



# Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations

Is the Marine Corps abandoning maneuver warfare?

by Marinus

The Maneuverist Papers have attempted to promote a conversation about Marine Corps doctrine. In so doing, they have always taken as their point of departure *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, which has stood essentially unchanged since the original version appeared in 1989. There have been two main objectives. First, to help today's Marines understand the genesis of maneuver warfare doctrine on the premise that to understand where you are and where you are going, you should understand where you have been. Second, to encourage a discussion on whether a doctrine that was promulgated over 30 years ago, in a very different time, continues to serve the needs of the Marine Corps of the present and future. The elephant in the room (or perhaps dragon is a better metaphor) regarding this question is Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), the new operating concept that underlies the most significant structural changes the Marine Corps has seen since after the Vietnam War. The authoritative source on EABO is the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (TMEABO),<sup>1</sup> according to which "EABO are a form of expeditionary warfare that involves the employment of mobile,

low-signature, persistent, and relatively easy to maintain and sustain naval expeditionary forces from a series of austere, temporary locations ashore or inshore within a contested maritime area in order to conduct sea denial, support sea control, or enable fleet sustainment."<sup>2</sup> Another key document is *Force Design 2030*, which describes the future Marine Corps intended to execute that concept.

First, we should establish that a new operating concept—generally speaking—is not obligated to comply with existing doctrine. Presuming that the operating concept is a response to a real-world operational requirement, it is doctrine that should comply with the concept. One caveat, however, is that if maneuver warfare is a direct response to the fundamental nature of war, as the Maneuverist Papers have argued, then we should make certain that where EABO contradicts maneuver warfare it is not also contradicting the nature of war. (Many recent joint and Service operating concepts, such as Effects-Based Operations, have been inconsistent with the reality of war.) The key question is this: If EABO is going to be the future of the Marine Corps, does our warfighting doctrine need to change to support EABO?

**EABO are a form of expeditionary warfare employing small, mobile Marine units operating from temporary positions to conduct sea denial and associated missions. (Photo by PFC Sarah Pysher.)**

While the *Tentative Manual* contains no explicit attacks upon the philosophy expressed in *MCDP I*, the methods it proposes are based on assumptions about the nature of war that contravene the tenets of maneuver warfare. Moreover, the EABO concept in execution has little use for maneuver warfare, and we foresee the warfighting philosophy disappearing in relatively short order as a result—in practice if not in doctrine.

### The Strategic Context

To understand EABO, it is necessary to understand the strategic context that begat it. EABO was conceived within the context of an Island Chain Strategy in a war in the Pacific with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Island Chain Strategy was first proposed during the Cold War as a plan for containing the Soviet Union and PRC through a series of naval bases in the western Pacific from which to project U.S. naval power and deny sea access to the Soviets and Chinese.

In the context of a war with the PRC, it would involve the employment of long-range precision fires from positions along one or more chains of islands to prevent Chinese forces from breaking out of the East or South China Seas. The Island Chain Strategy is an attritional, cost-imposition strategy: the idea is to make projecting power through a line of anti-access capabilities prohibitively expensive for China. Most significant is the First Island Chain, which runs from the Kamchatka Peninsula in the north through the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukus, Taiwan, and the northern Philippines to Borneo in the south (sometimes including southern Vietnam as its southern anchor). The most important of these is Taiwan, the possession of which is recognized as a major policy objective of the PRC. The Second Island Chain runs from Japan through the Bonin Islands, Volcano Islands, Marianas, and Caroline Islands to Western New Guinea.

Perhaps the most concise summary of the logic of the Island Chain Strategy is this:

The idea has an appealing logic: turn the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) equation back against China. By transforming islands into “porcupines,” DoD aims to develop layers of constraint against Chinese maritime growth. This strategy is both economical and resilient, at least in theory. Rather than matching China ship-for-ship and risk losing forces to the PRC's A2/AD capabilities, the archipelagic defense tries to put the United States and its allies on the right side of a cost imposition strategy. Pairing radars with shore-based, mobile anti-ship missiles could make a lethal but affordable combination. Moreover, there is no lack of islands in the western Pacific, so this offers the chance for “defense in depth.” The U.S. armed services have embraced the strategy with gusto. The Marines and Army, in particular, have been working on establishing their relevance in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

While the strategy has its supporters, we argue it is problematic.<sup>4</sup>

As a theater strategy, the Island Chain Strategy has a certain Maginot Line quality to it. One thing we know about Maginot Lines is that they encourage enemies to go to lengths

to find ways around them. The example of the Cold War is instructive. The main conflict was always expected to be in central Europe, and the U.S. Army committed multiple corps to that theater for nearly a half-century. That massive conflict never occurred, fortunately, but plenty of other conflicts (and other crises) flared up around the periphery, and the Marine Corps, as the Nation's force-in-readiness, was heavily engaged in most of them.

As what happened in Europe during the Cold War, implementing the strategy may involve committing combat forces to the region for years or decades, as China seems inclined to play a long game, patiently waiting until it has shaped the conditions that guarantee victory. As Sunzi, the forefather of Chinese strategic thought, wrote:

Anciently those called skilled in war conquered an enemy easily conquered. And therefore the victories by a master of war gain him neither reputation for wisdom nor merit for valor. For he wins his victories without erring. “Without erring” means that whatever he does insures his victory; he conquers an enemy already defeated. Therefore the skilled commander takes up a position in which he cannot be defeated and misses no opportunity to master his enemy. Thus a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning.<sup>5</sup>

Implementing the strategy will require that the EABs be in position before the onset of hostilities. According to the TMEABO: “*Rather than a force designed to fight its way into a contested area, the Marine Corps is building a force capable of persisting and operating forward as a critical component of a naval campaign.*”<sup>6</sup> (Are we to infer that the Marine Corps is abandoning a forcible-entry capability?) By the logic of the concept, if U.S. forces must fight their way through the Chinese anti-access envelope merely to get into position, then the cost-imposition calculus is reversed. Further, moving forces into position before hostilities in sufficient strength to cause the PRC to feel penned in may trigger just the conflict it is intended to deter, especially if China sees force ratios with respect to the capture of Taiwan trending in the wrong direction.

There also would be significant political hurdles to implementing such a strategy. Host nations would have to authorize the positioning of U.S. forces on their territory indefinitely. Whereas the defense of Europe against the Soviet Union was undertaken by a strong and unified alliance, that condition does not exist in the western Pacific. The United States would need to make arrangements with individual states for pre-conflict basing, and these would be difficult to arrange. For example, Taiwan would be an attractive location for basing, but any U.S. deployment there would trigger a ferocious Chinese response since the Chinese Communist Party considers Taiwan to be Chinese national territory. The Philippines would also be attractive because of its many islands near the South China Sea, but the Philippine government has been leery of U.S. connections, its military is weak, and the country is extremely vulnerable to Chinese pressure. Vietnam might be willing to host U.S. forces, but it too has tried to remain neutral, recognizing the immense power of

its northern neighbor. Japan has treaty connections to the United States and many U.S. bases but might not be willing to get involved in a conflict that did not directly attack Japanese territory. The Australians have allowed U.S. basing, but the country is distant from the likely venues of conflict.

Any state that allowed U.S. bases would come under continuous, intense economic pressure from China, in the form of both coercion and inducements, to deny U.S. basing rights. China has shown itself to be ruthless in this regard when it considers its interests to be opposed. (Just ask the Lithuanians, who recently lost access to the Chinese market for calling the Taiwanese embassy “Taiwanese” or the National Basketball Association, for that matter, which has repeatedly kowtowed to the Chinese Communist Party to keep access to that market.) Maintaining the system of basing sites, even if successfully established, would thus be an ongoing diplomatic challenge. In the event of conflict, the United States could never be sure that host countries would be willing to risk the immense dangers of confronting China.

A war with China in the western Pacific cannot be considered in isolation. There is the question of how an Island Chain Strategy comports with other strategic imperatives in the region or around the globe. For example, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea almost certainly would use a war between the United States and China as an excuse to invade its neighbor to the south. How does establishing a defensive line along the First Island Chain fit with the requirement to flow reinforcements to the Korean Peninsula in such as event?

All this effort might end up being focused on the wrong location. China is without question the greatest threat to U.S. national security interests, and a conventional, high-intensity conflict with China in the Pacific is a possibility—although not a likelihood. However, lesser conflict elsewhere around the globe is a certainty—whether sponsored by China, Russia, Iran, or somebody else. In a highly insightful and intriguingly titled article, “Insurgency, Not War, Is China’s Most Likely Course of Action,” John Vrolyk writes:

Competing with China might include a great-power war in the Western Pacific—but it’s almost certainly going to consist of fighting proxy wars and insurgencies around the globe where American and Chinese interests clash. ... A great-power conflict today would involve high-intensity combat that would make World War II pale in comparison. Great-power competition, on the other hand, is likely to involve a new era of messy global entanglements, ranging from economic rivalry to intelligence operations to full-on proxy warfare and insurgency campaigns focused on the world’s most critical lines of communication.<sup>7</sup>

The most rational way for China to pursue its aim of displacing the United States as the dominant power in the region, according to Vrolyk, is to “rely more on bullying, proxies, and insurgencies than on hypersonic or nuclear interchange.”<sup>8</sup>

Even acknowledging the potential deterrent value of the Island Chain Strategy, this is far from the best employment of Marine Corps forces. The Army is much better prepared and equipped to provide the landbased missile forces that are the backbone of the concept. If the Marine Corps were so committed, who then would fulfill the force-in-readiness

role? Is it in the Nation’s interest to tie up limited Marine forces—built for rapid deployability to “any clime and place” and warfare across the spectrum of conflict—indefinitely in anticipation of a war that may not occur?

Some may argue that the Marine Corps today is merely doing what the interwar Marine Corps did in developing amphibious capabilities based on War Plan Orange. The critical difference, however, is that those amphibious capabilities found utility in nearly every theater of the Second World War and in numerous instances since, while EABO appears to be applicable to one very specific feature of maritime terrain in the western Pacific.

Part of the motivation behind this concept likely is the understandable desire to return the Marine Corps to its naval roots after two decades of employment essentially as a second land army. However, there are other ways to do this without tying the Marine Corps down to a narrow mission within a single theater. No doubt, some of the motivation is the desire to be part of the main fight rather than a sideshow, but Marines should remember that during the Cold War they maintained a global posture as a force-in-readiness and were not focused specifically on the central front in Europe (although they did maintain capabilities that were relevant to that theater). This approach was successful. The Nation and the defense establishment recognized that the United States had global responsibilities it could not walk away from.

### The Operational Context

The operational context of EABO is a maritime campaign for sea control/sea denial by means of an integrated network of sensors and shooters designed to detect and engage advancing Chinese naval forces with long-range precision fires. EABs would serve as essentially inanimate nodes within that network, operating from supposedly survivable positions inside the enemy’s weapons engagement zone to attack the enemy’s anti-access capabilities from the inside out. As operating concepts go, this one fits squarely in the methodical battle/attrition warfare school of thought.

The TMEABO identifies several missions and tasks for EABs, including air and missile defense, forward sustainment, forward command and control, and forward arming and refueling point operations.<sup>9</sup> But clearly, the preeminent mission of EABs—and the one resulting in the most dramatic changes in structure—is expected to be engaging enemy ships with missiles from shorebased batteries or unmanned surface vessels launched from the EAB. The EABs will serve essentially as firebases launching anti-ship missiles at distant targets. A networked sensor system will detect the targets, and a networked naval commander will make the engagement decisions. The EAB will be just another set of launchers in the network, augmenting the much greater number of launch cells aboard Navy ships and on Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft.

Although the new concept might brief well, it has several major deficiencies. The first problem is fundamental. This is warfare reduced to dueling kill webs, warfare as a giant Lanchester equation, which we hardly need point out is attri-

tion warfare in pure mathematical form.<sup>10</sup> (See Maneuverist No. 10, “Defeat Mechanisms,” *MCG*, Jul21.) It reflects a mindset not uncommon in the Navy and Air Force—which see war essentially as a clash of technologies—but fundamentally inconsistent with the nature of war as described in *MCDP 1, Warfighting*.

A second problem is a discounting of combined-arms maneuver. EABO is a firepower-based concept premised on defeating the enemy’s advance at a long distance. Under such a concept, tactical maneuver becomes irrelevant. (The EAB commander’s latitude for positioning and repositioning for security purposes hardly qualifies as maneuver.) But we know this to be unrealistic; history tells us that at some point enemy forces will penetrate the friendly anti-access barrier, and when they do, the outnumbered and isolated small Marine units will be fighting for survival without the benefit of cannon artillery or tank support.

Third, the security of the EABs will be problematic. EABs are expected to rely on remaining undetected through mobility, concealment, and low signature. According to the TMEABO, the bases will be small, austere, and temporary, based on the rationale that any prepared emplacement within the PLA’s weapons engagement zone will be detected and vulnerable to destruction. This logic is problematic. First, any emplacement that remains in place for any period of time will start to accumulate infrastructure. This was the case with firebases in Vietnam, which were originally intended to be temporary positions but over time became ever more elaborate, incrementally providing additional security, comfort, and functions. If the stand-in forces at the EAB are engaged in security cooperation activities prior to hostilities, as is envisioned, their presence will be well known to the local population. That population almost certainly will be infiltrated with human intelligence sources.

Fourth, logistic support likewise will be an issue. Every resupply mission or other logistics contact risks giving away the EAB’s position, which is why EABs are meant to be largely self-sustaining. Despite YouTube videos of TBS lieutenants being taught to slaughter and roast pigs, we understand that

local sustainment primarily means living off the local economy through greater operational contract support. Like security cooperation activities do, self-sustainment presents a major operations security risk. Interactions with the local population will expose the EAB to detection by human intelligence. EABs are likely to be pinpointed every bit as much as if they had been detected by high-technology sensors.

### The Implications of Force Design 2030

In designing the force to implement the EABO concept, *Force Design 2030* calls for dramatic structural changes. The infantry battalion—the base ground maneuver unit, the moral heart and soul of the Marine Corps—will be reduced dramatically in both number and manpower strength. Marine Corps statements indicate that decision is driven by a desire to find budget savings rather than by any analysis of operational requirements. The number of active battalions will be reduced from 24 to 21. Only one of those will be permanently stationed in 3d MarDiv. The 1st MarDiv will have twelve infantry battalions, but six of those will be committed to Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) and MEU rotations, leaving only six battalions for other commitments. The 2d MarDiv will have eight infantry battalions, but four of those will be committed to MLR and MEU rotations, leaving barely a regiment for other requirements.<sup>11</sup> (See Figure 1 below.)

The TMEABO insists that the Marine Corps will be able to make these drastic changes and still meet its statutory missions, but we are unconvinced.<sup>13</sup> We question whether a Marine Corps with this decreased infantry structure can meet its global requirements. Unless the Marine Corps is being written out of war plans, the numbers do not seem to add up.

We understand that the exact organization of the infantry battalion is still under development, being the subject of ongoing experimentation, but per the TMEABO the infantry battalion will see a *one-third* reduction in manpower strength, from 965 to 648.<sup>14</sup> This will dramatically impact the battalion’s resilience in the face of the casualties that can be expected in a war with a peer competitor.

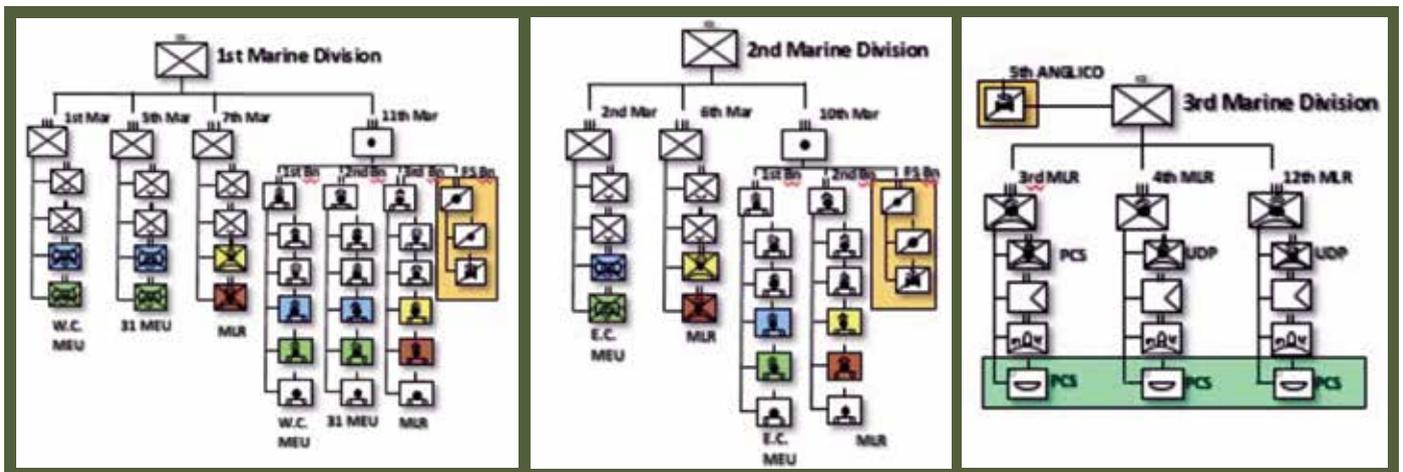


Figure 1.<sup>12</sup> (Figure provided by author.)

With the reduction in infantry battalions, the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* calls for roughly proportional cuts in aviation and other support.

Artillery will get smaller and undergo a transformation. According to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*,

we remain woefully behind in the development of ground-based long-range precision-fires that can be fielded in the near term which have sufficient range and precision to deter malign activities or conflict. Our capability development focus has fixated on those capabilities with sufficient range and lethality to support infantry and ground maneuver. This singular focus is no longer appropriate or acceptable. Our ground-based fires must be relevant to the fleet and joint force commanders and provide overmatch against potential adversaries, or they risk irrelevance.<sup>15</sup>

In practical terms, this means a transition from cannon artillery to rockets and missiles. It is these units that are expected to perform the task of providing precision anti-ship fires in support of sea control/sea denial called for in the concept. Per the TMEABO, cannon artillery in the active forces will be reduced to five total batteries.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the Commandant's guidance signals a shift away from fires in support of ground maneuver, a task requiring massed and sustained area fires and one not suitable for precision rockets and missiles, some of which cost nearly \$2 million per round. With the reduction of cannon batteries, the ability to perform traditional fire support missions like suppression, marking, illumination, and obscuration fires will be nearly nonexistent.

Additionally, as practically every Marine now knows, tanks have been eliminated outright from the inventory.<sup>17</sup> The elimination of tanks, the drastic reduction of cannon artillery, and the dramatic reduction in the number and size of infantry battalions unequivocally signal that the Marine Corps has little intention of being involved in high-intensity ground combat in the future. The infantry's mission of locating, closing with, and destroying the enemy clearly will be a thing of the past. Marine infantry will become little more than a security force for rocket/missile batteries and aviation and logistics assets. The debilitating impact on ethos and culture will be profound, even to the point of undermining the Corps' foundational belief in "every Marine a rifleman." It is ironic that one of the stated objectives of the reorganization is to transition away from two decades of counterinsurgency because, except for the MLRs optimized for a naval campaign in the western Pacific, the rest of the Marine Corps seems to be getting reduced to little more than constabulary forces incapable of high-intensity, combined arms combat.

Finally, the Marine Corps must consider the risk it is accepting by divesting itself of capabilities before new ones come online.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of which missile the Marine Corps eventually buys, that capability will not become operational for several years. But the divestments are happening now—and in some cases have already happened. The Marine Corps of today is a less capable force than the Marine Corps of only two years ago—and it continues to shed capability—which of course undermines national security.

### Mission Command

The concept of mission command merits special mention. As we have discussed, mission tactics (or mission command) are the defining feature of maneuver warfare (Maneuverist No. 12, "On Decentralization," *MCG*, Sep21). The *Tentative Manual* makes the necessary head nod to the concept:

The principles of maneuver warfare and mission command and control permeate all actions of littoral forces conducting EABO, from planning through execution. During planning, commanders aim to create conditions during execution that enable subordinates to operate guided by the essential elements of mission command and control: *low-level initiative, commonly understood commander's intent, mutual trust, and implicit understanding and communications.*<sup>19</sup>

The passage hits all the right notes, but as we read the manual, we have to wonder how much need there will be for mission command. How much latitude is there really for low-level initiative when the EAB will be little more than an inanimate firepower node in a massive kill web comprising myriad sensors and shooters linked together in a comprehensive digital network? The EAB commander's role will consist essentially of securing and sustaining his position on some littoral while the entire fight takes place over the horizon. There will be no

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maneuvering against the enemy or engaging in close combat—the historical strength of the Marine Corps—that is, unless the concept has utterly failed and it is time to fire the final protective fires (which, by the way, apparently will be limited to a small number of 81mm mortars). Movement generally will consist of local repositioning to avoid detection or counterbattery fire.

Moreover, there is an internal contradiction in espousing mission command within the context of a centralized network-centric approach. This problem is by no means unique to EABO. Practically every Service or joint operating concept of the last decade has paid lip service to mission command while making operations increasingly dependent on a comprehensive digital network. *Joint All-Domain Command and Control* is only the most recent, and perhaps most ambitious, effort. It is difficult to see how mission command will survive in such a command and control (C2) environment characterized by centralized situational awareness and detailed control through information technology. It is not practical to say that mission command will take over when the network goes down. (And does anyone believe that taking down the U.S. information network will not be a primary enemy objective in any war?) Mission command requires training and practice; it is not something that can simply be turned on when the network goes dark. A force that has trained and operated under tightly

controlled and highly centralized decision making becomes acculturated to that.

### Conclusion

Returning to the question that began this paper: If EABO is going to be the future of the Marine Corps, does our war-fighting doctrine need to change to support EABO? Based on assumptions about the nature of war that run counter to *MCDP 1*, the EABO concept has little need for maneuver warfare. We believe that doctrine will change. We believe EABO would be better served by a doctrine based on technical and procedural proficiency and limited latitude in the performance of constrained tasks, but we also believe that is not what the Nation expects or needs from its Marine Corps.

History tells us that the track record for accurately predicting the next fight is very poor.<sup>20</sup> China is the pacing threat, without a doubt, but that is a far cry from concluding that the next war will be a high-tech fight with China in the western Pacific. Yet, with EABO and *Force Design 2030*, the Marine Corps seems to be going all-in on just that fight while hobbling the Corps' ability to perform other missions.

The Marine Corps has a history of fearing for its survival any time it comes out of a long period of war in which it has been employed indistinguishably from the Army. We have no doubt the Commandant believes he is protecting the Marine Corps by making it more relevant to the future security environment. The Commandant deserves, and has received, credit for making bold moves. Boldness is a tenet of maneuver warfare, but we fear that the TMEABO and *Force Design 2030* risk transforming the Marine Corps into a niche force optimized for one specific war that must be considered unlikely while rendering it ill-equipped to respond to the many types of crises and conflicts that history tells us are certain. By stripping the Marine Corps of the ability to carry out the crisis-response and combat missions the Nation has long expected of it, the Commandant instead may be consigning it to irrelevance—or worse. As *Warfighting* advises, “boldness must be tempered with judgment lest it border on recklessness.”<sup>21</sup>

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### Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (TMEABO)*, (Washington, DC: February 2021).

2. Ibid.

3. Lyle Goldstein, “Bad Idea: Turning A2/AD against China with ‘Archipelagic Defense,’” *Defense 360°*, (December 2021), available at <https://defense360.csis.org>. To be fair, Goldstein is no supporter of the concept. The very next paragraph begins: “However, archipelagic defense is a bad idea for political, economic, environmental, and military reasons.”

4. See, for example, Andrew F. Krepenovich, “How to Deter China: The Case for the Archipelagic Defense,” *Foreign Affairs*, (February 2015), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>. See also Thomas G. Mahnken, “A Maritime Strategy to Deal with China,” *Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, February 2022).

5. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. by Samuel B. Griffith, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

6. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

7. John Vrolyk, “Insurgency, Not War, Is China’s Most Likely Course of Action,” *War on the Rocks*, (December 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

8. Ibid.

9. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

10. Lanchester’s Laws are a set of differential equations for calculating the strength of two battling military forces over time based on the relative rates of attrition between the two. They were first developed by English polymath and engineer Frederick Lanchester around the time of the First World War.

11. It is worth noting that these numbers are based on two-battalion rotations rather than three-battalion rotations, meaning six months on and six months off, which the Marine Corps has previously found unsustainable for MEU rotations. Switching to three-battalion rotations to ease the operational tempo would leave even fewer infantry battalions ready for immediate deployment.

12. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

13. Ibid.

14. Since the mid-1980s, between the decrease in the number of infantry battalions from 27 to now 21 and the reduction in the size of those battalions, the number of Marines in infantry battalions has been cut essentially in half.

15. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

16. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

17. And with the tanks also the necessary skills to rebuild the capability, as career Marine tankers unwilling to transition to other MOSs have been forced to transfer to the Army.

18. Not to mention the risk of never seeing the savings of those divestitures recouped in other capabilities gained.

19. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

20. See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History*, (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2017).

21. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

