navy and special operations forces, reassure strategic partners, and counter Beijing's attempts to increase its influence in the region.

melt.<sup>108</sup> This is not a region unfamiliar to our Corps. Recently, our Service increased its persistent presence in Norway conducting exercises while maintaining an established Marine Corps Pre-Positioning Program-Norway.<sup>109</sup>

With the proposed new big idea, we suggest a modification to deter Russia and to increase cooperation with our allies. Currently, the Norwegian Coast Guard only has one vessel, yet it requires

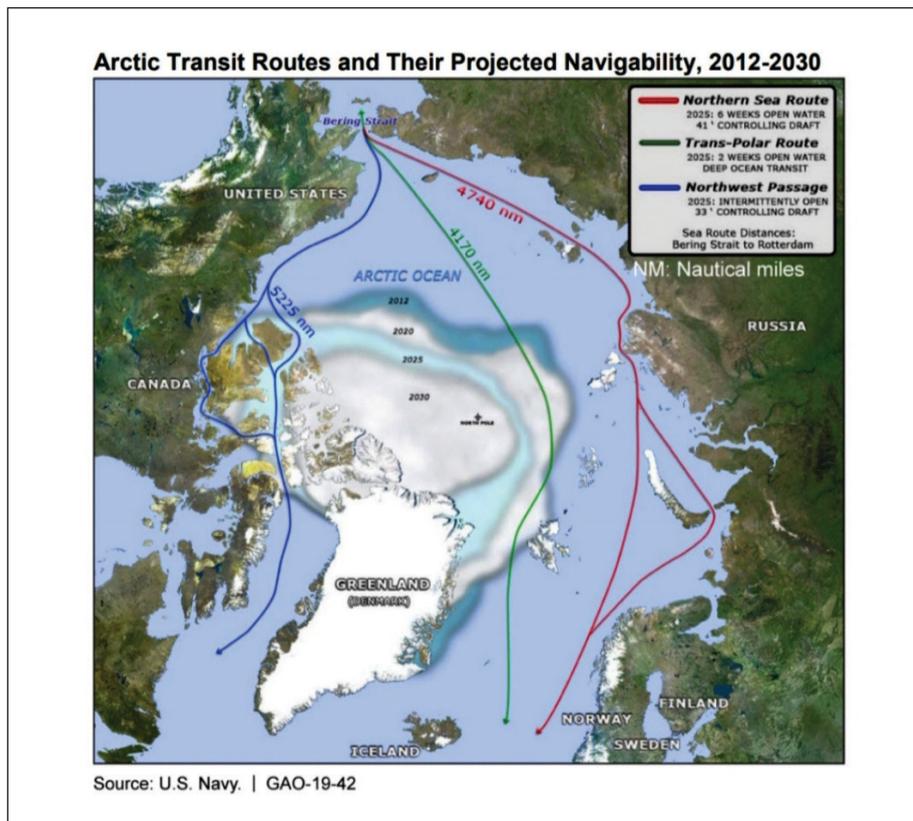


Figure 7. Arctic sea routes.<sup>104</sup>

Spinning the globe again, we travel north 4,000 nautical miles to Svalbard, Norway. (See Figure 7.) This was the site of a number of military operations during World War II, most importantly as key maritime terrain for Germany to maintain war weather stations.<sup>105</sup> Svalbard is 550 nautical miles north of Murmansk and adjacent to the Barents Sea, where Russia is constructing artificial islands.<sup>106</sup> Svalbard is also home to the Doomsday Vault for the world's seeds.<sup>107</sup> It has the northern-most set of undersea cables that are likely to be networked as the Arctic continues to

more to conduct all the operations required for Svalbard.<sup>110</sup> This provides an excellent partner mission opportunity for an augmenting persistent littoral strike force. Moreover, last year Russia conducted an exercise simulating an invasion into Svalbard, which if carried out could invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>111</sup> Russian possession of Svalbard would enable their A2/AD capabilities, protect their nuclear submarines, and enable sea control into the Barents Sea complicating NATO efforts. We believe amphibious-based close combat forces, with both their

organic lethal fires and instantaneous access to theater- and global-range joint cyber and conventional missile capabilities, would serve as a vital deterrent to help prevent such a scenario from ever happening in the first place.

Turning now toward the other entrance to the Arctic, 2,100 nautical miles over the North Pole, we find the Ber-

America's coast.<sup>117</sup> These forces could also partner with our Canadian allies who have similar challenges in the region.

These are just five pieces out of dozens of potential key maritime terrain locations. The selection of the South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandeb Strait, Barents Sea, and Bering

phy, achieving this powerful, persistent presence requires fundamental change to how our Service thinks about its mission and relevance to the Navy and our Nation.

### Top Eight Actions Required to Implement the New Big Idea

With the new strategic guidance and big idea vision in mind, what follows are the top eight actions that our Corps should embrace to maximize its future value for our Nation:

*Embrace expanding the competitive space.*<sup>118</sup> Instead of the current episodic MEU and multi-MEB amphibious JFEO surge capability focus, philosophically commit to prioritizing contact and blunt layer missions that maximize our Nation's ability to constantly compete with revisionist powers and violent extremist organizations.<sup>119</sup> (See Figure 8.) This will enable forward persistence in ways that reassure allies and partners, while deterring and, if necessary, helping to defeat potential adversaries in short order. The current lack of persistent and distributed presence near key maritime terrain means our Service has much work to do to achieve this goal.

*Double down on reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare.* Our big idea not only proposes a way to leverage the changing character of war in our favor, but also the very structure of democracy, capital-

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## ***Given the world's increasingly closed geography, achieving this powerful, persistent presence requires fundamental change to how our Service thinks about its mission and relevance to the Navy and our Nation.***

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ing Strait. Unlike during the Cold War, when sea ice concentrations in the region prevented dependable transit routes for trade, cargo shipping along the Northern Sea Route in 2017 achieved a record high of 9.7 million tons.<sup>112</sup> This was a 35 percent increase from 2016, with experts forecasting much greater growth in the years ahead. U.S. Navy strategist, Rachael Gosnell, recently commented that the "Bering Strait will open for an extended period starting around 2020, the Northern Sea Route around 2025, and the Transpolar Route around 2030."<sup>113</sup> She also described how plentiful natural resources have already sparked great interest in the region. Russia is acting on these interests by conducting major infrastructure building efforts and large naval exercises.<sup>114</sup> China has also employed its navy in the region.<sup>115</sup> Unfortunately, despite this key maritime terrain being adjacent to Alaska, neither the U.S. Navy nor the Marine Corps have a visible, persistent presence in the region. U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan, a Marine representing the state of Alaska, has increasingly expressed concerns about these deficiencies during Congressional testimony.<sup>116</sup> This is yet one more opportunity for our Corps to implement the proposed new big idea. In this case, our new mini-MAGTF littoral strike force proposal would help support an already over-tasked U.S. Coast Guard element protect 10,000 kilometers of U.S. coastline, which is 50 percent of

Strait should not imply that this is where competition might become conflict, but to serve as talismans for potential crisis spots. This analysis could have equally described maneuver in and around the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Bosphorus Strait, the Panama Canal, and the East China Sea, among many others. While it is unwise to debate precisely where or when a conflict trigger will occur, it is increasingly imperative to have a credible force at this point *first* and this force must be connected to the full might of our Nation. Given the world's increasingly closed geogra-



**Figure 8.** The icons on the map indicate the approximate location of the capital ship within each CSG or ARG as of 31 December 2018. Even if the other four ARG ships are operating in a distributed manner near key maritime terrain, major shortfalls remain throughout the contact layer.<sup>120</sup>

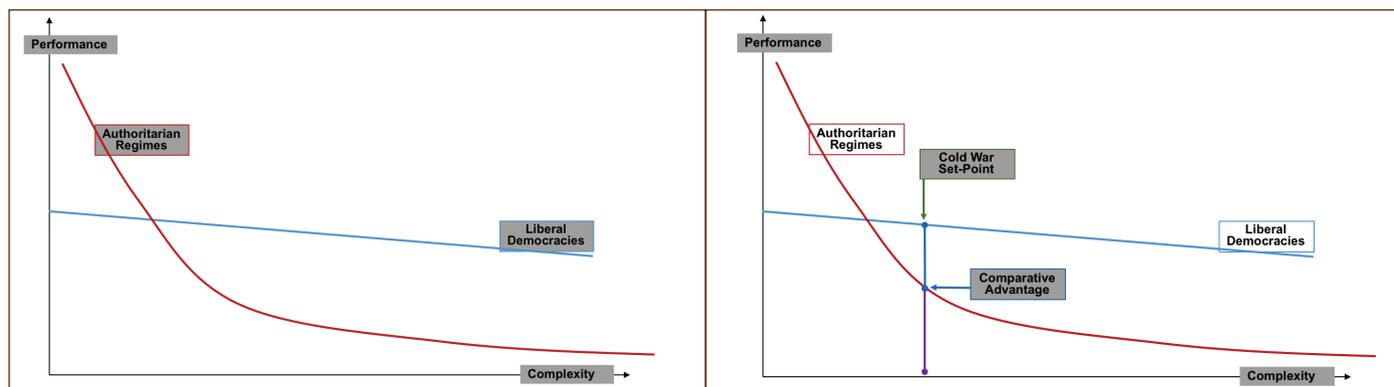


Figure 9. (Image by David Blair.)

izing on what David Blair has called the *Chaos Imperative*.<sup>121</sup> The *Chaos Imperative* is to liberal democracies as maneuver warfare is to the Marine Corps. It seeks to inject disorder into a system that requires order to perform. Just like *MCDP-1 Warfighting the Chaos Imperative* seeks to “create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.”<sup>122</sup> Calibrated chaos is one of our innate advantages in a great power competition with a centralized, repressive, and controlling authoritarian state such as China. It proposes a way to leverage the structure of our democratic system, like our warfighting philosophy, to outperform our enemy in deliberate chaos and complexity. In other words, calibrated chaos, as a principle, should be considered our best friend. The Marine Corps’ new big idea should strive to maximize the competitive advantages of this chaotic trade space. While the Generals’ war might belong to the Chinese General Staff, a Captains’ war, or even better, a Sergeants’ war, belongs to us.

Update our Service concepts in full partnership with the Navy. The ongoing “Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment” and “Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations” concept efforts are a start. These should be revised based on the *NDS* guidance, the forthcoming new *National Military Strategy*, in anticipation of the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty (again, with a particular focus on the implications of lifting the conventional missile constraints), and with a clear prioritization on maximizing the ability to provide persistent, distributed, and lethal capacity throughout the contact

layer’s key maritime terrain.<sup>123</sup> They should also be signed by the Secretary of the Navy, our Commandant, and the Chief of Naval Operations. Our Nation cannot afford any conceptual daylight between the Naval Services going forward.

Focus force design on supporting essential naval tasks as described in the Chief of Naval Operation’s recently published “A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.”<sup>124</sup> These tasks are near identical to those described by our 29th Commandant, Gen Alfred M. Gray and LtGen George J. Flynn in their 2015 “Naval Maneuver Warfare Linking Sea Control and Power Projection.”<sup>125</sup> Accordingly, let the multi-MEB amphibious JFEO organizing construct fade away into the history books. Focus, instead, on reinventing ourselves in conjunction with the Navy such that within the next 5 years the Naval force has more than 50 persistent, forward-deployed complementary sensing, screening, and transformatively lethal, mini-MAGTFs located in key maritime littoral regions. Redefine our Naval Service “readiness” metrics in this way as well.

Redesign the amphibious component of the 30-year Naval shipbuilding plan. As per Representative Gallagher’s repeated requests, work closely with the Navy and Congress to create a new plan that meets the *NDS* contact and blunt layer intent. Continuing to request only more billion-plus dollar amphibious ships, each operated by 400 to 1,000 Sailors, is unaffordable given current budget constraints. Nor does it address what is required for operational relevance

given the *NDS* guidance. The new plan should incorporate a more valuable amphibious shipping approach, which includes around 25 large “L” class ships (LHD/LHA/LPD) maintained at high readiness rates to operate in the blunt layer. And instead of replacing the current fleet of LSDs with the LPD Flight 2 ships at \$1.4 to \$1.6 billion each, request more than 100 relatively inexpensive amphibious fast attack combatants to enable simultaneous forward-partnered persistent operations throughout the contact layer’s key maritime terrain.<sup>126</sup>

Fully implement the *Close Combat Lethality Task Force* guidance.<sup>127</sup> The evolution and modernization of MAGTF small units in accordance with this guidance combines seamlessly with our Commandant’s intent to reinvigorate maneuver warfare. As such, it also enables adapting our forward deployed and forward stationed force posture, especially for units in the Western Pacific. Congress has already been informed that these forces need to become more lethal, maneuverable, and survivable.<sup>128</sup> These units should become the central components of the new big idea and the contact layer foundation, including the ability of forces within it to quickly transition to blunting activities.

Double down on our Corps’ growing relationship with *Special Operations Command*. Our Service is currently learning myriad invaluable lessons while working in ad hoc manners alongside the special operations community in multiple combat zones. In accordance with the new *Marine Corps—Special Operations Command Concept for Integration, Interdependence, and Interoperability*, these

lessons should be institutionalized.<sup>129</sup> They should also inform the new amphibious close combat units' capability development such that these forces can best reassure allies and partners located in the world's key littoral regions. This coordination reiterates to strategic competitors and violent extremist organizations alike that challenging the rules-based international order will not be tolerated and that any attempt to do so will be soundly defeated.

*Prioritize all aspects of manned-unmanned teaming.* The robotics and autonomous systems opportunities that now present themselves, largely derived from software defined commercial technologies, can enable the new amphibious close combat mini-MAGTFs with persistent sensing, communications, and fires.<sup>130</sup> Our Service should embrace the velocity of commercial advancements and what this means for affordable capability development through rapid prototyping and hypothesis validation while also adopting advanced manufacturing for iterative small batch production. Simultaneously, we should think deeply about how other MAGTF elements, both manned and unmanned, can support these Gen Geiger-envisioned smaller forces. As just one example, persistence, multi-thousand-mile range, and high reliability redefines on-station aviation support potential. A remotely piloted aircraft's time in the chinks now only requires minutes at a forward arming and refueling point in exchange for days of sensing, communications bridging, and effects thereby redefining sortie generation possibilities. This one capability allows reimagining what organic and scalable remoted services support is possible for these mini-MAGTFs. Scalability is provided by autonomous, line-of-sight, relayed, or even CONUS reachback leveraging networked capabilities across enterprises while gracefully degrading to essential services for the new close combat units. This, combined with the organic capabilities of the new amphibious close combat units, shifts the collective capability menu for tactical visionaries and strategists for the next century to iterate in numerous permutations and combinations.<sup>131</sup>

### Turning Crisis into Opportunity

One of the world's greatest innovators, Alexander Graham Bell, once said, "When one door closes, another door opens, but we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us."<sup>132</sup> Perhaps this quote applies to our Corps, too long yearning for the multi-MEB amphibious JFEO closed door to re-open anew and for being too satisfied with limited capacity, episodically rotating MEUs. Or, perhaps, given what our policymakers have tasked us to do, our Corps has been justifiably too focused on fighting in predominately land campaigns over the past 18 years to embrace a new amphibious paradigm. Regardless, our policymakers have now given us fundamentally different strategic guidance—and with this guidance comes an enormous opportunity for our Corps to reimagine itself through the open door that the Navy and our Nation need most. The eight recommended big idea actions provide the broad framework to help us exploit this opportunity.

By increasing our Service's ability to provide the Navy and U.S. policymakers with transformatively lethal amphibious close combat units, which are, simultaneously revolutionary mini-MAGTFs, we will ensure that the global operating model contact layer has the persistent, forward-partnered strategic forces required to meet the *NDS*'s intent. Additionally, by providing similarly transformative contributions to the joint force blunt layer, we will ensure that Marines can help counter adversary aggression reinforcing anywhere in the world within a week or two, if not in days, hours, or even in a minute or less. Combined, these new Marine Corps contact and blunt layer contributions will provide U.S. policymakers the most precious of all capabilities—time.

#### Notes

1. This article is a synthesis of the following five articles published in 2017 and 2018 on *War on the Rocks*: "Open Your Eyes and See the 21st Century MAGTF"; "Marines, Algorithms, and Ammo: Taking 'Team of Teams' to the

Contested Littorals"; "Marine Warbot Companies: Where Naval Warfare, the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and Close Combat Lethality Task Force Intersect"; "How the Marines Will Help the U.S. Navy and America's Allies Win the Great Indo-Pacific War of 2025"; and "Not Yet Openly at War, But Still Mostly at Peace: The Marine Corps' Roles and Missions In and Around Key Maritime Terrain." We are grateful to the *War on the Rocks*' Editor for permitting us to incorporate parts of these articles in this one. All five *War on the Rocks*' articles are available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

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