Seabasing and 21st Century Alliances:

Statement by Commander Gregory Parker

In the next ten minutes or so, I will argue that seabasing has been a sort of barometer of post cold war foreign policy and military theory, and then I will argue that a *reformulated* concept of seabasing has a very promising future. But the first question about seabasing is always, what is it?

At its conceptual core, seabasing moves traditional land-based functions to sea. In the most basic military sense, that means aircraft, artillery, and ground forces. This was a concept that became popular in the 1990s after the Cold War with the drawdown from overseas bases, but it really has historical roots going back centuries and especially in the World War II push across the Pacific. As a data point, by mid 1945, the United States was capable of landing over a million troops on a foreign shore and supporting them with aircraft and logistics

In the 1990s, planners looked to this past as model for using the sea as a vast maneuver space on which the U.S. could position and deploy forces independent of allies and foreign bases, and the seabasing discussions from those years have very strong political overtones. During the Clinton years, for example, we saw an administration very wary of military intervention in foreign conflicts, exemplified by actions in Somalia, by the 1998 missile strikes into Sudan and Afghanistan, and by the Bosnian conflict. In the 2000s, we saw an administration that reserved the right to act unilaterally and preemptively, exemplified by the opening salvos of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, in which Army Special Operations Forces and Marines were launched into Afghanistan from the North Arabian Sea. Concurrently, the defense establishment was consumed by discussions about transformation, which promised to yield a smaller, lighter, and faster force. In all cases, seabasing seemed to offer a certain degree of freedom – freedom *from* allies and the need for allies.

Now, the Navy is already a sea-based service, but it is important to understand that in modern literature, “seabasing,” and “sea-based,” generally are really two different things. In most contemporary conversations, seabasing really refers to the ground force portion of the operation. In other words, seabasing is all about the land. (I’m not claiming that that is the way it *should* be, but rather the way it *is*). The reason for this is that there is a long history of employing aircraft, gunfire, and missiles from the sea without needing to rely on the land. Ground operations from the sea, however, and specifically amphibious assaults, have historically involved moving an “iron mountain” of logistics ashore to support an invasion; this creates an “operational pause” – and a huge vulnerability.

Seabasing in modern discussions then is really about floating this iron mountain and keeping all logistical support and supplies at sea. When we talk about seabasing in the modern context, then, we’re *typically* talking about the ability to push a large ground force ashore…and supply and sustain them from *offshore.*

It therefore should surprise no one that most seabasing discussions in the U.S. are spearheaded by the Marine Corps. The Marines don’t want to be a second land army and sea basing offered them a new vision of amphibious warfare for 21st century. In the last decade, the Marines proposed a squadron of 14 vessels called the Maritime Preposition Force (Future) (MPF(F)) to replace their

three Maritime Prepositioning Squadrons. The MPF(F) would support a brigade of Marines afloat and enable all supply and sustainment for two more Marine Expeditionary Brigades on amphibious ships to remain at sea rather than using the deep water ports that current prepositioning ships require. Prepositioning dates back to the Cold War, when the U.S. intended to use foreign ports and airfields to rapidly reinforce allies by flying in personnel to marry up with equipment. The MPF(F) was to move this to sea; it was the Marines' seabasing vision to float the iron mountain.

Now let's fast forward to the present. Last month, in its 30-year shipbuilding plan, the Navy announced cancellation of the MPF(F). It claimed, the "concept is valid, but not within the Navy's fiscal reach" – an anticlimactic end to a program that was supposed to revolutionize warfare.

What happened? To start with, the foreign policy outlook in 2010 was significantly different than it was when seabasing bloomed. Starting very distinctly in 2005 with the war going poorly in Iraq, we see a real change in language in official documents like the National Defense Strategy. Instead of minimizing allies, we're courting allies. Instead of a "smaller, lighter, faster" mantra, we're advocating large numbers of troops using heavily armored vehicles in a land-locked country. Meanwhile, the Navy is struggling with competing missions and the fiscal demands of its own shipbuilding priorities. The net result is a defense establishment that has largely lost interest in seabasing, a nation that is focused on large-scale counterinsurgency, and a navy struggling to pay the bills

So why is sea basing still worth discussing?

The first answer is that it is geographically compelling. We have all heard of this string of troubling hot spots often categorized as an "arc of instability" comprised of nations that are essentially littoral in nature. Some of them are friendly, some not: the Philippines, North Korea, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, to name a few, are all located on the sea, have mostly coastal populations, and are poor candidates for U.S. basing. So a solution that could begin to address this arc seems very relevant.

But that's a big area, and the Navy's answer to this has been a concept called the "Thousand Ship Navy" published in November, 2005, later branded simply as the "Global Maritime Partnership. The descriptive language in this document is very interesting, as we see in an early speech by ADM Mike Mullen, current CJCS:

> Membership in this 'navy' is purely voluntary and would have no legal or encumbering ties. It would be a free-form, self-organizing network of maritime partners.

I don't think it's entirely clear yet exactly what this means. It sounds more like Facebook than foreign policy. But the evidence also suggests that it resonates with the international audience – particular after it was reiterated in 2007's *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, the tri-service maritime strategy signed by the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The last International Seapower Symposium in September, 2009, for example, was attended by 102 countries and 91 chiefs of services – attendance roughly double that prior to CS21. The GMP has also had some success: CTF-151 is a voluntary, multinational effort to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, and the Malacca Straits have witnessed a dramatic decrease in piracy after Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia came together to address their common problem – *without* U.S. involvement.

So we have two distinct emerging trends. We have a troubling littoral region centered roughly around the Indian Ocean involving countries that are poor candidates for U.S. basing. We have a new "social networking" model of maritime alliances that is emerging and as yet unproven, but that seems to be very popular internationally. It is possible that seabasing holds a key for these

emerging alliances in this vast region. But to do so, I would argue that it needs complete sea base makeover.

I mentioned that in the 2000s, seabasing became essentially a Marine Corps program. But Marines constantly have had to deal with the complaint that there has been no large-scale amphibious landing since Inchon in 1950. Marine expeditionary units have been busy, of course – just not on the brigade scale that the MPF(F) was designed for. To paraphrase General Charles Krulak, who stated over a decade ago that future conflicts were less likely to be the beloved son of Desert Storm than the unwanted stepchild of Chechnya, it seems that rather than the son of Iwo Jima, we're more likely to face the stepchild of Mogadishu.

So what is the right model for seabasing, then? To answer that, we need to turn to an emerging modular concept of Naval organization that has been communicated in the literature as "boxes." Indeed, Robert Work, the Undersecretary of the Navy, has described all of the Navy's ships as boxes or capability containers that would deploy individually or in groups and act as motherships for vessels and aircraft, manned and unmanned. True, this is partly about shipbuilding cost. Ships, after all, have 30-50 year lifecycles and need periodic modifications. But there is also an emerging ethos of modularity that builds on the Navy's multi-function past and which views naval organizations as pieces to assemble and disassemble in countless configurations. It is the Lego model of naval organization. And with respect to seabasing, if we talk about basing *capabilities* at sea in various configurations, *including* but not *limited to* amphibious assault, there is the potential for a much broader concept.

There are already signs of this emerging. For the past several years, the Navy has deployed Global Fleet Stations consisting of ships of intermediate size that travel to various geographic regions – e.g. S. America and Africa – for training and building partner capacity. The GFS is a sea base. Just yesterday, there was an article in the news about DARPA creating modular sea bases from shipping containers that can be configured in infinite ways. But the Navy still deploys the majority of its assets in large strike groups centered around major capital ships like aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships. These are large seabases. So there is a disconnect between the small and the large.

The Marines, for their part, designed their seabasing constructs around a three brigade-capability – again, a scale not employed since Inchon. The Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, however, is experimenting with reducing the lowest level Marine fighting unit from a reinforced battalion (currently in the Marine Expeditionary Unit) to a reinforced company. This would create a small amphibious operations capability that would fit on one ship. There is even talk of placing a single platoon on a Joint High Speed Vessel.

In seabasing, then, we see evidence of both the large and small. What we don't necessarily see is a seamless transition in scale from the small end – like a GFS – and the large end, like the Marines' sea base for major combat operations. Sea basing needs scalable modularity, and it needs a way for international players to plug into it.

There are some emerging platforms that will be interesting to watch in the next several years, but I don't intend to address them here. What is striking to me, however, is that this modular concept is converging from three different directions: modular platforms, a modular military organization, and – perhaps – modular alliances. Individually the trends can't be called totally new, but together they seem to be coalescing into something very unique, something with seabasing as the skeleton.

I'd like to tell you that I know where all of this is going – or even guarantee that it is indeed going somewhere. It may not be controllable from the top down. But most importantly, this revised model of seabasing is more about *uniting* allies on the sea in a loosely structured global network than about the post Cold War strategy of being able to operate *independently* of Allies. It may involve

reexamining service identities, redefining the Marines, for example, as experts in the littorals and reducing their focus on amphibious assault. In any case, it needs to be part of a comprehensive solution to this worldwide, littoral region that we've been talking about for 20 years, and it needs to be part of sending foreign policy back to sea.