

2019 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: First Place

Deepening Interoperability

A proposal for a combined allied expeditionary strike group within the Indo-Pacific region

by Capt Eli J. Morales

To restore readiness and enhance interoperability, coalition partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region must assemble and deploy an expeditionary strike group (ESG) built from the capabilities and resources of each coalition partner and ally. The high operational tempo of the last decade has resulted in deferred maintenance and reduced readiness for Navy and Marine Corps units. In 2012, after the USS *Essex* (LHD-2) skipped maintenance to satisfy operational requirements, the 31st MEU was forced to cut short its

>Capt Morales is an Instructor at the MAGTF Intelligence Officer Course, Marine Detachment, Dam Neck, VA.

deployment and miss Exercise COBRA GOLD. On a separate occasion,

after being ordered to respond to the 2010 Haitian earthquake just one month following a seven month deployment, the USS *Bataan* (LHD-5) suffered a double failure of its evaporators forcing the 22nd MEU to delay rescue operations in order to take on

40,000 gallons of water from a nearby supply ship.¹

Currently, the Navy and Marine Corps are faced with a choice to maintain current levels of forward naval presence and risk breaking its amphibious force, or reduce its presence and restore readiness through adequate training, upgrades, and maintenance.² What has not changed over the last decade is the need for Navy and Marine Corps units to establish and maintain capable alliances and partnerships within the Indo-Pacific region.

In his farewell letter to the force, former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis wrote that we must “hold fast, alongside our allies, aligned against our foes.”³ Secretary Mattis’ comments are nested in the President’s 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) when he wrote, “Sustaining favorable balances of power will require a strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners.”⁴ Within the Indo-Pacific Command, “U.S. allies are critical to responding to mutual threats, such as North Korea, and preserving our mutual interest.”⁵ For the region, the NSS highlights the importance of our alliances with South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Critical to maintaining a favorable balance of power in the region is the Marine Corps cooperation with each ally. The NSS mandates



The Navy and Marine Corps can maintain current naval presence operations or move to deploy with a totally reconstituted amphibious capability. (Photo by LCpl Scarlet Sharp.)

that within the Indo-Pacific region the United States will

maintain a forward presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating our adversary. We will strengthen our long-standing military relationships and encourage the development of a strong defense network with our allies and partners.⁶

When Secretary Mattis wrote his farewell letter, he again highlighted the importance of maintaining alliances against our foes. In his 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), Secretary Mattis spoke of three elements for achieving a capable alliance and partnership network: uphold a foundation of mutual respect, responsibility, priorities, and accountability; expand regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning; and deepen interoperability. For the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Mattis' priority was to expand Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.⁷ Ultimately, Secretary Mattis' strategic approach for the Nation's National Defense Strategy called for "a more lethal force, strong alliances and partnerships, American technological innovation, and a culture of performance."⁸

The Current Model

Unlike NATO in Europe, the Indo-Pacific region does not have a coalition of states bound by a principle of collective defense. An attempt was made by the United States in 1954 following the signing of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty that formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). However, "SEATO had no independent mechanism for obtaining intelligence or deploying military forces."⁹ As a result, SEATO formally disbanded in 1977. Since 1967, attempts to promote regional peace and stability have been through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Today, member states promote mutual trust and confidence through their contributions to the establishment of the ASEAN political-security community. The focus among ASEAN Defense Ministers has been on the use of ASEAN military assets and capacities for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as peacekeeping operations.¹⁰



Marine Corps interoperability with Indo-Pacific coalition partners. From top left, clockwise: ROKS Dokdo (LPH-6111) sails alongside amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard (LHD-6); ROK Marine watches the first MV-22B Osprey land on the flight deck of the Republic of Korea ship Dokdo (LPH-6111); Marines onboard the HMAS Canberra; HMAS Canberra successfully embarking four USMC AAVs. (Sources: "Amphibious Assault Vehicle Trials go Swimmingly;" "U.S. Republic of Korea Forces Kick off Exercise SSANG YONG;" and "U.S. Republic of Korea Forces Kick off Exercise SSANG YONG."¹¹)

Unfortunately, the United States is not a member state of ASEAN, and without a principle of collective defense, ASEAN lacks the legitimacy to deter adversaries within the Indo-Pacific region.

In the absence of a collective defense treaty, the United States has maintained a forward presence within the Indo-Pa-

acific region. Units such as the 7th Fleet and the III MEF have been instrumental in maintaining a forward presence ashore and at sea. Subordinate to both organizations is Amphibious Squadron 11 (CPR-11) and the 31st MEU. Twice a year aboard three of CPR-11's ships, the 31st MEU deploys within the Indo-Pacific region. As the maritime contingency force for the Indo-Pacific combatant commander, the 31st MEU is

certified biannually to perform mission essential tasks ranging from humanitarian assistance to amphibious assaults. Likewise, the staff from CPR-11's higher command, Amphibious Force 7th Fleet (ESG-7), embarks, attaches a cruiser or destroyer, and earns its certification as a forward-deployed ESG.

Unfortunately, the United States is not a member state of ASEAN, and without a principle of collective defense, ASEAN lacks the legitimacy to deter adversaries within the Indo-Pacific region.

acific region. Units such as the 7th Fleet and the III MEF have been instrumental in maintaining a forward presence ashore and at sea. Subordinate to both organizations is Amphibious Squadron 11 (CPR-11) and the 31st MEU. Twice a year aboard three of CPR-11's ships, the 31st MEU deploys within the Indo-Pacific region. As the maritime contingency force for the Indo-Pacific combatant commander, the 31st MEU is

The Navy and Marine Corps have been participating in theater security cooperation exercises in the Indo-Pacific region to obtain capable alliances and establish partnership networks. Exercises such as TALISMAN SABRE, SSANG YONG, and RIM of the PACIFIC provide training opportunities with coalition partners that help foster and sustain cooperative relationships, enhance readiness and interoperability, and ad-

United States*	Japan	Singapore	Thailand
USS Wasp LHD-1	JS Kaga DDH-184	RSS Endeavour LPD-210	HMS Anghong LPD-791
USS Green Bay LPD-20	JS Izumo DDH-183	RSS Persistence LPD-209	
USS Ashland LSD-48	JS Ise DDH-182	RSS Resolution LPD-208	
USS Germantown LSD-42	JS Hyuga DDH-181	RSS Endurance LPD-207	
Australia	Philippines	South Korea	India
HMAS Canberra L02	BRP Davao del Sur LD-602	ROKS Dokdo LPH-6111	INS Jalashwa L41
HMAS Adelaide L01	BRP Tarlac LD-601		
HMAS Choules L100			
*Amphibious Squadron 11			

Figure 1. Amphibious ships in the Indo-Pacific region. (Sources: World Navies in Review.¹²)

vance command and control capabilities through the conduct of combined amphibious operations with force-on-force, live-fire training modules. During each exercise, the Navy and Marine Corps exercises interoperability through the execution of combined ship-to-shore operations and crossdecking Marines, Sailors, and equipment. These exercises are all held biannually with units participating for as long as one to three months. During the interim, Navy and Marine Corps units participate in annual exercises like COBRA GOLD, KEY RESOLVE, ULCHI-FREEDOM GUARDIAN, or KEEN EDGE/SWORD with coalition partners for as long as one month out of the year. Unfortunately, these exercises are highly scripted and limited in duration as opposed to a seven-month deployment as a maritime expeditionary force conducting real-world contingency operations.

Proposal

Coalition partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region will benefit if they deploy a combined allied ESG (CAESG). This formation shall be built from the capabilities and resources of each coalition partner and ally. Through the employment of this CAESG, coalition partners will exercise allied interoperability through operational planning and by patrolling as a maritime contingency force within the Indo-Pacific region. The ESG can be tasked organized with capabilities that will allow it to respond to the current mission essential tasks of a MEU. To

achieve this capability, coalition partners and allies within the Indo-Pacific region must be committed to supporting this initiative through the deployment of ships, aircraft, and personnel on a rotational basis. Leadership and tasking, authorities, rules of engage-

listed are tank landing ships and landing craft. All of the ships listed are capable of carrying, launching, and receiving various types of rotary-wing aircraft. If each of the nations listed in Figure 2 (on next page) commits to contributing ships, aircraft, and personnel on a

To achieve this capability, coalition partners and allies within the Indo-Pacific region must be committed to supporting this initiative through the deployment of ships, aircraft, and personnel on a rotational basis.

ment, and the roles and responsibilities of the CAESG must be agreed upon by each coalition partner and ally. To achieve such a commitment, a treaty of collective self-defense must first be established with coalition partners and allies within the Indo-Pacific region. Without a treaty calling for a collective self-defense, the CAESG will have no legitimacy as a deterrence against adversarial threats, accountability between partners and allies will not be established, and the instrument to formally establish an allied force will remain nonexistent.

If partners and allies were to commit to a collective self-defense treaty, Figure 1 depicts the amphibious ship capabilities that potential members of the coalition can contribute to a CAESG. The ships listed are not all inclusive of each country’s amphibious capabilities. Not

rotational basis, obtaining a persistent presence in the Indo-Pacific region as a coalition will become more sustainable for each nation. Coalition partners and allies not listed in Figure 2, such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, that also have amphibious capabilities can provide their support by committing their ships, aircraft, and personnel into a rotation. If a coalition partner is not able to contribute by providing an amphibious capability, member nations can provide their support though alternative methods such as deploying a frigate or destroyer, providing financial or logistical support to a patrol, or hosting a port visit.

Figure 2 depicts what a hypothetical deployment schedule can look like for a CAESG. Ideally, the strike group will deploy twice a year throughout the Indo-Pacific region. When a coali-

		20 20		20 21		20 22	
		Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec
	USS Wasp LHD-1	X					
	USS Green Bay LPD-20		X				
United States	USS Ashland LSD-48				X		
	USS Germantown LSD-42						
	Cruiser or Destroyer			X			
	JS Kaga DDH-184			X			
	JS Izumo DDH-183					X	
Japan	JS Ise DDH-182						X
	JS Hyuga DDH-181						
	Destroyer	X					
	RSS Endeavour LPD-210			X			
	RSS Persistence LPD-209					X	
Singapore	RSS Resolution LPD-208						X
	RSS Endurance LPD-207						
	Frigate	X					
	HMAS Canberra L02				X		
Australia	HMAS Adelaide L01						X
	HMAS Choules L100			X			
	Frigate or Destroyer					X	
	BRP Davao del Sur LD-602				X		
Philippines	BRP Tarlac LD-601		X				
	Frigate						
	ROKS Dokdo LPH-6111	X				X	
South Korea	Frigate or Destroyer			X			
	HTMS Anghthong LPD-791	X					
Thailand	Frigate						X
	INS Jalashwa L41		X				
India	Frigate or Destroyer						X
New Zealand	Frigate				X		
Malaysia	Frigate		X				
Indonesia	Frigate				X		
Vietnam	Frigate		X				

Figure 2. Hypothetical ship deployment schedule. (Sources: World Navies in Review.¹³)

tion member's ship is only required to deploy for approximately six months every three years, it will become less of a burden logistically and financially for each partner. When a coalition partner is not deploying its ships, aircraft, or personnel on an annual or biannual basis, more time and money can be spent on improving readiness through

maintenance, upgrades, shore-based training, or research and development.

It is expected that participating coalition partners will require a significant amount of training prior to consolidating and deploying. To standardize training and employment, it may be necessary for coalition partners to utilize the Navy and Marine Corps' certification

metrics for an ESG, ARG, and MEU until such a time exists that the coalition is able to establish metrics that are acceptable, feasible, and suitable for the creation and sustainment of a CAESG. This can be achieved during each patrol when the coalition establishes and maintains SOPs derived from best practices and lessons learned.

Select staff members of ESG-7, the 31st MEU, and CPR-11 may embark on coalition partner ships to gain a better understanding of methods and procedures in an effort to enhance interoperability and cohesion. If it is in the interest of the coalition partner, these staff members can provide mentorship, training, and assistance throughout each deployment. Conversely, when a U.S. amphibious ship is deployed, select staff members from the coalition force may embark on the ship to gain a better understanding of a coalition partner's methods and procedures as well as enhance interoperability and cohesion. Ultimately, the coalition ESG, ARG, and MEU staff will be comprised of members of the coalition. The amphibious ships, along with their crew, embarked units, and equipment, will be manned, trained, and equipped by each coalition partner in accordance with the standards established and agreed upon by the coalition.

Counterargument

One might argue that by reducing ship deployments in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States will reduce its forward naval presence. If the Marine Corps simultaneously embraces its expeditionary advance base operations (EABO) concept through the implementation of stand-in forces, the Marine Corps will not reduce its forward naval presence. In fact, it will maintain its forward naval presence. During each coalition ESG deployment, the Marines and Sailors from the 31st MEU who are not embarked will become the stand-in force that will remain ashore to deter and train alongside coalition partners and allies within the Indo-Pacific region. Their presence ashore alongside our coalition partners in the region will engender confidence, assurance, and trust to operate as a combined allied force. Over time, the coalition will create an integrated maritime defense in-depth that is capable of deterring peer and near-peer adversaries within the Indo-Pacific region. While ashore, the stand-in force will be capable of establishing mutually supporting strong points in close and confined seas. They will establish rotating forward arming

and refueling sites for fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and unmanned aerial systems' operations. Simultaneously, they will maintain persistent situational awareness through partnered intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance operation. By embracing the EABO concept through the implementation of stand-in forces complemented by CAESG deployments, the Navy and Marine Corps will meet the NDS' objectives of deterring adversaries from aggression, maintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific Region, bolstering coalition partners against coercion, and sharing responsibilities with coalition partners for common defense.¹⁴

... the Navy and Marine Corps must deploy with coalition partners ...

Conclusion

When Secretary Mattis advised the force to "hold fast, alongside our allies, aligned against our foes," he understood as an armed Service that we must not conduct combat operations against a peer adversary alone.¹⁵ He understood future combat operations against a peer or near-peer adversary within the Indo-Pacific region will require the force to strengthen alliances and partnerships. Finally, he understood through deepening interoperability the combined allied force will act together to coherently and effectively achieve military objectives in the future operating environment. To achieve greater interoperability, the Navy and Marine Corps must deploy with coalition partners in the Indo-Pacific region as a CAESG while embracing the EABO concept through the employment of a stand-in force.

Notes

1. Bryan Clark and Jesse Sloman, "Deploying Beyond Their Means: America's Navy and Marine Corps at a Tipping Point," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, (Online:

November 2015), available at <https://csbaonline.org>.

2. Ibid.

3. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, "Memorandum for all Department of Defense Employees," (Washington, DC: December 2018).

4. President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2017).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

8. Ibid.

9. Department of State, "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)," (Washington, DC: 1954).

10. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting," (Clark, PHL: October 2017).

11. Department of Defence, Helen Frank, and Steven Thomas, "Amphibious Assault Vehicle Trials Go Swimmily," *Navy Daily*, (Online: July 2016), available at <http://news.navy.gov.au>; Ryan Mains, "Ospreys Land on Korean Amphibious Assault Ship," (Online: March 2015), available at <https://www.31stmeu.marines.mil>; and Carla Burdt, "U.S. Republic of Korea Forces Kick off Exercise Ssang Yong," Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, (Online: March 2014), available at <https://www.cpf.navy.mil>.

12. Eric Wertheim, *World Navies in Review*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 2018).

13. Ibid.

14. Art Corbett, *EABO and Stand-in Forces: A Discussion on Innovation in Strategy and Concepts*, (Quantico, VA: Marine & Naval Concepts, Concepts and Plans Division, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, 2018).

15. "Memorandum for all Department of Defense Employees."

