

Distributed Forward Presence

Reexamining Marine deployment concepts

by LtCol G.J. David

The proliferation of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) technology, coupled with evolving international politics, requires a reexamination of the way the Marine Corps provides forward presence—especially in the Pacific. Adversarial technologies are rapidly closing the advantage previously enjoyed by the United States to the extent that access to littoral crises is becoming increasingly problematic. Furthermore, global politics do not currently favor large, protective bases in the model of the Cold War. The strategic rebalance toward the Pacific should instead be met with a conceptual advance in how Marines achieve presence in the region. Although long investment experience makes the Pacific a good place to begin, this basing concept can then also be applied in other theaters.

To achieve effective presence, Marines must rotate into the Pacific as a combined arms task force that is ready from the moment they arrive. Further, they should deploy into theater activities that immediately posture them to respond to crises while fulfilling the theater security cooperation (TSC) campaign and exercise requirements. Finally, Marines require smaller, more widely distributed locations to deploy; must accentuate temporary basing arrangements; and need to more rapidly advance seabasing and sea-enabled concepts. Marines will execute TSC, exercises, and transit within the context of a broader contingency response plan that ties the specific activity to forward posture and presence. Whenever they are required, these forces can swing into real-world action. These measures, effectively applied, will transform Ma-

>At the time of writing in 2015, LtCol David was the Division Chief for the Executive Support Division of Intelligence Department, Headquarters Marine Corps. He was since promoted and served a tour at USCENTCOM before assuming command of Marine Corps Cyberspace Warfare Group at Fort Meade, MD, in July 2019.

rine forward presence and confound potential adversary reactions before they occur.

From the moment Marine units depart home bases in the United States, they must move forward as a MAGTF, tactically deploying with all the logistics and aviation necessary. A MAGTF is by its nature scalable above and below the MEU level. Scalability provides the greatest flexibility, utility, and attraction for combatant commanders; it is time to exercise that utility in fact. Individual ground, aviation, or logistics elements

should never rotate alone because doing so does not provide the forward presence of a unit organized in the same way that it will fight. After arriving in theater, for instance in Japan, they would not need to reconstitute and composite into follow-on elements with a command element placed on top as with the current 31st MEU;¹ they would already be a MAGTF ready for that command element to employ. Furthermore, all scalable detachments would appear only as a MAGTF as well, going everywhere with ground, aviation, and the logistics



Marines must deploy as combined arms forces prepared to participate in theater activities.
(Photo by LCpl Kyle Bunyi.)

to support them down to the smallest detachment participating in the most rudimentary security cooperation (SC). In this fashion, Marine forward presence will send an instant message of readiness to execute operations—the fact of Marines on the ground or in the air in a given place implies a MAGTF that can strike immediately. The first fundamental paradigm shift must adjust Marines from a 1977 model of deploying in non-MAGTF elements to deploying into a combined arms team ready to fight.²

Secondly, these scalable MAGTFs should move straight into TSC with an eye to providing a ready force for follow-on contingencies. In other words, exercises and theater security events would not be an end in themselves,³

The best bases, however, are those provided by mobility within the global commons: seabasing. Marine seabasing concepts must be more rapidly advanced and must shed the tight limits of vision on what an amphibious ship must be.

but rather a means of achieving distributed presence for potential crises, contingencies, or theater operations plans. Marines who are training allies one day can expect to be applied to theater contingencies not just the next day but even that same day. Any battalion-sized unit, for example, deploying to the Pacific would first constitute into a MAGTF with a squadron and logistics. Then, if undertaking an exercise in country A, a theater security event in country B, and a small amphibious mission off country C on ships, it would deploy sub-MAGTFs to those countries or ships with their logistics for war, maintaining C2. In the event of a crisis in country X, the overarching MAGTF would then apply its sub-MAGTFs from A, B, and C immediately to the crisis because they need not be returned to some other forward base and reconstituted with supplies and aviation—it is all there with the subordinate MAGTFs, ready to go. These Marines are moving

about the theater in the same form that they would in a crisis or contingency; they are training as they fight.

Finally, the Marine Corps must change its forward basing concepts, emphasizing shared bases for mutual support and advantage. Smaller dispersed bases, especially when shared with the host nation, are always more acceptable and often provide better training. Camp Fuji, for example, provides a shared training area for both Japanese and U.S. forces and is maintained for Marines by a small, focused, and professional cadre that assists units in achieving training objectives that can no longer be accomplished on Okinawa such as artillery fire.⁴ Space at Fuji is not consumed to provide gigantic fixed infrastructure to support long-term presence complete

with families, government civilians, and contractors. The Northern Training area of Okinawa, as the name suggests, is also a place to acquire better jungle warfare skills but would be more acceptable to the Japanese if it were a shared training space.⁵ Sharing the facilities with the host nation enables upgrades and improvements due to mutual benefit; the Air Force's Misawa Air Base reflects this mutual benefit calculus as the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force reaps rewards every time the U.S. Air Force makes an improvement and has consequent incentive to facilitate it.⁶ Simultaneously, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force flies out of the same airfield and is much more adept at managing local popular perceptions.

Temporary basing arrangements are often even better because Marines come and improve shared facilities for the period of their use such that host-nation forces can employ them afterward without implication of occupation

or political dilemmas associated with long-term presence, even if Marines are scheduled to return. Alongside the small Camp Mujukthat reflects the benefits of a light footprint, nearby facilities are often used as Marines move in and out in support of exercises with the Republic of Korea Marine Corps annually near Pohang.⁷ The Republic of Korea Marines handle domestic public relations and gain the benefit of both training and minor facilities improvements while the United States shows unambiguous force presence.⁸

The best bases, however, are those provided by mobility within the global commons: seabasing. Marine sea-basing concepts must be more rapidly advanced and also shed the tight limits of vision on what an amphibious ship must be. The “surface connectors,” like the joint high-speed vessel often used to move Marines to and from huge bases on Okinawa to training events,⁹ must be viewed as that MAGTF's temporary platform that could be diverted mid-course to contingency. Basing ideas including Maritime Prepositioning Ships, Military Sealift Command, National Defense Reserve Fleet, and allies and partners with capable platforms must be explored.¹⁰ Use of all such platforms will then comprise a part of the forward presence of Marine forces which could be rapidly concentrated from disparate activities or transit across a portion of the theater to address crises and contingencies.

Marines should further explore more unmanned systems in the air, on land, and at sea to accompany these MAGTFs. The distributed concept implies a level of self-sufficiency with small numbers of Marines. Manned-unmanned teaming coupled with reachback and enterprise capabilities that generate self-sufficiency, when necessary, in denied spaces will soon be essential to the A2/AD environment for any Service seeking to retain relevance and credibility. Small numbers augmented with unmanned systems to the extent that their combat power is greater than the sum of the boots on the ground are the future. Controlled lethal systems must become a part of the every-day life of the junior-most Marines in the smallest units, as



Distributed operations provide Marines to support combatant commanders without the need for a large operational footprint. (Photo by LCpl Jyle Bunyi.)

routine as their smartphone. A program of continuous updating and change will assist in keeping rapidly developing adversaries off balance while lending force to the distributed concept. Anywhere there are Marines could imply a huge amount of combat force (the essence of force presence), even associated with small numbers.

Such concepts must rapidly advance because the capabilities of potential adversaries are quickly eliminating the advantages that U.S. forces and Marines, in particular, have enjoyed in technology, expeditionary operations, operational reach, and agility. For at least a decade, Marines have debated the tour lengths for Okinawan unit deployment and MEU rotations because there is a perceptible need to increase presence or time on station,¹¹ yet little has changed even as the circumstances in the China Seas have transformed completely because of aggressive Chinese growth and development. Large, fixed bases—like those clustered on Okinawa—provide easy targets for the proliferating, highly capable aviation and missile forces of potential adversaries like China and North Korea.¹² In addition to the A2/AD problem, these bases have also been decreasing in utility and political acceptability for decades; when closed, they are consolidated into larger and

more permanent installations, providing an even more lucrative target for everything from intelligence collection to ballistic missile targeting.

In the twenty years that an alternate location for Futenma Air Station has been debated, for example, China has erected three capable air stations in the disputed Spratly Islands almost from nothing. In August 2014, Fiery Cross Reef was a reef with one hut on stilts. By September 2015, it was an island with a 10,000 foot runway, an apron and hangars, a functioning deep-water port, full logistics and communications, surface fires, air defense missiles, and living facilities.¹³ Rapidly made deals with multiple countries strike agreements whereby China will renovate and modernize port facilities on condition that Chinese vessels can use them afterward.¹⁴ Just in sheer numbers, the People's Liberation Army Navy has expanded by close to 50 percent in those same two decades, but China uses its Coast Guard and merchant fisherman to enforce its claims as well.¹⁵ These are just examples; in all fields, the pace is that fast. By contrast, the decades-old unit deployment program (UDP) to large, fixed, and expensive bases in Okinawa is obsolete, cumbersome, and not entirely expeditionary. These may be process and political problems, but

they must be overcome immediately. The hour grows late.

The Marine Corps must act quickly and discover new ways to increase our presence or lose relevance. Luckily, distributed concepts are not as novel as it might seem at first glance. Not unlike the island-hopping campaign of the Second World War, there is no need to be everywhere, but to be present in multiple, overlapping, usable locations. Moreover, some units are beginning to work this way out of necessity. The distributed operations of the special purpose MAGTFs in Spain and the Middle East are not just popular with geographic combatant commanders, they have set a precedent in the ability to operate from distributed locations that—through the MAGTF presence—can provide mutual support without providing a large target footprint.¹⁶ Alternate seabases such as the USS *Ponce* afloat staging base and attempts to work with the configurations of MSC ships for basing some Marines are being explored.¹⁷ Recognition of the need to exercise Maritime Prepositioning Ships plans beyond checking the equipment and amphibious warfare discussions with allies and partner nations have taken place.¹⁸ All these efforts, however, need an overarching construct in order to be tied together into an effective force presence: what the unit moving forward should do.

A distributed forward presence provides the Marine Corps with a way of advancing its fundamental force concepts, such as *Expeditionary Force 21*,¹⁹ in a theater requiring a revised operating process. Logisticians, planners, and budget developers will all see potential pitfalls in change, but the Nation's adversaries are rapidly adapting and the Marine Corps must stay ahead of them. Costs must be met by trimming the obsolete, such as the old way of UDP, while reinforcing success like the special purpose MAGTF. Succumbing to the endless debate over UDP tour length and the Neverland of an alternative to Futenma on Okinawa must be discarded in favor of rapid change and much broader thinking about smaller, combined, temporary, or afloat bases. A distributed concept could easily be ap-



Marines must increase their presence and training opportunities with partner nations. (Photo by Cpl Josue Marquez.)

plied to theaters other than the Pacific, and in some ways is already in evidence in Europe and the Middle East. Distributed forward presence is the future for forward deployment.

Notes

1. Although “the only continuously forward-deployed MEU,” this banner applies only to the command element. The rest of the MEU rotates and must be retrained every six months such that not only does the 31st do half of the workup cycle of other MEUs, but it is only available for about six months a year. Because of modern adversary systems, this is equivalent to deploying units to Baghdad in order to train for their mission ... in Baghdad. Such situations are no longer reasonable. Headquarters Marine Corps, “31st Marine Expeditionary Unit,” (Washington, DC: April 2016).

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO P3000.15B, Manpower Unit Deployment Program Standing Operating Procedures*, (Washington, DC: October 2001).

3. A ref that shows that the SC events are often viewed as an end in themselves. United States Pacific Command, “USPACOM Strategy,” (Honolulu, HI: 2016).

4. Headquarters Marine Forces Pacific, “Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji,” (Camp H.M. Smith, HI: 2016).

5. Tom Bartlett, “Northern Training Area: Okinawa,” *Leatherneck*, (Quantico, VA: February 1982),

6. 35th Fighter Wing Public Affairs, “Misawa Air Base-Newcomers Page,” *Welcome to Misawa*, (Okinawa, JP: April 2016).

7. Staff, “Camp Mujuk, Korea,” *Marine Corps Base Camp Mujuk*, (April 2016), available at <https://www.mcipac.marines.mil>.

8. Do-Gyun Kim, “U.S., South Korea Stage Assault Drill; North Threatens to Wipe out Enemies,” *Reuters*, (March 2016), available at <https://www.reuters.com>.

9. Gen James F. Amos, “Bridging Our Surface-Connector Gap,” *Proceedings*, (June 2014), available at <https://www.usni.org>.

10. George David, “Back to Sea,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: January 2016).

11. Neil Carey and Lewis Lee, “OPTEMPO and Retention: Okinawa, Hawaii, and Twenty-nine Palms,” CNA, (Arlington, VA: July 2011); Bruce Klingner, “Top 10 Reasons Why the U.S. Marines on Okinawa Are Essential to Peace and Security in the Pacific,” (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2011); and Michael Green and Nicholas Szechenyi, “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region,” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2012).

12. Michael Chase and Arthur Chan, “China’s Evolving Approach to ‘Integrated Strategic Deterrence,’” Rand Corporation, (2016); and David C. Gompert, “North Korea-Preparing for the End,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013).

13. Derek Watkins, “What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY: October 2015).

14. Christopher K. Johnson, “President Xi Jinping’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative: A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Communist Party’s Roadmap for China’s Global Resurgence,” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016).

15. Ronald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities: Background and Issues for Congress*, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress and Congressional Research Service, 2007).

16. Sam LaGrone, “Spain and U.S. Sign Permanent Basing Agreement for up to 3,500 U.S. Marines,” *USNI News*, (Annapolis, MD: June 2015); and Megan Eckstein, “280 Special Purpose MAGTF Marines Set to Return Home From Europe, Africa Deployments,” *USNI News*, (Annapolis, MD: January 2016).

17. Megan Eckstein, “3rd Marine Division Experimenting With Using MSC Ships In Higher Level Operations,” *USNI News*, (Annapolis, MD: January 2016).

18. Tyrone C. Marshall, Jr, “U.S. Pacific Command Symposium Enhances Regional Stability,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Pacific Command, May 2015); and Associated Press, “US Marines, Sailors Demonstrate Amphibious Skills For Military Leaders From Around The Pacific,” *Foxnews*, (May 2015), available at <https://www.foxnews.com>.

19. Gen James E. Amos, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, March 2014).

