

# Gray Zone Considerations

## Resurrection of the Maritime Prepositioning Force

by Maj Joe Borgardt

The transformation of the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) is critical to remain relevant in today's contested maritime threat environment. The reinvigorated marriage of the Marine Corps to the Navy toward the ultimate purpose of collectively modernizing capabilities to fight as a team is clearly conveyed in the Marine Corps' *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG). The reality is that peer competitors like China and Russia have evolved their strategies to directly influence the United States' ability to project power around the globe across all domains. Simultaneous to their proliferation of long-range precision weapons and information-related activities, adversaries have advanced their interests by operating effectively below the threshold of armed-conflict. This is also referred to as "gray-zone tactics." Consequently, usefulness of the MPF must be viewed through two environmental lenses. The first is through the lens of competition below the threshold (i.e., short of war within the gray zone). The second is through a lens beyond competition after resorting to war within actively contested maritime space. Both frameworks would require MPF capability to operate within the ambiguous gray zone, thus enabling greater options toward de-escalation. If modernized through these lenses, MPF can be resurrected as a force multiplier.

A critical part of conceptualizing solutions through these two lenses is the cognitive basis with which we attempt to solve them. As military leaders, we are culturally accustomed to solve problems with what we organically possess—all of which are traditional

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*The deck of the USNS John Glenn. (Photo by author.)*

military-oriented solutions. China has cunningly blended civilian-militia-paramilitary as part of their maritime strategy to achieve their aims short of war. So too must we increasingly consider a mixture of commercial and civilian options when developing future capabilities and strategies, particularly if we want to effect the enemy within the blurred lines between military and civilian. This inevitably includes how we modernize and employ our MPF. A willingness to adapt and think creatively is clearly emphasized within the CPG regarding not only capabilities, such as

unmanned platforms and artificial intelligence (AI), but also employment as a Navy-Marine Corps Team. This need for innovative thinking becomes clear, particularly within the INDOPACOM region when observing how China effectively extends their influence using gray zone tactics below the threshold of armed conflict. Effective maneuver within the gray zone allows adversaries to escape global condemnation and provides a means to achieve their end-state without resorting to war. To accomplish this, China has leveraged their "civilian masked" Maritime Militia in concert

with their Coast Guard and Navy to advance their interests “below the radar.” Part of China’s maritime strategy entails a People’s Liberation Army-Navy led and trained civilian maritime force referred to as their Maritime Militia, disguised as fisherman to defend and advance China’s territorial claims.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneous to creating employment options within emerging Navy and Marine Corps concepts such as *Dis-*

agement regarding such agreements can empower and enhance our network of partnerships in the region to commit greater resources toward integrated multi-lateral intra-theater “local-civilian oriented” contingency shipping solutions in support of our MPF. Right-sized ship and land-based EABO equipment package options offer distribution of resources within the theater preventing all the eggs from being consolidated

be able to operate effectively within contested maritime space in the gray zone below and beyond the threshold of armed conflict. To achieve this successfully, our Corps needs right-sized, risk-worthy logistics and sustainment solutions that enable our emerging naval concepts and empower our network of partnerships in the region. Innovative MPF employment options such as those discussed here build upon ideas and enhance creative thinking about our MPF’s modernization and future utility. International norms will not survive without those willing to defend them. As the CPG states, as part of the naval team, the Marine Corps will be the first on scene, first to help, first to contain a brewing crisis, and first to fight if required to do so.<sup>3</sup> A creatively resurrected MPF can help.

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*tributed Maritime Operations* and *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, Maritime Prepositioning Forces must also be modernized to operate within this gray zone area of competition, short of war. So what modernization options exist for the MPF?

Col John P. Sullivan, Jr.’s article, titled “Exercise Trident Juncture: A Window into the Future Prepositioning Operations,” and the 38th CPG highlight a few creative ideas worth considering. Colonel Sullivan highlighted the value and conceptual dispersion associated with employing land-based, shore-based, and home station resources via both military and commercial shipping. In other words, don’t put all your eggs in one “resource” basket. Contrarily, he applied a distributed resourcing approach into theater through multiple or “multi-modal” means to include land-based, ship-based, and home-based.<sup>2</sup> Expanding on Col Sullivan’s conceptual contribution, land-based prepositioning of equipment in small packages scattered throughout a conflict-prone region like the South China Sea offers a diverse set of solutions for the combatant, joint, or maritime commander. For example, small land-based EABO packages strategically positioned in the Philippines, Guam, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam create a distributed regional balance of options while decreasing ship-based requirements. Covert or overt political-military en-

into one basket. In fact, reconfiguration of MPF equipment loadouts into ship-based EABO packages is already underway.

Both the CPG and Col Sullivan underline the need for a wide array of smaller black bottom ships. Smaller, more affordable, risk-worthy black bottom or other commercial ships, combined with larger ships that can transit long distances, enable a “relay” strategy. For example, the big ships travel from afar, then subsequently transfer equipment to the smaller civilian ships to “blend in” closer or within the weapons engagement zone to execute shore-based or in-stream offloads. A civilian complexion combined with a greater versatility because of their shallower drafts provide unique MPF options within the gray zone in support of emerging concepts. A loud demand signal created now for MPF security options can spawn naval thinking and collective progress toward development of integrated maritime MPF security options tethered to DMO and EABO concepts. It is clear that adversaries like China intend to limit U.S. access into their backyard, bully its smaller regional neighbors, and leverage its influence to frustrate any attempts that challenge their interests. Proliferation of anti-access/area denial capabilities such as long-range precision weapons demonstrate this reality. As an extension of the naval fleet, the Marine Corps must

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**Notes**

1. Andrew S. Erickson, “The South China Sea’s Third Force: Understanding and Countering China’s Maritime Militia.” *China Maritime Studies Institute*, (September 2016), available at <http://www.andrewerickson.com>.
2. John P. Sullivan, “Exercise Trident Juncture: A Window into Future Maritime Prepositioning Operations.” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (February 2020), available at <https://mca-marines.org>.
3. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

