

Persistence and Distribution

Gaining an advantage below the threshold of war

by Capt Ronald J. Lienhardt

In 2019, LtGen Michael Dana famously stated that the Marine Corps was “ill-prepared for the next war” as war’s character shifts from the industrial into the information era, “which is making legacy bureaucratic process and military organizations obsolete.”¹ As people become increasingly connected, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, accurately predicts that war will correspondingly evolve with “the dynamic of human interaction.”² Meanwhile, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, reminds readers that as the character of war evolves, the battlefield will still be characterized “by friction, uncertainty, disorder, and rapid change,” regardless of domain.³ Accordingly, while the nature of war remains constant, the means and methods used evolve alongside its practitioners.⁴

War might still be a “violent clash of interests between or among organized groups characterized by the use of military force,” but the United States military must expand its definition of violence and what to do when conflict exists below the threshold of close combat.⁵ Therefore, the critical consideration this organization faces is what it means to “generate organized violence” in order to “compel our enemy to do our will,” and consider what actions must be taken before the first round is fired so that it can impose its will on the enemy if the time comes to fire those rounds.⁶

Since 2014, the Corps has considered the evolution of those “means and methods” of war through the planning documents of three Commandants. Along the way, several programs and exercises have been conducted to prove and improve the concepts nested in these Commandants’ visions. Of those, the two most critical characteristics of

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amphibious operations in the future are *persistence* and *distribution*.

Persistence: Forced Entry from Within

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* describes a global operating model that defines four layers on the field of global competition: contact, blunt, surge, and homeland. Majs Gordon Emmanuel and Justin Gray define “effective deterrence” as

convincing an adversary that aggressive actions that seek to compromise U.S. national security interests, including

the security of our alliance architecture, are not worth the cost in lives, money, and resources.⁷

Therefore, in order to achieve such levels of deterrence, it is abundantly clear that the Navy-Marine Corps Team must not merely enter intermittently, but persist interminably in the *contact* and *blunt* layers.

As an example of the importance of these two layers, one must look no further than the critical infrastructure and shipping lanes running through the Malacca Strait and South China Sea, in which billions of dollars of shipping and billions more in undersea fiber-optic cables are vulnerable to any number of malign actors. It is here, in the contact layer, defined as “activities conducted in contest zones below armed conflict



Navy-Marine Corps Teams must be persistent in the contact and blunt layers. (Photo by Cpl Anabel Abreu Rodriguez.)

to expose malign behavior and counter influence” that the Marine Corps’ future belongs.⁸

Indeed, in an age where China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy is increasingly active in its desire to increase influence in the region and develop a monopoly in the face of a seemingly distracted United States, what better force is there than an inherently amphibious team of “combat-credible and warfighting-oriented forces” tasked with deterring “aggression or degrade adversary objectives in a conflict?”⁹ However, in order to deny the increased activity of China, the United States must not merely operate sporadically in the region. Instead, persistence is the only way to show our commitment to the region’s stability and to show the world that the United States is still a bulwark for freedom of navigation, security, and prosperity.

The *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* concept (EABO) is one such bold counter to China’s maneuvering in the region and also addresses the concern of adversarial anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) advancements that seek to mitigate the naval advantage long-held by the United States. A critical characteristic of EABO is that it is a “dual-posture context of a persistent ‘inside force’ ... and consequently is a foundational enabling capability for other naval and joint concepts ... that require persistent forward presence to achieve advantage.”¹⁰

The result is a persistent force operating within the adversaries’ weapons’ effective range without risking the fleet. Furthermore, with deliberate electromagnetic discipline and dispersion across a substantial area of operations, forward positioned units are difficult to detect, and no single unit is so critical that an enemy would risk compromising its own security by posturing against it (unlike a carrier or an ARG). After all, as LtCol Scott Cuomo, et al asked in their article *Charting a New Course for the Navy-Marine Corps-Coast Guard Team*:

given that the *National Defense Strategy* is built on a long-term competitive strategy foundation ... is it wise to continue prioritizing new \$13 bil-



Reconnaissance operations are just one way to demonstrate persistence and develop better situational awareness. (Photo by Cpl Patrick Crosley.)

lion aircraft carriers when China can field around 1,230, 1,000-plus mile range, all-weather, mobile, ground-launched missiles to strike each one?¹¹ Instead of more ships, EABO can aid in the advancement and maintenance of “naval and joint sensor, shooter, and sustainment capabilities of the inside force” in order to “leverage the decisive massed capabilities of the outside force with enhanced situational awareness, augmented fires, and logistical support.”¹²

Such persistence can result in continuous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, as well as sea and air space control (or denial), and heightened situational awareness.¹³ These capabilities will be critical in the early stages of a scenario in which the United States must transition into the *surge* and *blunt* layers of global completion.

Distribution: Strength through Maneuver and Security through Dispersion

In hybrid warfare ashore, special operators and guerrilla forces deny their true intentions, confuse international organizations, and preserve the strength of their conventional military forces—a tactic that has been used with great suc-

cess in Russia’s recent campaigns.¹⁴ This is not unlike the “fishing militias” of China operating throughout the South China Sea in particular and in the Pacific in general. As the Marine Corps pursues ways ahead of its adversaries, its adversaries continue to advance A2/AD capabilities that threaten naval forces and, therefore, the United States’ strategic reach and operational maneuver.¹⁵ Similarly, just as maintaining security and protection against a peer enemy is impossible in a static battle position ashore, the same can be said about conventional naval operations at sea. Mobility ashore focuses on the destruction of the enemy by waiting until the attack is vulnerable, then defeating the enemy through a deliberate offensive action.¹⁶ In the same way, Marine units persisting in the contact layer can mitigate the inherent vulnerability of U.S. ships at sea while still accomplishing the task of denying access to assigned terrain for a specific amount of time.¹⁷

Unfortunately, neither the Marine Corps nor the Navy’s current Title 10 responsibilities address what happens when “the naval campaign is not one that starts after an adversary crosses certain armed conflict escalation criteria, but rather one that persists below the level of armed conflict, 24/7/365.”¹⁸



Deployed Navy/Marine forces would provide evidence of the U.S. intent to call upon forces as necessary to demonstrate national intent. (Photo by LCpl Joshua Sechser.)

With the way the naval environment is shaping in the Pacific, a persistent *inside force* is an innovative solution to the security concerns in the region and the A2/AD threats that the Navy increasingly faces. Indeed, while such an inside force is more restricted in its ability to maneuver than outside forces, the benefits of such a force are outlined in the *EABO Handbook*, which states that it is

optimized to persist and partner within range of adversary long-range fires with minimum signature, wide distribution, and acceptable risk,

thereby enhancing survivability [both that of the force itself and Naval forces at sea] and enable[ing] local defense.¹⁹

Just as offensive mobility is an integral part of defensive operations ashore, a dynamic and persistent force in the contact layer is critical to the defense of national, regional, and global interests. Furthermore, with the lightning carrier concept and the existing MEU/ARG construct operating as outside forces, the inside forces' vulnerability is mitigated and allies and strategic partners are emboldened by the United States' ability to quickly call upon forces in the blunt layer.²⁰ However, the Pacific is far too large for one force to control, so such an undertaking will also require "close cooperation and interoperability

with allies and strategic partners" wrote Majcs Emmanuel and Gray, a task that is increasing in rate as this is written.²¹

Conclusion

In a world in which sea-control and American naval dominance is increasingly challenged, the Marine Corps must reimagine itself in order to remain as the vanguard of power projection. Put more succinctly by Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, the Marine Corps should assist the Navy in "preventing the emergence of closed regional spheres of influence" in order to maintain "free access to the global commons of the sea."²² However, what needs to be done is not revolutionary, but expands upon the Corps' own doctrine of maneuver warfare by maintaining *persistence* and trading mass for *distribution* in order to increase its influence and capacity for security.

Notes

1. Scott Cuomo, et al., "Charting a New Course for the Navy-Marine Corps-Coast Guard Team," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

2. Department of the Navy, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington DC: HQMC, 1997).

3. Department of the Navy, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington DC: HQMC, 1997).

4. *Warfighting*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Gordon Emmanuel and Justin Gray, "The Marine Corps' Evolving Character and Enduring Purpose," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

8. "The Marine Corps' Evolving Character and Enduring Purpose."

9. *Ibid.*

10. Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) Handbook: Considerations for Force Development and Employment*, (Quantico, VA: 2018).

11. "Charting a New Course."

12. *EABO Handbook*.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Ronald J. Lienhardt, "Defensive Operations 2025: Protection through Economy and Dispersion, Strength through Observation and Maneuver," (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, April 2019).

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Charting a New Course."

19. *EABO Handbook*.

20. Megan Eckstein, "Marines Test 'Lightning Carrier' Concept, Control 13 F-35Bs from Multiple Amphibs," *USNI News*, (October 2019), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

21. "The Marine Corps' Evolving Character and Enduring Purpose."

22. *Ibid.*

