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Seabasing Since the Cold War

**Maritime Reflections of
American Grand Strategy**

COMMANDER GREGORY J. PARKER, USN
FEDERAL EXECUTIVE FELLOW



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seabasing is an age-old military concept that has been the subject of 20 years of intense discussion and debate following the Cold War. Resuscitated in the 1990s, when diminishing overseas bases and politically hesitant allies created impediments – both perceived and real – to military plans for force projection, seabasing reflected America’s broader if unwritten strategy to be able to operate independently of allies. It thus had strong and often controversial political overtones. The Marine Corps embraced seabasing as the cornerstone of its 21st century vision for amphibious warfare, but the concept, not coincidentally, began a fall from grace when the large ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a renewed emphasis on coalition building signaled a marked shift in foreign policy.

To remain relevant, therefore, and to reflect this change, seabasing must also evolve. In particular, a revised concept of seabasing built around an emerging modular construct has the potential to be a powerful and unifying vision for 21st century maritime forces. Formulated in such a manner, seabasing is not about *independence* from allies, as it was in its earlier conceptual development, but about *uniting* allies in an innovative approach to emerging littoral geostrategy.

Seabasing’s story is replete with all the drama and soul-searching that characterized the entire post-Cold War era. At its conceptual core, it purports to move traditional land-based functions to sea, from billeting and logistics to the employment of force. Its roots date back centuries, but its pinnacle lay in the World War II push across the Pacific, when the United States created a vast armada capable of carrying its air, sea, and land forces inexorably westward towards Japan. Planners looked to this legacy when the 1990s Navy shifted its focus from fighting *on* the seas to fighting *from* the seas. It was a novel and allegedly transformational vision for a unipolar era.

And as this unipolar moment waned amid the counterinsurgency campaigns of the last decade, the military’s seabasing plans have foundered on the shoals of shipbuilding. With very different opinions about the need for both amphibious and prepositioning vessels, the Navy and Marine Corps struggled through a decade of acquisition plans before eventually canceling the Marines’ hallmark seabasing program in early 2010. Overshadowed by counterinsurgency, seabasing seemed to be “abaft the beam,” yet another relic of an obsolescent military mindset.

As the United States looks beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the world's littoral nations, and especially the "arc of instability," will increasingly dominate its attention. Seabasing, if reconceptualized successfully, will have a critical role to play in this troubling region. By uniting maritime nations in "plug-and-play" alliances that mirror plug-and-play platforms, 21st century seabasing can reconcile the need for capacity with the high cost of naval shipbuilding. Challenging traditional assumptions and even identities, this next vision of seabasing can help inaugurate a new era of American grand strategy formulated for a multipolar world. In sum, 21st century seabasing can begin to send foreign policy back to sea.

CHAPTER ONE

What is seabasing? It's all about the land.

"If we get this concept of seabasing right, it might well be one of the most transformational things the Department of Defense, and our naval forces, will ever do. We will, most importantly, offer our nation a truly quantum leap over what we have today."¹

– Lieutenant General E. H. Hanlon, USMC, 2002

As the second decade of the 21st century begins, perhaps no military concept better represents the tumultuous intellectual oscillations of the 20 years following the end of the Cold War than seabasing. The subject of intense debate, invigorated by the fall of the Soviet Union and the resultant search for the appropriate post-Cold War military strategy, seabasing nominally involves moving many overseas basing functions, including logistics and billeting of forces, from the land to the sea. Most importantly, it involves employing ground forces from the sea. Yet much of the literature about seabasing spends as much time explaining what it is *not* rather than what it is: it is not just platforms; it is not just logistics; it is not just major combat; and it is not just a Navy-Marine Corps endeavor.² Armed with what it is *not*, then, it is fair to ask exactly what it *is*? Surprisingly, a clear vision is somewhat elusive.

Perhaps it is best to start with the official definition given by the 2005 *Joint Integrating Concept* published by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the document that in many ways represented the high water mark the concept of seabasing in the last decade.

Seabasing is defined as the rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and re-employment of joint combat power from the sea, while providing continuous support, sustainment, and force protection to select expeditionary joint forces without reliance on land bases within the Joint Operations Area (JOA). These capabilities expand operational maneuver options, and facilitate assured access and entry from the sea.³

What is new here? To answer this question, it is helpful begin again with the question, 'what is *not* new?' The answer, which provides a fundamental and critical distinction essential to the seabasing discussion is that sea-based assets and sea-based missions are not new. The U.S. Navy, for example, would never

describe itself as anything other than a sea-based service, a term that permeates its mission set. Tellingly, a Google search of “sea-based” yields three pages of results all related to naval missions or infrastructure at sea: “sea-based X-Band radar;” “sea-based ballistic missile defense (BMD);” and even “sea-based wind farms.” It is not until the third page of search results, however, that the term “sea-based” produces any results related to modern seabasing definitions.⁴ Remarkably, “sea-based” seems to have almost nothing to do with “seabasing.”

Somewhat counter intuitively, the usual debate about seabasing is all about employing and supporting ground forces ashore. In that sense, seabasing is all about the land. Of course, the Marines Corps’ identity is already tied to operations from the sea, and the Marines have made amphibious landings their central focus since the days of experimentation before World War II. Coming ashore from the sea is not new. What *is* new, however, is the notion of not only employing forces from the sea but also *sustaining* them from the sea, providing all logistical support from the sea, and then returning (or reconstituting) the forces to the sea following an operation. This freedom from reliance on land would constitute a new capability, at least for large numbers of ground forces, which have typically been replenished ashore via large ports and land-based airfields or via supplies brought over the beach. Seabasing’s ports and airfields, by contrast, would remain at sea.

Why seabasing? The concept has had two primary drivers, both related to significant concerns over the nation’s ability to project force in the coming century. The first is largely political. Following the end of the Cold War, the U.S. strove to make more of its combat forces “expeditionary,” meaning that they would deploy from the Continental United States (CONUS) in case of conflict, rather than from permanent foreign bases. The intent was to reduce its overseas basing commitments and simultaneously free itself from the occasional recalcitrance of its overseas allies in case of conflict. It sought to make America the ultimate, unsinkable aircraft carrier capable of choosing where and when it would take action.

The second driver can be labeled “tactical.” Even with willing overseas hosts, much of the world either does not have sufficient facilities to host large American forces or tactical issues preclude their presence. The rise of missile technology, for example, worries planners when thinking about where to come ashore: even if ports and airfields can be taken and occupied, their predictable location makes targeting them relatively easy by accessible and affordable missile technology, drones and rudimentary artillery. In response, planners envisioned a mobile and elusive force that would be much more difficult to locate and target. As a vast “maneuver space,” the sea seemed the natural domain for such a force.

Although seabasing's intellectual foundations seemed like a natural outgrowth of world events, its detailed conceptual development became something more controversial and subject to radically different interpretations. The Army envisioned the ability to make its heavy units more mobile. The Marine Corps viewed seabasing as the means to reinvent large-scale 21st century amphibious warfare, a desire that gained urgency during a decade spent supporting intensive ground operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the Navy eyed the other services warily, protective of its shipbuilding budget and its own mission priorities, and interpreted seabasing as a logical extension of traditional naval missions. Despite seabasing's conceptual popularity, it clearly meant different things to different people.



**Figure 1. Joint Mobile Offshore Base. Illustration by John Berkey.
Reproduced by permission from *Popular Mechanics*, April 2003.**

Seabasing also typified a period of heady optimism and unrestrained enthusiasm for new technological solutions, especially popular in the post-Cold War Pentagon. Perhaps the most powerful vision of a sea base, the Mobile Offshore Base (MOB), was conceived in the 1990s and eventually graced the cover of *Popular Science* in 2003. The MOB was envisaged as a large, floating airfield that could be positioned almost anywhere in the world and handle a variety of ships and aircraft, making it a de facto joint platform. It was quite literally a base at sea. The concept was eventually discarded in favor of an aggregate collection of

existing or planned ships, but its striking “sci-fi” image ingrained it in the minds of a generation of enthusiasts, and derivative floating module concepts continue to surface in articles and blogs today. It is no wonder, then, that seabasing was often described as “revolutionary,” or that seabasing’s advocates rode the bandwagon of Rumsfeldian “transformation” so enthusiastically.

At an even more fundamental level, seabasing served as a remarkably accurate barometer of post-Cold War foreign policy. With its alleged independence from foreign allies and their bases, it lent itself well to both the Clinton administration’s reluctance to commit ground forces overseas and the Bush administration’s self-declared unilateralism. In short, it dovetailed nicely with at least 15 years of American grand strategy even before its own formulation was complete. The concept’s allure, however, dwindled as the U.S. became embroiled in two large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that could not possibly have been conducted from the sea. Meanwhile, the desire to be free of allies was displaced by the need to court them

But seabasing’s close alignment with grand strategy and foreign policy should also serve as reason for its own resurrection. As events have conspired to undermine the predominant vision of seabasing that resulted from nearly two decades of unilateral thought, they have also illuminated the very unique littoral needs of the 21st century. A new and revised vision for seabasing, it would appear, has a critical role to play in this emerging world.

Before offering any verdict, however, it is important to examine the concept’s roots. As we will see, for all its talk of transformational capabilities, seabasing is firmly wedded to U.S. military history dating back to the World War II campaign in the Western Pacific and beyond. To paraphrase Mark Twain, history may not repeat itself, but it definitely does rhyme.

¹ Lieutenant General E. H. Hanlon, opening remarks at the Navy-Marine Corps Seabasing Conference, Quantico, Virginia on 21 February, 2002. As cited in Colonel Art Corbett, USMC, and Colonel Vince Goulding, USMC (ret), “Sea basing: What’s New?” Naval Institute *Proceedings*, November, 2002.

² See especially U.S. Navy Dept., *Seabasing for the Range of Military Operations* (Quantico, Va.: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 2009), and the undated Joint Chiefs of Staff Powerpoint presentation, “Seabasing: Joint Multinational Operations from the Sea.”

³ *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, 1 August 2005), p. 5.

⁴ Google search conducted on 15 May 2010. “Seabased logistics” is the result that emerges on the third page, with a link to the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, an organization intricately involved with Marine Corps seabasing.

CHAPTER TWO

History that Rhymes

“Our ability to command the seas in areas where we anticipate future operations allows us to resize our naval forces and to concentrate more on capabilities required in the complex operating environment of the ‘littoral’ or coastlines of the earth.”¹

...From the Sea, 1992

Looking for Work

At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Navy found itself without a central mission. The Cold War emphasis on war at sea and strategic missions against the Soviet Union quickly became irrelevant as the USSR dissolved and the Russian military began a precipitous decline. Holding an overwhelming advantage on the seas against any foreseeable competitor and in an enviable position of strength following the 1980s buildup toward a 600-ship fleet, the Navy began developing a vision for the future by looking to the past. A 1954 *Proceedings* article by Samuel P. Huntington that argued for a landward looking Navy was critical to this development. Conceptual proponents of seabasing quote the article with near reverence.²

With its command of the sea it is now possible for the United States Navy to develop the base-characteristics of the world’s oceans to a much greater degree than it has in the past, and to extend significantly the “floating base” system which it originated in World War II. . . . The application of naval power against the land requires of course an entirely different sort of Navy from that which existed during the struggles for sea supremacy. The basic weapons of the new Navy are those which make it possible to project naval power far inland. These appear to take primarily three forms. . . . Carrier aviation is sea based aviation; the Fleet Marine Force is a sea based ground force; the guns and guided missiles of the fleet are sea based artillery.³

Huntington’s formulation assumed the ability to operate uncontested on the seas, a situation that was quickly becoming reality again in the early 1990s. In the absence of an opposing fleet, the world’s oceans thus became a global “maneuver space” in which the U.S. Navy could operate unfettered and, more

importantly, transport aircraft, artillery, and ground forces within miles of a foreign coast. Intellectual momentum built quickly within Navy strategy circles, resulting in *The Way Ahead* in 1991, ...*From the Sea* in 1992, and *Forward...from the Sea* in 1994. These documents consistently emphasized the ability to influence and control events *inland* as opposed to on the seas. The story line was compelling: water covers 75% of the world's surface and carries 90% of the world's trade while 75% of the world's population lives within 200 miles of the coast.⁴ Thus, the Navy turned its focus to this "dense, pulsing demographic ganglia near the seas,"⁵

"The 'From the Sea' formulation reinvigorated the notion of amphibious operations and gave new conceptual clarity to a service whose need had often been questioned during the Europe-centric years of the Cold War."

Using Huntington's three "forms" to assess the Navy's capabilities of the post-Cold War era, it is clear that carrier aviation was well-established and quickly adapting to remarkable advances in Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs), whose effectiveness was plainly demonstrated during the First Gulf War. Sea-based artillery – the guns and guided missiles of the surface fleet and, to some extent, the submarine force – was following a similar evolutionary path. For the Fleet Marine Force, the "From the Sea" formulation reinvigorated the notion of amphibious operations and gave new purpose to a service that struggled to justify its existence during the Europe-centric years of the Cold War.

This new naval focus on the land accompanied a dawning realization that the U.S. would need to operate in more of an "expeditionary" mindset across the services for future conflicts. The need to maintain large, overseas forces to deter an ideological foe evaporated with the implosion of the Soviet Union and led to a "peace dividend" drawdown during the Clinton Administration. Robert O. Work, the current Undersecretary of the Navy and a former analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), has argued that 1990 marked the beginning of a new, "Joint Expeditionary Era" similar in nature to the Expeditionary Era between 1890 and 1945. During this period, the U.S. projected power overseas from the Continental United States via "coaling stations" in order to get sea-based forces in place.⁶ This expeditionary model gave way during the Cold War to a "fight where you're based" model that required the U.S. to maintain significant forward-deployed forces (primarily on land) and rely on the sea to quickly reinforce and sustain established garrisons. As an analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses stated, "We were going to fall in on our allies."⁷

In the 1990s, however, defense planners began to publicly question the ability to access critical areas during times of conflict. Their concerns have evolved over

the years into two primary issues: one political and the other military. Politically, the availability of bases was unclear, and the ability to use them without restrictions during a conflict was even more in doubt. As early as 1986, for example, U.S. military planners seethed at the denial of overflight rights by Spain and France during the Operation El Dorado Canyon Strikes against Libya. In 1992 the Philippines expelled U.S. forces from long-established bases. Perhaps most seriously, U.S. leaders later in the decade found themselves repeatedly defending the use of bases in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain during Operations Northern and Southern Watch, which enforced the no-fly zones against Iraq. The idea of fighting an enemy like Saddam Hussein without the use of nearby ports and airfields was a troubling proposition, and the perceived lack of allied determination reinforced worries.

History has at least partially borne out these concerns. At the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, for example, Turkey denied ground access to the 4th Infantry Division, and Saudi Arabia denied use of its bases for combat flights, forcing the U.S. to move its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) to Al Udeid, Qatar. Moreover, recurring problematic relations with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan during the U.S. deployment in Afghanistan further validated the worst fears of unilateralist military ideologues.

Even with a permissive host nation, however, the emergence and proliferation of guided and ballistic missiles, as well as inexpensive rockets and artillery, called into question the viability of land bases. This “tactical” concern was addressed by 1997 National Defense Panel, which noted:

Even if we retain the necessary bases and port infrastructure to support forward deployed forces, they will be vulnerable to strike that could reduce or neutralize their utility. Precision strikes, weapons of mass destruction, and cruise and ballistic missiles all represent threats to our forward presence, particularly at stand off ranges.⁸

The vulnerability of land bases is arguably the most serious concern because it impacts even those bases offered by friendly (and often needy) allies during times of conflict. This problem implies the need to operate independently from land bases, including ports and airfields.

Looking to the past, strategists viewed the U.S. campaign in the Western Pacific during World War II as a model for success. The sheer scale of the U.S. expeditionary effort in the war against Japan is simply astounding. As Work notes, by late 1945 the U.S. was prepared to land 1.3 million men on mainland Japan and support them with aviation, naval gunfire, and a vast logistics

network.⁹ By the latter stages of the war the Navy had uncontested access to the sea lanes, much the same freedom it enjoyed in the 1990s. The effort was decidedly joint: the Army was trained in amphibious operations and played a significant role in the island-hopping campaign, and the Army Air Corps inhabited forward airfields and used them to launch bombing missions while the front lines moved inexorably toward Japan.

Little usable infrastructure existed on these remote islands. While construction battalions built some facilities ashore, the massive seabased logistics fleet sustained the majority of the effort, ferrying materials and providing floating maintenance warehouses. The defeat of island after island in the Pacific by this combination of assault forces and floating logistics ships provided historical precedent for sea-based ground forces on a grand scale. Quite simply, seabasing had been done before.

Strategy during the Cold War, however, had dramatically reduced emphasis on opposed amphibious assault and offshore logistics. Rather than fighting its way across a vast open ocean, the U.S. intended to quickly support and reinforce allies in the European theater. To effectively accomplish this, it needed to base significant forces overseas (primarily in Europe) and then, in case of conflict, fly in supporting troops and aircraft while shipping whatever could not come by air. The ports and airfields essential to such a strategy would already be available, and the most important factor to success would be how quickly assets could be moved to them. Few believed that the Soviet navy would not oppose this movement. It was simply that such opposition to U.S. naval forces was expected to take place at sea, where the U.S. had a relative advantage, rather than at or near the coast, where allies were responsible for protecting the infrastructure. The intent was to reach the continent with supplies and personnel well before a Soviet onslaught from the East had time to push through Germany and France to the sea, thereby creating the need for a Normandy-style invasion. In such an environment, “forcible entry” amphibious capabilities on the NATO flanks were secondary concerns, well behind speed of supply. And while sealift was a highly visible capability, amphibious assault was not.

Cold War operational plans for the Marine Corps reflected this strategy. Despite a successful and widely-lauded landing at Inchon in 1950 that reversed the Corps’ postwar decay and provided impetus for 1952 legislation that cemented its place in the American military structure (specifically to mandate not less than three combat divisions and three associated Marine air wings),¹⁰ the Marines would not conduct another large-scale opposed amphibious assault for the duration of the Cold War. Indeed, it has not done so to the present day.¹¹ Importantly, the Marine Corps did play a role in every major American conflict in the latter half of the 20th century, but that role was usually as an adjunct land

army (as in post-Inchon Korea and in Vietnam) or as a small-scale landing force against relatively insignificant shore opposition (as in Lebanon and Grenada). Even the “hot war” plans for conflict with the Soviet Union relegated the Marine Corps to landings in Norway or Thrace to defend NATO’s northern or southern flanks, while decisive combat would take place on the North German Plain and the Fulda Gap.¹²

Amphibious operations’ ancillary role during the Cold War illustrates an important nuance in the evolution of U.S. grand strategy in the 20th century. Specifically, while relying on the availability of friendly ports and airfields during the Cold War, the U.S. continued to implement an essentially maritime strategy in concert with its allies as opposed to the continentalist or “heartland” strategy

“While current prepositioning... gets supplies and equipment anywhere in the world quickly, it relies on established ports and airfields, and the personnel who arrive separately do not arrive ready to fight.”

adopted by the Soviet Union. The Soviet approach was consistent with Sir Halford Mackinder’s Heartland Theory, which he first articulated in 1904. Mackinder explained the importance of the Eurasian “pivotal” area by stating, “who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the World.”¹³ This important geostrategic concept laid the intellectual foundation for 20th century conflict, as evidenced by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and provided a clear contrast between the “exterior” United States and the “interior” foe. The interior versus exterior formulation of military strategy has a long history, of course; Jomini’s discussion of it in his 1838 *Art of War* is part of every beginner military strategy class. The distinction between a land and sea-based strategy, exemplified by Britain’s conflict with Napoleonic France, follows a similar narrative.

During the Cold War, the US relied heavily on the sea to operate on the *periphery* of the Communist Bloc, and it used the maneuverability of its navy to threaten the Soviet flanks in an effort to balance the overwhelming Communist conventional force advantage in Eastern Europe. This strategy contrasted sharply with the Soviet heartland approach that created buffer states around its own periphery and pushed outward, occasionally via proxy wars, to extend its influence. The U.S. strategy was also fundamentally consistent with allied strategy in World War II, employed against continentalist Germany as well as the Japanese Empire, which had expanded outward in a fundamentally “interior” or continentalist manner.¹⁴ In each case, the U.S. approach was to operate along its enemies’ exterior lines, treating the enemy “like a bull being harried by a pack of wolves until it collapsed and was consumed.”¹⁵ This

approach was well-suited to the overarching Cold War strategy of containment and the underlying tenet that, given enough time, communism would simply collapse from within due to its own internal failings.

As a result, the maritime, or external, core of U.S. strategy during the Cold War remained largely consistent, regardless of plans (or lack thereof) for amphibious operations. What changed, however, was the location of key battles. In the World War II Pacific theater, the amphibious assault *defined* the key battle: crossing the beach was and is notoriously dangerous, and acquiring a sizable and secure beachhead was essential for allowing additional personnel and equipment to follow, thereby preventing the entire invasion from being pushed back into the sea. Once the amphibious assault was complete and sizeable U.S. forces began to build ashore, traditional attrition warfare took hold. Indeed, by the Okinawa invasion of April, 1945, Japanese defenders abandoned the beach entirely in favor of a protracted, defense in depth strategy, and Marine and Army divisions fought side by side in the long ensuing battle.¹⁶ But the battle had to start with the landing, and, in this sense, the successive amphibious assaults that moved U.S. forces westward defined the front.

In the Cold War, amphibious assaults were decidedly ancillary to the center of the action, which would occur in the heart of Europe. They remained important but primarily because they defended NATO's flank and drew attention away from the front rather than reinforcing it. Opposed amphibious landings (and therefore, the Marine Corps) were simply no longer the strategic centerpiece, replaced instead by rapid reinforcement of on-site forces in the center of Europe.

As rapid reinforcement grew in importance, so too did the capability to provide it. In this sense, prepositioning, a capability so integral to current seabasing debates and endowed with its own considerable legacy, arrived on the scene relatively late. In March, 1979, President Carter signed a directive creating the Rapid Deployment Force and committed prepositioned supplies to support potential conflicts in the Middle East.¹⁷ Concerns about rapid availability of supplies to forces in other theaters spurred an expansion of the concept, and resulted in a fleet of ships operated by the Military Sealift Command and manned by civilians deployed (or rapidly deployable) overseas. Each initiative intended to eliminate the inherent delay in transporting heavy equipment overseas by pre-staging the equipment near potential areas of conflict and allowing corresponding personnel to fly in and join it.

Maritime prepositioning was not the only solution to rapid reinforcement needs. During the same period, for example, the U.S. prepositioned stocks forward on land, including supplies in Norway for the Marines.¹⁸ The Army's fast sealift capabilities were also augmented and improved to get combat forces rapidly

across the seas.¹⁹ Finally, the Army and Navy created the Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) program, a joint endeavor to use seabased logistics in areas without prepared ports and where there is *no opposition*.²⁰ The majority of the solutions, however, still focused on prepositioning.

Prepositioning today consists of: the 16-ship Maritime Prepositioning Fleet, deployed in three five- or six-ship squadrons worldwide to support the Marine Corps;²¹ the Army Prepositioned Stocks-3 (APS-3) program, an eight-ship roster designed to rapidly support the Army worldwide;²² and the awkwardly-titled Navy, Defense Logistics Agency and Air Force (NDAF) program, eight ships with mixed capability to support the four services and DLA.²³ All of these ships are designed to be unloaded in large, deepwater ports. They have some ability to do “in-stream” offload but only in calm seas and at significantly-reduced speeds. The material, dense-packed and in long-term storage conditions, is united with the soldiers who will use it in a process called RSOI (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration), a cumbersome event that can take up to a week. In other words, while current prepositioning capability gets supplies and equipment anywhere in the world quickly, it relies on established ports and airfields. Even more, the personnel who arrive separately do not arrive ready to fight.

This planning model worked well in the Cold War when ports and airfields were expected to be readily available and the key determinants were how much you could bring to the theater and how fast you could get it there. In a sea-based, expeditionary world, however, the availability of established facilities is not a given. In World War II, supplies came over the beach and were piled in what is often called “the iron mountain” of supplies ashore. With the implosion of the Soviet Union, the new focus on the littorals and uncertainty about the availability of ports and airfields, the viability of the heretofore successful prepositioning model began to look doubtful. It was, perhaps, time to float the iron mountain.

Allies Unmoored

The revived expeditionary focus that the Navy embraced in the 1990s received an early test in Somalia, an ideal proving ground for “from the sea” warfare. Beginning on January 7, 1991, concurrent with the much larger buildup for Operation Desert Storm, U.S. forces went ashore to conduct a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO). Thus began a several year deployment marked most memorably by the catastrophic death of 19 soldiers and as many as 1000 Somalis in an October 1993 raid, an event immortalized in Mark Bowden’s *Black Hawk Down*.²⁴ From the beginning of involvement in Somalia in 1991 to the final evacuation of all U.N. forces in March, 1995, operations were overwhelmingly

amphibious in nature. Forces came from the sea, received supplies from the sea, and returned to the sea.²⁵

While serving as a model of expeditionary capability, the culmination of Somali operations revealed as much about political will as it did about military tactics. Following the shocking events of October 1993, the Clinton administration chose to set a timeline to leave Somalia rather than escalate the conflict,²⁶ illustrating a clear reluctance to commit U.S. personnel to messy land conflicts without clear strategic benefits. The expeditionary, sea-based model, while proving its effectiveness at reaching remote littoral areas, was just as effective at quickly getting out.

Reluctance to commit ground forces, especially the army, to conflict areas colored U.S. operations for the remainder of the decade. In retaliation for the 1998 bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, for example, U.S. warships launched cruise missiles on August 20 of that year against the Al Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan and against supposed terrorist camps in Afghanistan. The Al Shifa attack quickly became a lightning rod for criticism of U.S. intelligence agencies when public officials belatedly admitted that there were holes in the evidence linking the plant to terrorism.²⁷ But this new, standoff style of warfare meant that no U.S. personnel were injured as a result of faulty intelligence, effectively limiting the political fallout.

“The expeditionary, sea-based model, while proving its effectiveness at getting into remote littoral areas, was just as effective at quickly getting out.”

More importantly, the administration’s public avowal not to use ground forces in the Balkans during 1999’s Operation Allied Force²⁸ appeared to portend a new style of strike warfare in which the U.S. would simply bomb its enemies into submission. But with a moratorium on the use of the Army and as the Air Force quickly ran out of viable targets, Slobodan Milosevic’s intransigence forced military officials to ponder their next step. The Serbian capitulation, however, effectively forestalled such debate and lent credence to the apparent utility of the combined Navy-Air Force bombing campaign.²⁹ One author cynically contrasted Serbian deaths with the complete lack of allied casualties by stating, “Kosovo represents the grail which American leaders have been seeking for decades: the politically cost-free war.”³⁰

Despite the supposed “aggressive multilateralism” of President Clinton, the decade of conflict ending in 2000 demonstrated a clear trend on the part of U.S. forces to fight as remotely as possible. In such an environment, seabasing’s promise to dramatically reduce (if not eliminate entirely) the reliance on foreign

bases offered great promise. Expeditionary operations from the sea, whether involving soldiers or just missiles and strike aircraft, would allow the U.S. to fight at the time and place of its choosing. This vision was manifest in official service documents, including this 1996 Marine Corps excerpt.

A sustainable forcible entry capability that is independent of forward staging bases, friendly borders, overflight rights, and other politically dependent support can come only from the sea. The chaos of the future requires that we maintain the capability to project power ashore against all forces of resistance.³¹

This post-Cold War unilateral trend only gained momentum following the elections of 2000 and the rightward political shift of the Bush administration, especially after the cataclysmic events of 9/11. The need to project power quickly into remote areas of Afghanistan forced the U.S. to look eastward for new allies, even if that meant accepting strange bedfellows in the short term. In such an environment, traditional alliances and partners seemed of little use. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan concluded rapid agreements to provide logistics hubs for inbound American forces, and Pakistan succumbed to intense pressure by disavowing the Taliban and granting overflight and limited basing rights to the United States.³² U.S. Air Force cargo planes and tankers on the tarmac of former Soviet air bases in Central Asia seemed to herald a new world order.

Enabled by these ad hoc alliances, operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban commenced less than a month after the strikes on the Twin Towers and Pentagon. The initial forays into Afghanistan did not involve large ground units and instead relied heavily on special operations forces and ships in the North Arabian Sea. The viability and flexibility of a sea-based strategy for projecting power, including ground forces, appeared validated when the aging aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* was converted into a special operations platform carrying Army helicopters and when Marines were inserted into Afghanistan from Amphibious Assault ships off Pakistan's coast.³³ If a few special operations soldiers on horses aided by long-range strike could overthrow a regime, then maybe the age of traditional alliances and overseas basing was truly at an end.

For seabasing's visionaries, the "From the Sea" nature of Operation Enduring Freedom's early stages confirmed the need to further curtail America's reliance on foreign allies of any sort. Indeed, the later expulsion of U.S. forces from K2 airfield in Uzbekistan and near expulsion from Manas in Kyrgyzstan,³⁴ coupled with constant uncertainty about the long and politically unpalatable supply train running through Pakistan, suggested that the ability to supply forces from the sea remained the only thing holding the U.S. back from the President's unilateral and preemptive vision, who famously declared in November, 2001, "You are

either with us or against us.”³⁵ For their part, naval leaders expressed this in terms of the “sovereignty” of sea bases. Vice Admiral John B. Nathman, the head of naval aviation at the time, summarized this view in 2002 while commenting about naval aviation’s role in Operation Enduring Freedom.

Sovereignty. There is a great irony here. We have a world conflict on terrorism but three countries that could provide counteroffensive leverage for U.S. forces rolled up their sidewalks. Enough said.³⁶

Conclusions drawn from the rapid initial success in Afghanistan supported earlier unilateral concepts and created a heady intellectual brew in the early part of the decade. A seemingly quick and decisive victory over a nation that previously had been a quagmire for the Soviet 40th Army and that had played a large part in the Soviet Union’s demise suggested that warfare had fundamentally changed. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld used this atmosphere to his advantage, pushing an aggressive “transformation” agenda that touched on every aspect of defense, from bases to personnel to equipment.

“If a few special operations soldiers on horses aided by fighter planes could overthrow a regime, then maybe the age of traditional alliances and overseas basing was truly at an end.”

The word “transformation” has itself become an icon of the Rumsfeld era and is hard to separate from the acrimonious debates surrounding his time as Secretary. At its core, however, the concept incorporated smaller and lighter military formations, the heavy use of air power, and the ability to employ information technology to replace the heavy and cumbersome military of the previous decades. It also leaned heavily on rapid mobilization and the use of smaller, forward-deployed expeditionary forces. It was seen as a dramatic shift from the “Powell Doctrine” of the early 1990s that advocated the use of overwhelming force and a clear exit strategy prior to entering foreign conflicts.³⁷

A few particular strands of transformation are worthy of mention because they provided the context in which the concept of seabasing was developed in the early 2000s. The notion of a “Revolution in Military Affairs,” or RMA, was pervasive during the early Rumsfeld years. For the Navy, RMA apostles were led by VADM Art Cebrowski, a head of the Naval War College and key Rumsfeld adviser. Cebrowski was the Navy’s chief proponent of “network centric warfare,” a concept that argued that individual platforms were no longer as important as the combined, cumulative effects of all platforms sharing information.³⁸ Network concepts found their way into seabasing discussions,

culminating with the Navy's publication of *Enhanced Networked Seabasing* in 2003. This document effectively summarized seabasing discussions to date and incorporated the fashionable lexicon of the era into the concept.³⁹ The eminent fascination with networks attested to a broader, underlying confidence in technology, a confidence that typified transformation in general and that only began to unravel during the Iraqi insurgency.

Uncertainty about the future and potential conflict locations was a repeated mantra: much of the world was allegedly a powder keg likely to blow at any time, and the U.S. could not easily predict when or where that would happen. In acquisition strategy, this view drove a shift from "threat based" requirements to "capability-based" requirements.⁴⁰ In other words, instead of building a force structure designed to oppose a specific enemy, the U.S. would instead build a force structure based on a set of capabilities deemed necessary to collectively fight across the spectrum of conflict. Allegedly, it was more about having the right tools in the toolbox than knowing where they would be used.

A more uncertain world, however, still called for some framework for planning. To fulfill this requirement, the Department of Defense modified the Two Major Theater War construct and devised planning metrics based largely on speed. First came the 1-4-2-1 Construct, initially approved by President Bush as part of the Defense Planning Guidance in 2002. Under this formulation, U.S. forces needed to:

- Fully defend the United States;
- Maintain forces capable of "detering aggression and coercion" in four "critical regions" (Europe, Northeast Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East/Southwest Asia);
- Maintain the ability to defeat aggression in two of these regions simultaneously, and;
- Be able to "win decisively" up to and including forcing regime change and occupying a country in one of those conflicts "at a time and place of our choosing."⁴¹

Secretary Rumsfeld introduced even more demanding requirements in a classified 2003 Pentagon document called "Operational Availability Study." This guidance challenged the services to structure themselves to deploy to a distant theater in 10 days, defeat an enemy within 30 days and be ready to fight again within another 30, a metric since known as "10-30-30."⁴² Such guidance affirmed confidence in the capabilities of conventional U.S. forces and communicated the

central tenets of transformation: speed, technology, and the ability of information to replace “mass.” Unfortunately, the U.S. military was not configured this way in 2003, and achieving such a force, even under the best of circumstances, would take time.

To begin to meet the 10-30-30 goals, metrics would have to be re-evaluated, a process already underway during the early years of the administration and presented in the summer of 2004 by the President as part of his reelection campaign. The “Global Posture Review” reflected a shift in focus from traditional U.S. concentrations of strength, particularly Germany and South Korea, to emerging “hot spots” around the world and particularly toward nations along the “arc of instability.”⁴³ The novelty of the new basing approach was perhaps best encapsulated by a 2003 article in *Foreign Affairs*.

Some of the moves being contemplated reflect genuinely new thinking. For example, General James Jones, commander of the U.S. European Command, envisions creating a set of what he calls “lily pads:” small, lightly staffed facilities for use as jumping-off points in a crisis. These “warm bases,” as they have also been called, would be outfitted with the supplies and equipment to rapidly accommodate far larger forces. These small, expandable bases would be linked like spokes to a few large, heavy-infrastructure bases (such as Ramstein in Germany and Misawa and Yokosuka in Japan). At the margins, “virtual” bases would be established by negotiating a series of access rights with a wide range of states. Much more equipment would be prepositioned at land and sea, with an increased focus on specialized units for rapid base construction.⁴⁴

Transformation, then, built upon and accelerated the “from the sea” concepts that had germinated in the post-Cold War atmosphere of the 1990s. Emphasizing speed, technology, and freedom from traditional alliance structures, the new global posture agenda and accompanying unilateral foreign policy encouraged military concepts that would quicken mobilization and mitigate reliance on hesitant allies. All that was needed was a solid vision from the services.

Following the Paper Trail

In retrospect, the documents that grew out of strategic introspection following the Cold War highlighted seabasing as an integral concept for the 21st century U.S. military. These documents were as notable for what they were *not* as for what they *were*: gone was the maritime strategy of the 1980s with its central

theme of using the sea to oppose the continentalist Soviet Union; gone was the “ends-ways-means” template of typical military strategy. In fact, for 17 years, from 1990 to the publication of the *Cooperative Strategy for the 21st Century* in October 2007, the Navy and Marine Corps spent more time talking about their identity and service vision than what ends they wished to achieve; in short, means trumped ends.

The first significant naval document of this new, unipolar era was an April 1991 *Proceedings* article entitled, “The Way Ahead,” which established the framework for the Navy’s new focus on the littorals.⁴⁵ It was followed in September 1992 by probably the most important papers of the early post-Cold War. ...*From the Sea*. In this seminal white paper, the Navy placed its focus squarely on expeditionary operations and the intent to influence the land from the sea; in doing so, it elevated the Marine Corps to a central role in naval operations and strengthened the bond between the two services to an extent not seen since World War II.⁴⁶ Notably, the concept of sea-based supply, sustainment, and reconstitution was already evident.

“To the Marines, the requirements were in place; all they needed now was a good acquisition plan.”

Military options available can be extended indefinitely because sea-based forces can remain on station as long as required. Naval Forces encompass the full range of logistics support that is the critical element of any military operation. It requires a comprehensive and responsive logistics support system, including air and sealift, replenishment of ships, mobile repair support system...replenishment ships, mobile repair facilities, and advanced logistic support hubs.⁴⁷

The subsequent 1994 *Forward...from the Sea* reemphasized this vision but also reiterated the Navy’s commitment to its own, traditional missions, possibly in an attempt to protect its own share of the defense budget.⁴⁸ In any case, the Navy had clearly stated its new priorities and shifted its focus landward.

The Marine Corps, meanwhile, followed suit with a series of documents meant to delineate its new vision of amphibious operations. In 1996’s *Operational Maneuver from the Sea*, or *OMFTS* as it is widely known, the Corps made a clear conceptual break from its own, over-the-shore amphibious legacy by explaining the need to avoid the “operational pause” that accompanies a beach landing and the traditional need to stockpile men and material ashore. Instead, *OMFTS* envisioned forces proceeding directly from ships, ideally located over the horizon, to their intended military targets and then returning to the sea when

complete. This vision was expanded in 1997's *Ship to Objective Maneuver*, or *STOM*. Both documents were heavily influenced by lessons learned in Somalia.⁴⁹

The basic vision was clear: the Marines would avoid the heavily-opposed amphibious landings of their distant history, including the "iron mountain" of supplies ashore, and instead use maneuver, both on the sea and in the air, to remain unpredictable and attack the enemy's weak points. This idea was not entirely new; the Marine Corps had begun to develop similar amphibious concepts in earnest in the 1980s, and discussions of both seabasing and maneuver warfare dated back decades.⁵⁰ But the demise of the Soviet Union gave new impetus to Marine strategists. It was no longer necessary to assume that large combat units would simply fall in on allies.

Although their vision was powerful, it was also out of reach without significant material improvements. In particular, *OMFTS* required range that was currently not available with traditional helicopters. It required the ability to selectively tailor forces and offload supplies at sea, a capability that did not exist in pre-configured amphibious task forces or in densely-packed Maritime Prepositioning Ships. Finally, it required long-term sustainability, or the ability to replenish both men and material from the sea.

To outline these requirements, the Marines published two subsequent companion documents that focused primarily on logistics. In 1997's *Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) 2010* and 1998's *Seabased Logistics*, the Corps made clear its intent to move beyond the need for deepwater ports and, even more fundamentally, to create logistical hubs at sea. Collectively, the two documents clarified the notion of *indefinite* sustainment: ships offshore would be supplied by a series of shuttles, and the iron mountain ashore would be eliminated entirely. This in turn would allow the Marines to rapidly flow from one location, or one conflict, to another. The transformation underpinnings were already evident, even in documents dedicated primarily to logistics. As one stated, "Adopting best commercial practices, the functions of logistics will undergo a transformation to replace mass with information and speed."⁵¹ For the Marines, the requirements were in place; all they needed now was a good acquisition plan.

Discussions about suitable platforms to fulfill this vision of seabasing began tentatively in the mid 1990s and then gathered steam in the early part of the next decade. The previously mentioned Mobile Offshore Base was a 1990s favorite of Admiral Bill Owens, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs from 1994 to 1996.⁵² Largely discredited in the latter part of the decade, it made a brief conceptual recovery in late 2002 and early 2003.⁵³ A 2001 Institute for Defense Analysis study, however, weighed decisively in favor of a conglomeration of contemporary and future ships,⁵⁴ and the MOB ultimately made little progress

beyond the drawing board. Unfortunately, its greatest legacy was to confuse the seabasing debate following its 2003 publication in *Popular Mechanics*.⁵⁵ Its literal interpretation of a sea base stuck in policymakers and the public's minds, making it difficult for advocates to move forward with different concepts.

Proceeding more pragmatically, the Marines Corps for years had focused on a replacement for the Maritime Prepositioning Ships, equating the need for sea-based logistics with the need to have such logistics *prepositioned*, a view that would have important long-term repercussions. This 21st century prepositioning replacement was labeled the "Maritime Prepositioning Force Future," or MPF(F). The Marines set down their requirements in a 2001 Missions Needs Statement (MNS) that constituted the opening salvo in a long and laborious acquisition process. Once validated, the MNS allowed for a subsequent MPF(F) Analysis of Alternatives (AOA) in 2002.⁵⁶

While the Marines were writing requirements documents to fulfill their *OMFTS* vision, the transformation concepts originating in the Office of the Secretary of Defense began to have important implications for seabasing. In the 1-4-2-1 metric, especially in the subsequent 10-30-30 formulation, speed was critical. To meet such a requirement from the sea, prepositioned assets were absolutely essential; commencing operations within 10 days was simply impossible to do if the corresponding ships and personnel originated in the continental United States. To the Marines, this compressed timeline validated their focus on recapitalizing the MPF force. Quite simply, there was no other way to get to a conflict quickly enough without it.

Meanwhile, the Defense Science Board, the advisory group chartered by the Office of the Secretary Defense to "advise on matters relating to DOD's scientific and technical enterprise,"⁵⁷ conducted a study on seabasing and produced its report in August, 2003. As its starting point, the board used 2003's *Enhanced Networked Seabasing*, which largely echoed the premises of 1997's *MPF 2010 and Beyond*.⁵⁸ Drawing from the lessons learned in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and looking forward to a troubled and uncertain future, the board delivered four primary conclusions, all music to a seabasing proponent's ears:

- Seabasing represents a *critical future joint military capability* for the United States. It will help to assure access to areas where U.S. Military forces are denied access to support facilities.
- Future sea basing needs are *well beyond* today's Navy and Marine Corps operating capabilities.

- The complexity and difficulty of sea basing requires *a coordinated, spiral development effort* to address identified issues and create a joint seabasing “system-of-systems.”
- The United States should *realistically test* its seabasing capabilities to work out problems and develop leadership skills in all services (emphasis in original).⁵⁹

The report went on to list 12 issues (labeled the “Dirty Dozen”) that would have to be addressed to make seabasing a reality.⁶⁰ Remarkably, it endorsed only the airborne version of *OMFTS* concepts, stating that “forces will leapfrog beaches” enroute to military objectives.”⁶¹ In other words, the DSB only saw a need for aerial amphibious assaults, particularly the mostly helicopter-borne tactic called “vertical envelopment.” The Board essentially deemed seaborne assault a thing of the past, an opinion that the Marine Corps has long opposed.⁶² Though such conclusions generated debate even within seabasing’s advocacy, the report’s clear endorsement of seabasing was still encouraging.

To this point, seabasing had attracted significant attention across the DOD, and the widely-expected outcome was the creation of a joint organization dedicated to its development. Such an organization is typical for programs that fundamentally affect all services, and the 2003 DSB report had specifically recommended a Joint Sea Basing Program Office.⁶³ In July, 2004, however, the Pentagon’s Joint Resources Oversight Council (JROC) instead decided to push seabasing directly down the acquisition path and to make the Navy the sponsor, arguably undermining much of seabasing’s inter-service impetus. The Navy in turn developed a *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept (JIC)* and published it in 2005 as a first step in the Pentagon’s elaborate Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS). Along with the definition of seabasing examined previously, the *JIC* included the key metrics that seabasing would have to meet, labeled the “Top Level Measurements of Performance.”

- CLOSE joint sea-based capabilities, including elements of JC2 [Joint Command and Control], to a JOA [Joint Operations Area] to support major combat operations within 10-14 days of execution order.
- ASSEMBLE and integrate joint capabilities from the sea base to support major combat operations within 24-72 hours of arrival within the JOA.
- EMPLOY over-the-horizon from the sea base at least one (1) brigade for JFEO within a period of darkness (8-10 hrs).

- SUSTAIN joint sea-based operations, including up to at least two (2) joint brigades operating ashore, for an indefinite period using secure advanced bases up to 2000 nm away; also support selected joint maintenance and provide level III medical within the sea base.
- RECONSTITUTE one (1) brigade from ashore to the sea base and reemploy within 10-14 days of execution order.⁶⁴

The metrics' details are significant. Speed, as mentioned time and time again, is king. Prescribed here as 10-14 days, the timeline to "close" is more or less consistent with the 10-30-30 metric and conveys transformation's expectations for large-scale conventional forces. The requirement to "assemble" at sea, moreover, is consistent with unilateral force projection concepts dating back to the 1990s; no fickle allies clutter the pages, nor do their unreliable ports or airfields. For its part, the 2000 nautical miles listed under the "sustain" metric implies the intent to conduct operations from the more limited "coaling stations" of the new Joint Expeditionary Era and thereby remain independent of regional facilities

Perhaps the most notable requirement falls under the heading "employ," and it is significant for both its type and scale. The JIC specifies that a sea base must be able to employ a brigade from the sea and support two. Thus, seabasing's key metrics, the measurables against which the

concept must be assessed, pertain solely to ground forces from the sea. In short, the seminal U.S. joint document on the subject made seabasing all about the land. Whether intentional or accidental, this emphasis on ground forces would tilt seabasing's conceptual balance irrevocably toward amphibious assault and influence the debate for years to come.

"This emphasis on ground forces would tilt seabasing's conceptual balance irrevocably toward amphibious assault and color the debate for years to come."

In terms of scale, the 1-2 brigade sizing constraint places it within the intermediate range. A brigade's size is highly dependent on the specific organization. Since 2004, the Army has mostly organized itself into Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs), organic combat units usually consisting of two maneuver battalions, a reconnaissance battalion, and enabling combat service support. Army BCTs lie on the lower end of the numerical scale, ranging from 2,500-5,000 people. Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEBs), on the other hand, number nearly 15,000 people, though that number includes ground, aviation, logistical, and headquarters personnel, many of whom would not come ashore during an

assault. As a joint document, the seabasing JIC does not specify which service the “brigade” belongs to, so it is difficult to cite specific numbers.

In any case, the order of magnitude is more important than the exact size. According to the 2005 JIC, if the U.S. wanted to put ashore roughly 5,000 people (one brigade), it would need to sustain approximately 10,000 (two brigades). That makes the force ashore much larger than a simple raiding or special operations force but much smaller than the amphibious forces of World War II or even Inchon. It would also be far smaller than the tens of thousands of soldiers and Marines deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq.

The 2005 JIC’s publication was arguably seabasing’s high water mark – at least over the next several years. At that point, the concept had 15 years of Navy and Marine Corps intellectual development to support it; it had conflicts ranging from Somalia to Operation Enduring Freedom to serve as justification, and; it had almost universal support, ranging from old-school amphibious advocates to the forward-looking Defense Science Board. But the push to create material solutions and the conceptual bias toward ground forces revealed conceptual, cost and implementation dilemmas. Despite the considerable momentum of the previous 15 years, the rest of the decade would not be so kind.

¹ U.S. Navy Dept., . . . *From the Sea: Preparing the Naval Service for the 21st Century*, Navy and Marine Corps White Paper (Washington, DC: September 1992), 1.

² See especially Robert O. Work, “On Seabasing,” in *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Carnes Lord, Newport Paper 26 (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2006), p. 128; Douglas M. King and John C. Berry, Jr., “Seabasing: Expanding Access,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 50 (3rd Quarter 2008), p. 47; and U.S. Navy Dept., *Seabasing for the Range of Military Operations*, p. 2.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1954, p. 491.

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, “The Navy’s New Flat Earth Strategy,” *Atlantic*, 24 Oct 2007, available at <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200710u/kaplan-navy>>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Work, “On Seabasing,” p. 99.

⁷ Dr. Keith Costa (Center for Naval Analyses), interview by the author, 6 November 2009.

⁸ National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Defense Dept., 1997), p. 12.

⁹ Work, “On Seabasing,” p. 105.

¹⁰ Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), p. 58.

¹¹ The Marines deployed a two-brigade task force in the Persian Gulf at the onset of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 for a potential opposed assault. The largest such force since Inchon, it was credited with diverting seven Iraqi divisions, but it served mostly as a deception and was not employed. See Robert O. Work, *Thinking about Seabasing: All Ahead Slow* (Washington, D.C.: CSBA, 2006), p. 76.

¹² Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 609.

¹³ Geoffrey Sloan, “Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999), p. 18.

¹⁴ Professor Robert Rubel of the Naval War College makes this point in his unpublished draft, “Maritime Influence on Grand Strategy: The Global Exterior Position,” January 2010.

¹⁵ Rubel, “Maritime Influence on Grand Strategy.”

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- ¹⁶ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, pp. 433-438.
- ¹⁷ Major Douglas A. Darling, USMC, "Maritime Prepositioning Forces: Are They What They Seem?" Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1989, p. 1, available at <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1989/DDA.htm>>.
- ¹⁸ Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 61.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ²⁰ See "Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS)," at <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/jlots.htm>>.
- ²¹ Military Sealift Command, "Maritime Prepositioning Force," available at <<http://www.msc.navy.mil/PM3/mpf.asp>>.
- ²² Military Sealift Command, "Army Prepositioned Stocks-3 Ships (APS-3)," available at <<http://www.msc.navy.mil/PM3/cpf.asp>>.
- ²³ Military Sealift Command, "Prepositioning," available at <<http://www.msc.navy.mil/pm3/>>.
- ²⁴ For a basic account, see "Battle of Mogadishu (1993)," available at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Mogadishu_\(1993\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Mogadishu_(1993))>.
- ²⁵ For a comprehensive account of littoral operations in Somalia, see Gary J. Ohls, *Somalia...From the Sea*, Newport Paper 34 (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2009).
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- ²⁷ See James Risen, "To Bomb Sudan Plant, or Not: A Year Later, Debates Rankle," *The New York Times*, 27 October 1999, available at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20000831005711/http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/sudbous.htm>>.
- ²⁸ "Operation Allied Force: Day One," *CNN.com*, 25 March 1999, available at <<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9903/24/nato.attack.bullet/index.html>>.
- ²⁹ This interpretation was vociferously countered in Earl H. Tilford, Jr., "Operation Allied Force and the Role of Air Power," U.S. Army War College *Parameters*, Winter 1999-2000.
- ³⁰ Mark Danner, "Kosovo: The Meaning of Victory," *New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1999.
- ³¹ U.S. Navy Dept., *Operational Maneuver from the Sea (OMFTS)* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1996) p. 2.
- ³² Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 154.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 167.
- ³⁴ See, for example, Jim Nichol, *Uzbekistan's Closure of the Airbase at Karshi-Khanabad: Context and Implications*, Congressional Research Service Report RS22295 (Washington, DC: CRS, 07 October 2005); and Jim Nichol, *Kyrgyzstan's Closure of the Manas Airbase: Context and Implications*, Congressional Research Service Report R40564 (Washington, DC: CRS, 04 May 2009).
- ³⁵ "'You are either with us or against us,'" *CNN.com*, 06 November 2001, available at <<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/U.S./11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>>.
- ³⁶ Vice Admiral John B. Nathman, "'We were Great:' Navy Air War in Afghanistan," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March 2002.
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- ³⁸ See Vice Admiral Arthur K. Cebrowski, USN, and John H. Garstka, "Network-Centric Warfare – Its Origin and Future," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1998.
- ³⁹ See Lieutenant General Edward Hanlon Jr., USMC, and Rear Admiral R.A. Route, USN, *Enhanced Networked Seabasing* (Marine Corps Combat Development Command and Navy Warfare Development Command, 2002).
- ⁴⁰ See, for example, Colonel Stephen K. Walker, USA, "Capabilities-Based Planning: How it is Intended to Work and Challenges to its Successful Implementation," U.S. Army War College Research Project, 18 March 2005.
- ⁴¹ David Isenberg, "The U.S. Global Posture Review: Reshaping America's Global Military Footprint," *Basic Notes*, 19 November 2004, available at <<http://www.basicint.org/pubs/Notes/BN041119.htm>>.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*

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- ⁴⁴ Kurt M. Campbell and Celeste Johnson Ward, “New Battle Stations,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2003.
- ⁴⁵ See H. Lawrence Garrett III, Frank B. Kelso II, and A. M. Gray, “The Way Ahead,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, April 1991, pp. 36–47.
- ⁴⁶ This early conceptual alignment eventually gave way to what one author calls “widely divergent world views.” See Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 129.
- ⁴⁷ U.S. Navy Dept., . . . *From the Sea*, p. 1.
- ⁴⁸ Ohls, *Somalia...From the Sea*, p. 17.
- ⁴⁹ For a comprehensive account of Somalia’s influence on Marine doctrine, see Ohls, *Somalia...From the Sea*.
- ⁵⁰ Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, pp. 73, 120.
- ⁵¹ U.S. Navy Dept., *Seabased Logistics* (Washington, DC: 12 May 1998), p. 2.
- ⁵² Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, pp. 108-110.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-173.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ⁵⁵ See Jim Wilson, “Military Joint Mobile Offshore Base,” *Popular Mechanics*, April 2003.
- ⁵⁶ Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 170.
- ⁵⁷ Defense Science Board Charter, available at <<http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/charter.htm>>.
- ⁵⁸ For a discussion, see Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, pp. 182-183.
- ⁵⁹ *Defense Science Task Force on Sea Basing*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, August 2003), p. xi.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. ix, x.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. iv.
- ⁶² Work, “*On Seabasing*,” pp. 117-120.
- ⁶³ *Defense Science Task Force on Sea Basing*, p. 43.
- ⁶⁴ *Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept*, p. 8

CHAPTER THREE

Seabasing in Rocky Shoals: The Vision Fragments

“Sea basing is what we saw – or what I describe as the city at sea – that we literally built in Indonesia to help those countries [after the 2004 Tsunami]. There is no other institution in the world that could have done that. Sea basing is what we did for Katrina, sea basing was the hundreds of ships off the Turkish coast and all the around the northern Arabian Gulf prior to the commencement of OEF.”¹

– Admiral Mike Mullen, CNO, 2005

“You know, back in its origins, what the sea base offered to us at the high end was the potential to confuse an enemy. If you look at any amphibious operation, the objectives are always identifiable. It’s always going to be the port and the airfield. So we develop CONOPS where we would not necessarily land in the face of the enemy. We would land where he was not, but we always had to make a right or a left, and guess what? Go for the port or the airfield.”²

– General James T. Conway, Marines Corp Commandant, 2009

Speed is Life

The year 2005 will likely be remembered as the year the American military made a fundamental transition in philosophy, from an almost arrogant overconfidence in its quick-strike, conventional abilities to a sobering realization that 21st century warfare would be typified by difficult counterinsurgency campaigns.³ The smaller, lighter, and faster strategy at the core of transformation, however, was proving ineffective in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Thomas Friedman parodied the shift in confidence in an October, 2004 *New York Times* editorial in which he described the Rumsfeld Doctrine as “just enough troops to lose.”⁴ The deteriorating situation in Iraq, coupled with the lack of measurable progress in Afghanistan,

“The deteriorating situation in Iraq, coupled with the lack of measurable progress in Afghanistan, began to place serious doubts on some of the assumptions building from 15 years of unipolar mindset.”

placed serious doubts on a number of assumptions built upon 15 years of a unipolar mindset.

For seabasing, the defining issue to emerge from the earlier, more ambitious era can be summarized as “the need for speed.” The ability to commence a large-scale conflict in approximately ten days, as laid out in the 10-30-30 metric, necessitated a prepositioned force, and the MPS squadrons therefore were a natural fit. The MPSRON vessels, however, were large, commercial ships not designed to military survivability standards, and the Marine Corps’ desire to “operationalize” their replacements (i.e., to use the MPF(F) vessels as part of the sea base and even to employ combat Marines from them) suggested a more rugged, robust capability.⁵ For their part, the Marine Corps interpreted the MPF(F) as an *addition* to existing amphibious ships, already numbering 35 at the time. If viewed as a strictly one for one replacement for the preexisting MPSRON vessels, this made sense. But since the new ships would do more than just provide logistics support, they would cost more than their commercial forebears, and the Navy therefore saw them as *replacements* for amphibious ships.⁶ Thus, even within the Department of the Navy, seabasing generated significant debate.

The impasse over the nature of the MPF(F) was symptomatic of a deeper conceptual misalignment between the Navy and the Marine Corps, a rift that would continue to widen. In October, 2002, the Navy published yet another concept paper called *Sea Power 21* under the guidance of Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark. In Clark’s estimation, “sea power” consisted of Sea Strike (sea-based offensive power), Sea Shield (sea-based protection of those assets), and Sea Basing (the hosting at sea of military power, and particularly the ships, aircraft, and personnel).⁷ The fact that Sea Basing was separate from Sea Strike in Clark’s formulation showed that, to the Navy, sea basing really did mean *basing*. It was simply the hosting of assets at sea and was relatively unrelated to their employment.

To the Marine Corps, however, sea basing was an umbrella concept for both basing and the missions that would originate from the sea base. It encompassed the entire “close-assemble-employ-sustain-reconstitute” range of capabilities defined by the 2005 JIC that stemmed from 1997’s *MPF 2010 and Beyond*. The differences between services were far more than academic nuances because they framed the way in which each approached the debate and, perhaps more importantly, who attended the debates. According to one analyst present during the MPF(F) concept development, the Navy saw the matter largely as a *logistical* issue consistent with the *Sea Power 21* formulation and sent representatives with logistics expertise to meetings with the Marine Corps. The Corps, however,

viewed “Sea Strike” (i.e. power projection) as *part* of seabasing and chafed at the Navy’s relative lack of interest.⁸

Intriguingly, an August, 2004 *Defense Daily* interview with Admiral Clark highlighted this Navy-Marine Corps disconnect over *Sea Power 21* and provided an intimate glimpse into Clark’s view of who was leading the conceptual charge.

“I wrote Sea Power 21 as a Navy document,” Clark said. Over time, then Marine Commandant Gen. James Jones and current Commandant Gen. Michael Hagee found alignment with the Sea Power 21 mindset, he added.⁹

The MPF(F) AOA, completed in 2004, examined three possible paths forward for the MPF(F): an in-kind replacement of existing MPS ships; a modest improvement to existing MPS ships to achieve limited seabasing capabilities, or; a complete replacement of the MPS with new construction ships to fulfill the Marines’ seabasing and *STOM* visions.¹⁰ Ultimately, the latter solution prevailed because it would “provide the most capability at the least cost with the earliest initial operational capability.”¹¹ Thus, a 14-ship “hybrid” MPF(F) squadron was to be procured in three increments. The squadron consisted of:

- 3 T-AKE Auxiliary Cargo and Ammunition Ships
- 3 Mobile Landing Platforms (MLPs)
- 2 LHA(R) Amphibious Assault Ships
- 1 LHD legacy Amphibious Assault ship drawn from the existing amphibious fleet
- 3 LMSR Large, Medium-speed, roll-on, roll-off ship
- 2 T-AK legacy (dense-packed) pre-positioning ships transitioned from the MPSRONS (See Figure 2).

The squadron represented a blend of old and new vessels and ship concepts. The T-AKEs were based on existing commercial ship designs modified to allow selective offloading of equipment and supplies, a capability critical to the seabasing concept. Whereas traditional MPF ships were expected to unload large quantities of dense-packed material and supplies in port, the ships in a sea base would have to be able to remove and replace only what was needed at a given time while at sea. This approach necessitated a less dense mode of packing coupled with a more responsive approach to logistics.

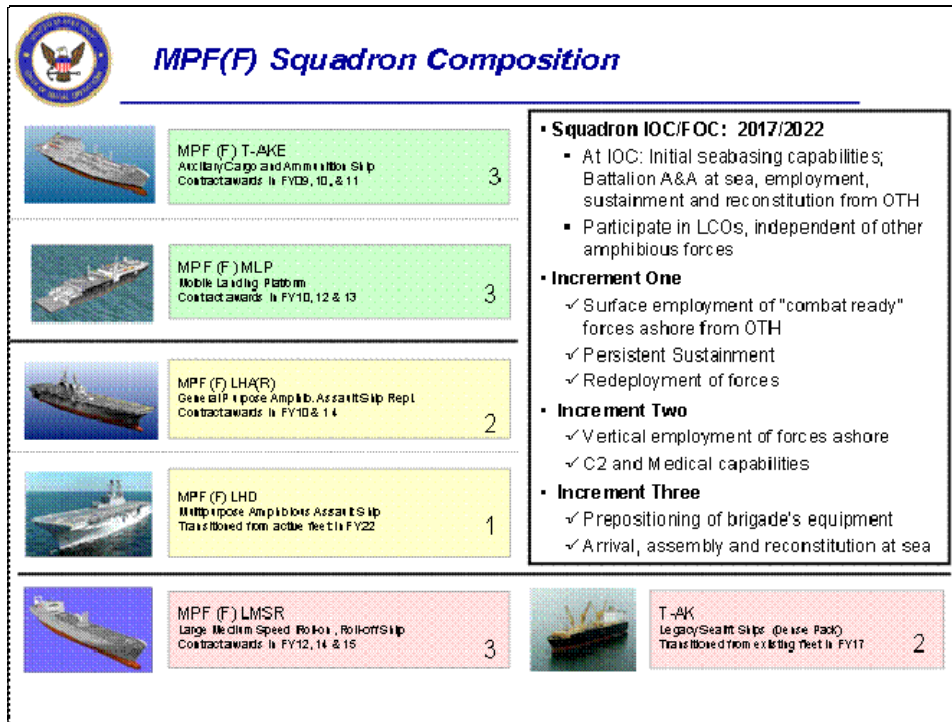


Figure 2. MPF(F) Squadron Composition (Reprinted from Maritime Prepositioning Force Future (MPF(F)) Program Overview, Powerpoint Brief, October 2009).

The amphibious assault ships served as the “airfield” in the port and airfield at sea concept, and the LMSRs served in a traditional roll-on, roll off capacity, hosting vehicles and equipment. They had already served the role successfully with the Army’s Prepositioning Service (APS), and while the design and packaging of the ships together was somewhat novel, much of it was based on pre-existing designs and concepts.¹²

The Mobile Landing Platform (MLP), however, was a truly new design, and in many ways it was key in making everything else work together. Essentially a floating pier, the MLP was intended to move large vehicles, equipment and personnel between vessels as well as transport them to a point near shore for debarkation. The MLP was the ultimate “connector” between ships. In February, 2010, a Marine Lieutenant Colonel touched upon the importance of such a vessel while blogging about a seabasing war game:

Now anyone who has been a part of a Navy surface combatant group knows that at times it is easier to swim to another ship than it is to get a ride there, or have a phone call with someone on another ship. So you can see quickly, that a key element of a successful seabase is ship to ship, and ship to shore connectors.¹³

With a planned Initial Operational Capability (IOC) of 2017 and a Full Operational Capability (FOC) of 2022, the MPF(F) was designed for a range of operations, from low-end train-advise-assist missions all the way up to large-scale Major Combat Operations (MCOs). The Marines, moreover, spent considerable effort in the waning years of the decade devising plans to enable them to tailor and scale the squadron to meet every range of conflict or applications across the “range of military operations” (ROMO).¹⁴ But the most difficult scenario, and the one that the requirements had been built around, was the need to support the 3.0 MEB amphibious assault that has long been a Marine metric for amphibious lift.

Amphibious lift plays such a central role in the requirements for seabasing that it deserves further explanation. Modern Marine Corps operating units are structured into Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs), consisting of an Air Combat Element (ACE), Ground Combat Element (GCE), and Logistics Combat (LCE). The smallest typical MAGTF is a 2200-person Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), deployed with an Amphibious Readiness Group (ARG), or Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) when it includes accompanying destroyers and submarines. The Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), totaling approximately 14,000-15,000 men, is the next level of organization, though not the Marine Corps’ preferred fighting unit. Finally, the Corps is organized into three Marine Expeditionary Forces: I MEF is based at Camp Pendleton, CA; II MEF in North Carolina, and; III MEF in Japan. A MEF is organized around the equivalent of a division of infantry and a wing of aircraft. It rarely deploys together as a single force, though it may do so for major overseas conflicts, such as the immediate onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹⁵

Since the end of World War II and General Omar Bradley’s notorious statement, 11 months before Inchon, that there would never be another need for a large-scale amphibious invasion,¹⁶ a number of studies examined how much amphibious lift capacity is necessary. Two separate studies were conducted in the 1980s; the first, DoN Lift I, was commissioned in 1982, and the second, DoN Lift II, was commissioned in 1989. Planning around the enemy construct of a Soviet Motorized Rifle Division, the Marines argued forcefully during the 1980s for 2.0 MEF of amphibious lift.¹⁷ In other words, the U.S. should create the amphibious lift capacity to deliver an MEF (approximately three Marine brigades) to a foreign shore in both the Atlantic and Pacific for a forcible entry amphibious assault.¹⁸

Even during the Reagan buildup of the 1980s, such a force was considered fiscally unattainable, and the Corps settled for a 1 MEF + 1 MEB alternative. Following the DoN Lift 2 study and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet

Union, the Navy and Marine Corps agreed to a lesser target of 3.0 MEBs, and, more importantly, a “fiscally constrained” target of 2.5.¹⁹ Even after these concessions, however, the Corps continued to insist that its basic fighting structure was an MEF, and the MEB construct was primarily for accounting purposes only. In other words, individual MEBs would still be recombined into an MEF for combat.²⁰ Regardless, the 3.0 MEB target equated to about 47 ships.

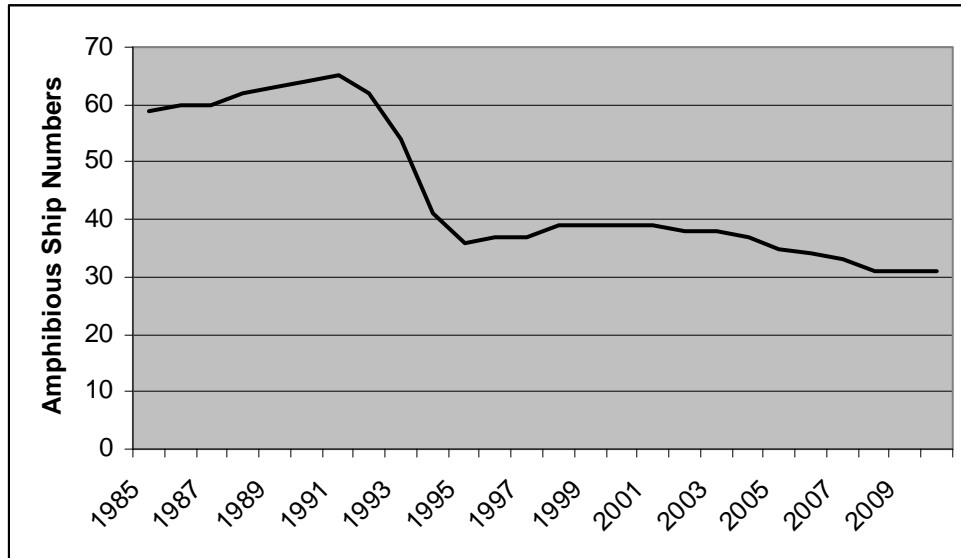


Figure 3. Amphibious Ship Force Structure, 1985-2010. Adapted from Matthew T. Robinson, *Integrated Amphibious Operations Update Study: (DoN Lift 2+) – A short history of the amphibious lift requirement* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2002), p. 37.

The Navy struggled to meet this more limited goal, however, and amphibious ships have since declined in number from 65 in 1991 to approximately 31 today (See Figure 3).²¹ The DonLift 2 study remained the sole concrete guidance for amphibious lift procurement for nearly 16 years until 2006, when updated Strategic Planning Guidance directed the services to procure a minimum of two brigades of forcible entry capability.²² The Marine Corps has argued consistently that this 2.0 target requires 34 available ships (of 38 total) but has agreed with the Navy that the absolute minimum should be a 30-ship availability with a 3-ship maintenance reserve.²³ Each brigade would then deploy with roughly 5 LHD/LHAs, 5 LPDs, and 5 LSDs,²⁴ and the entire amphibious fleet would consist of 11 ships of each class. With the MPF(F) in the acquisition process, however, the 3.0 MEB target was still accessible: two MEBs would arrive via traditional amphibious ships, and one MEB would arrive via the MPF(F). While its amphibious fleet has dwindled, the Marine Corps has not strayed from its 3.0 MEB goal for forcible entry.

Even as the MEB has emerged as the de facto basic combat organization for the Marine Corps, it is rarely deployed as such. Instead, Marines typically deploy the much smaller 2,200-person MEU on a routine basis in Expeditionary Strike Groups or Amphibious Readiness Groups. At any given time, there are usually two ESGs deployed and a third at sea or ready to surge from Japan,²⁵ but they are not typically combined. If there is a need for an MEB-sized force (or larger) from the sea, the Marines prefer to tailor and outfit that force at its source (usually meaning the continental United States) and deploy it intact. As a result, its arrival overseas could take 30 to 45 days or more. In addition, the Marines traditionally have prepared for large-scale amphibious assaults by conducting a rehearsal first.²⁶ This event is particularly important because landings of this size require significant coordination and practice.

MPF(F) concepts of operations made the MPF(F) responsible for hosting the third, reserve brigade of a three-MEB assault during major combat operations.

Personnel would fly to an advance base and join their MPF(F) ships while the Amphibious Task Force (ATF), carrying the other two brigades, sailed forward.²⁷ The irony is that this was similar to the Cold War model in which the Marines

“At a time when pundits began to argue that Iraq and Afghanistan epitomized the conflicts of the future, the strange, hybrid vessels of the Marines’ new vision for amphibious warfare were a hard sell, indeed.”

would fly personnel to a forward base to join up with their equipment. Now, however, they would join up with their equipment at sea. This got personnel quickly to the fight, but if the Amphibious Task Force itself took 30-45 days to arrive, then the reserve, non-forcible entry ships of the MPF(F) could conceivably be the first on scene with their Marines having never practiced the assault! While this was primarily an issue for the high end of conflict, for missions ranging from train-advise-assist to noncombatant evacuation operations, the Marines developed creative packaging solutions that used the MPF(F) ships in a standalone mode or coupled them with existing forward-deployed Expeditionary Strike Groups.²⁸ But if the MPF(F) was supposed to be the manifestation of the large-scale amphibious assault envisioned in the 10-30-30 metric, it had significant conceptual flaws.

The Marine Corps worked to clarify the MPF(F) in a series of papers and briefs, but doubts lingered. As early as July, 2005, the Senate Armed Services Committee expressed concern “about whether the concept of sea basing is technically feasible and fiscally prudent” and suggested that “the requirement for sea basing has not been refined beyond a concept of operations.”²⁹ Despite the Marines’ best efforts, doubt about the MPF(F) CONOPS would linger for the next several years, eventually creeping into the Navy’s official shipbuilding reports.

Indeed, the disconnect between speed and scale underscores the MPF(F)'s amalgamation of mixed concepts and capabilities. Intended to provide the missing at-sea sustainment capability, the means to float the iron mountain and eliminate the vulnerability of piling supplies and equipment on the shore, it would be composed primarily of commercial-grade vessels and therefore would not be capable of forcible entry. It would have the quick response capability inherent in all prepositioning vessels and would carry the supplies and material for an entire MEB, but to support a serious forcible entry operation, it would have to wait for its amphibious cousins to sail from CONUS and would then constitute a de facto holding pen for the third MEB. Its cost, meanwhile, would come at the expense of dedicated amphibious ships. And at a time when pundits were beginning to argue that Iraq and Afghanistan epitomized the conflicts of the future, the strange, hybrid vessels of the Marines' new vision for amphibious warfare were a hard sell.

Losing the Navy's Interest

While the size and exact nature of the MPF(F) squadron occupied Marine planners and strategists, the Navy found itself was busy in the latter part of the decade with an expanding mission set, a host of shipbuilding woes and corresponding budget shortfalls. All served to undermine seabasing as a Navy priority, at least as it pertained to amphibious assault. To the Navy, amphibious ground operations were only part of a larger mission set of controlling the littorals, or "green water," that dated back to 1992's *From the Sea*. Ships for the Marines, therefore, were only part of a bigger issue.

After those early, optimistic days, however, the Navy struggled to devise a credible and comprehensive acquisition strategy to fulfill the green water requirement. Recommendations ranged from a new fleet of corvettes to the "streefighter" concept proposed by Admiral Cebrowski: a small and fast littoral vessel intended to be both cheap and expendable in combat.³⁰ But as the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) came to a close, however, the Navy's only true green water solution was the controversial Littoral Combat Ship, a mission-modular design whose cost had exploded from \$220 million to roughly \$600 million and which had been the subject of intense congressional and budgetary scrutiny.³¹ Meanwhile, the program of record, the Navy's DDG-1000, had been abruptly truncated to three vessels in 2008 in order to divert money to the construction of more Arleigh Burke class destroyers (DDG-51), which have a greater ballistic missile defense (BMD) and anti-submarine (ASW) capability.³² The conscious choice to favor the open-ocean BMD and ASW capabilities of the Burke over the naval gunfire support capabilities of the DDG-1000 only added salt to the Marine Corps' wounds.³³

The focus on the land-sea interface manifested itself in two other, high-profile Navy programs whose extensive visibility edged out seabasing in both the public and DOD's eyes. The first, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), was a joint venture that involved the Navy and Coast Guard and purported to gain awareness of the maritime domain and, as a result, predict and prevent possible terrorist or hostile acts emanating from the sea.³⁴

“The proper means with which to respond to the China threat was a subject of intense debate, but amphibious assault capability was perhaps the least likely contender.”

An immensely difficult and complicated task, MDA challenged planners and programmers to create a viable, almost entirely defensive strategy that had little to do with projecting forces ashore. Moreover, by emphasizing the collection of “actionable intelligence,” it required extensive international cooperation. The November 2008 attacks on Mumbai only underscored concerns about sea-based terrorism and added urgency to the MDA program.

The second high-profile mission was sea-based Ballistic Missile Defense. For years the Navy had been developing and operating a significant BMD capability with its Aegis radar system and SM-3 missiles, but the capability took center stage in September 2009, with the announcement that a previously-planned ground-based system utilizing interceptors in Poland and radars in Czechoslovakia would be abandoned in favor of Navy destroyers operating from the Mediterranean Sea.³⁵ Aside from significant foreign policy implications, the decision left Navy budgeters scrambling to acquire funds to fulfill the ambitious Aegis development plan while still completing their own, original 313-ship plan.³⁶

Overshadowing these issues of capability was the ever-present specter of China, whose own intense modernization program left many arguing for a China-centric naval strategy reminiscent of the 1986 *Maritime Strategy's* focus on the Soviet Union. China's buildup seemed to offer an “asymmetric” template for nations seeking to oppose the overwhelming superiority of U.S. conventional naval forces. Clearly outmatched in conventional capability, China responded by developing large quantities of “anti-access” weapons: quiet, capable diesel submarines that could operate close to shore; short- and medium-range ballistic missiles ostensibly able to target land-based installations from Taiwan to Guam as well as U.S. aircraft carriers in the open ocean, and; high-tech anti-satellite and cyber warfare capabilities that threatened to erase U.S. technological and informational advantages on the battlefield.³⁷ The proper response to the China

threat was (and remains) subject of intense debate, but amphibious assault capability was perhaps the least viable solution.

Faced with this expanding mission set and a decline in visibility due to ongoing ground campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Navy teamed with the Coast Guard and Marine Corps in 2007 to publish *Cooperate Strategy for the 21st Century (CS21)*, a comprehensive document that outlined the role of the nation's maritime forces. CS21 was as remarkable for its breadth, covering everything from maritime security to war at sea and placing as much emphasis on preventing wars as on winning wars, as for its departure from traditional strategy documents, typified by an ends-ways-means formulation. CS21 intentionally did not lay out a corresponding force structure, instead leaving those arguments for the subsequent *Naval Operations Concept (NOC)* and shipbuilding plan.

“If the Navy had reservations about seabasing’s viability, it expressed its reservations largely by just ignoring it.”

CS21 also fails to mention seabasing as a separate or unique capability, though the term “sea – based” appears frequently. This absence of seabasing in the seminal tri-service naval strategy of the early 21st century was later the subject of criticism by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis.³⁸ One CS21 author’s response – that the Navy didn’t want to discuss specific “programs,” consistent with its decision not to include a force structure in the strategy – is significant. In the Navy’s view, tacitly (and certainly unintentionally) endorsed by the Marine Corps, seabasing was little more than a *program*, commensurate with other acquisition programs.³⁹ The subjugation of seabasing to a debate about platforms, radically different from the transformation debates of the 1990s and early 2000s, signified a dramatic shift in the Navy’s own inward-looking, post-Cold War intellectual trend.

Nearly four years after CS21, Navy strategists still struggles to make the “means” meet the “ends.” As the decade came to a close, budgetary woes permeated nearly every aspect of Navy plans. Rising personnel costs placed downward pressure on the Navy’s manpower end-strength while the Navy’s Individual Augmentation (IA) program robbed active Navy units of critical personnel.⁴⁰ The Littoral Combat Ship’s first two vessels, originating from separate manufacturers and of entirely different designs, were alike only in their massive cost overruns. Together, they became a lightning rod for defense acquisition reform. Navy planners forecast a “fighter gap” of as many as 250 aircraft in the 2015-2020 timeframe,⁴¹ and the new Ford class aircraft carrier carried a staggering price tag of \$11.5 billion for the first ship, planned for a 2015 launch.⁴² Given the Navy’s inability to accurately predict ship costs, experts calculated that the desired 313-

ship floor would require a \$21 billion per year shipbuilding budget, far higher than the historic \$15 billion limit that the Navy had operated under for years.⁴³ In this austere environment, the approximately \$14 billion price tag⁴⁴ for the MPF(F) ships became increasingly hard to justify.

But if the Navy had reservations about seabasing's future viability, it remained relatively silent about them. According to Professor Robert Rubel of the Naval War College, the Navy balked at seabasing concepts that the Marines and even the Army had introduced as early as 2003. Concerned about remaining relevant in an era of questionable access, the Army envisioned large, towed platforms designed to make a heavy army strategically mobile, a vision that the Navy viewed as "sci fi." The Marines were also focused on placing their three Marine Expeditionary Brigades ashore. As the military's builder of ships, the Navy reacted internally by asking where the funding would come from. When Joint Forces Command subsequently suggested Joint Seabasing as the subject of a 2004 war game, the Navy's own headquarters (OPNAV) refused to sponsor it. "The Navy just sort of went EMCON," says Professor Rubel, and the joint seabasing wargame never happened.⁴⁵

The Navy masked its relative lack of interest by committing to joint documents with the Marine Corps and publicly presenting a united front. In 2006, for example, the two services collectively signed a doctrinal document for seabasing as part of their own warfare publication libraries.⁴⁶ Reiterating most of the concept's philosophical foundations, it stated that years of service documents "emphasize seabasing as the overarching expression of a shared vision."⁴⁷ Detailing the composition of sea bases of various sizes, it provided sample scenarios of seabasing's viability.

That same year, however, the Navy expressed its ambivalence in a much more subtle manner. In the 2006 capstone *Naval Operations Concept*, seabasing was presented as a way of "providing operational maneuver and assured access to the joint force while significantly reducing our footprint ashore and minimizing the permissions required to operate from host nations."⁴⁸ This is consistent with the conceptual development of seabasing, but in providing an example, the *NOC* only addressed the Global Fleet Station, the Navy's fledgling concept of placing a ship or group of ships at key littoral locations worldwide for the purpose of building partner capacity.⁴⁹ Nowhere does it mention amphibious warfare or ground forces from the sea. It was as if seabasing's historical *raison d'être* did not exist.⁵⁰

All of this was anathema to the Marine Corps, which viewed seabasing as the central issue in a debate about its identity. The long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had kept large Marine Corps units tied to land campaigns for

several years, prompting concern from the Commandant on down about a lack of Marine Corps amphibious expertise. With the service's distinction from the Army increasingly blurred, and the viability of amphibious operations once again in question, the Marine Corps clung vigorously to the *OMFTS* and *STOM* visions it had developed in the 1990s.

These 21st century amphibious operations were supposed to be about more than just storming ashore from the sea. Indeed, for almost 20 years Marines had been far more focused on maneuver and *avoiding* opposed beach landings than on reinventing the battle of Iwo Jima. To do that, however, the Corps needed the ability to launch operations far from the shore. It also needed to get adequate forces to the fight, sustain them, and eventually withdraw them. The three platforms critical to this vision, the V-22, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV), and the MPF(F), all came with sobering price tags that required justification.

That justification ostensibly lay in the world's green waters. In general, naval strategists have consistently quoted impressive statistics about the coastal regions and the need to influence them: "90% of the world's trade travels by water...[while] 75% of the world's population and 80% of the capital cities are located in the littorals."⁵¹ What has become less clear is the survivability of naval assets close to shore and the range at which they can be protected. For example, Marine Corps documents typically quote 25 nm as being "over the horizon" and secure from shore-based danger.⁵² Missile technology and its proliferation, however, makes that number questionable. Indeed, the western world was rocked by Hezbollah's successful C-802 cruise missile attack on an Israeli warship ten miles off the Lebanese coast in July 2006. Even more worrisome, the C-802 has a nominal maximum range of 75 miles, implying that the attack could have taken place at a much greater distance.⁵³

In an era in which drones and missiles are relatively cheap and easy to acquire, it is certainly fair to ask what distinguishes 10 nm from 25 or even 100 and what range can reliably be deemed safe. With naval aviation advocates warning of the vulnerability of aircraft carriers to Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) as far away as 1000 nm,⁵⁴ building an amphibious concept of operations based on a 25 nm standoff seemed shortsighted at best and reckless at worst. One author claimed, "Such weapons could make a traditional massed landing in the manner of Iwo Jima look like the Charge of the Light Brigade on water skis."⁵⁵ Furthermore, in the wake of Secretary of Defense Gates' call for more budgetary attention to wars that the U.S. is likely fight, defense experts across the board questioned the high price tag for Marine Corps programs and for amphibious operations as a whole. The Secretary reiterated these themes in a May 2010 speech.

But we have to take a hard look at where it would be necessary or sensible to launch another major amphibious landing again – especially as advances in anti-ship systems keep pushing the potential launch point further from shore. On a more basic level, in the 21st century, what kind of amphibious capability do we really need to deal with the most likely scenarios, and then how much?⁵⁶

Outside the Navy and Marine Corps, seabasing gained little traction following publication of the 2005 *JIC*. Originally billed as a joint concept, Navy sponsorship in the acquisition process all but ensured that it would be an inherently naval issue, and the Navy’s array of outside concerns further stovepiped seabasing into a Marine Corps issue.⁵⁷ The Army, however, concerned with access issues to foreign countries since the 1990s, participated in an acquisition program with the Navy for the Joint High Speed Vessel, an intra-theater shuttle designed to quickly move troops between sea and shore.⁵⁸ It continued its participation in the Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) program, which provided a capability to offload cargo in permissive environments without deepwater ports. Finally, it also continued to examine future concepts to build upon its Army After Next program and to develop a coherent system acquisition strategy following the demise of the Future Combat System (FCS), a comprehensive manned and unmanned system plan that was cancelled in 2009 under Secretary Gates.⁵⁹ But the Army remained understandably focused on its ongoing ground campaign, and seabasing took a back seat to more pressing issues.

“The Marine Corps clung vigorously to the OMFTS and STOM visions it had developed in the 1990s and saw seabasing as the light at the end of the tunnel.”

The Air Force, meanwhile, was tasked with the Navy to develop an AirSea Battle Doctrine, an integrated naval-air campaign model in the spirit of the Army-Air Force AirLand doctrine that dominated NATO planning for potential defense of Western Europe in the 1980s.⁶⁰ The emerging AirSea Battle concept did not name specific foes, but it centered on anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) challenges that might emerge during a high-end conflict with China.

In short, other, more pressing operational and doctrinal concerns took center stage for virtually all of the services, and seabasing as a joint vision limped along solely under the guise of the Marine Corps’ push for the MPF(F).

Even within seabasing’s advocacy base, dissension reigned. Robert Work, a retired Marine Colonel who became Undersecretary of the Navy in 2009, is

arguably the most prolific author on the topic and has been a consistent and vocal opponent of the MPF(F). In a 2006 monograph he produced for CSBA and a shorter piece he authored for the Naval War College Newport Papers, he argued that the MPF(F) provided little additional capability while sacrificing significant amphibious lift inherent in the existing MPSRONS.⁶¹ Work also introduced the “Sea as Base” concept, in which he differentiated between a sea base and having the “sea as base.”⁶² The former, he claimed, involved moving as many basing capabilities as possible *from land to sea*, which is arguably what the 2005 JIC and subsequent MPF(F) acquisition program intended. The latter, he contended, meant using the maritime domain flexibly as part of a larger overall campaign.

Work argued that the Marines were developing a narrow, naval formulation, and he instead proposed a joint vision of the sea *as* base. He advocated limiting the logistical and resupply aspects of a sea base to the initial, opening phase of a conflict, eventually moving most of the force ashore. Rather than deciding too quickly on the MPF(F), Work argued for a longer trial and experimentation period to develop a Joint Offshore Logistics Sea Base and for the creation of a 21st Century version of the Mulberry Harbor, the World War II vintage floating pier. Work’s research was unabashedly in favor of seabasing and consistent with 20 years of unilateral thought, but his solutions were dramatically different.

It is clear that seabasing’s waning fortunes resulted from a number of factors, most importantly budget struggles, inter-service rivalry and its own conceptual shortcomings. While the Marines continued to present a united front in support of their marquee MPF(F) program, the ground wars overseas and the Navy’s own evolving strategic priorities suggested the world had changed. It was a shift in outlook and priorities that was mirrored on the political front.

It Takes a...Sea Base?

In the same way that the political environment of the 1990s and early 2000s created fertile ground for seabasing, foreign policy views in the latter half of the decade presented a new international framework in which seabasing fell from prominence.

This gradual and subtle shift emanated from the growing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the dawning realization in U.S. policy circles that the unilateralist approach of the early Bush administration years was no longer viable.

The clearest manifestation of this course change in U.S. foreign policy came in the 2005 *National Defense Strategy*. Unlike the 2002 *National Security Strategy*

(often labeled “The Bush Doctrine”⁶³) and the 2004 *National Military Strategy* (which a 2005 *Daily Standard* article derisively labeled “last year's attempt by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to pretend that the insurgency in Iraq was not happening”⁶⁴), the 2005 *NDS* elevated the importance of alliances, particularly their role in the Global War on Terror. Key strategic documents have always included language about allies and the need to protect freedom, democracy, and shared interests, but the 2005 *NDS* went beyond generic goals to suggest that the U.S. needed its allies, not vice versa. It also went to great lengths to soften the previous, bellicose statements from the early Bush administration years:

Shared principles, a common view of threats, and commitment to cooperation *provide far greater security than we could achieve on our own*. Unprecedented cooperation in the war on terrorism is an example of the benefit of strong international partnerships (emphasis added).⁶⁵

The emphasis on coalition warfare was also reflected in the Navy’s 2007 *CS21*.

Additionally, maritime forces will be employed to build confidence and trust among nations through *collective security efforts that focus on common threats and mutual interests in an open, multi-polar world*. To do so will require an unprecedented level of integration among our maritime forces and enhanced cooperation with the other instruments of national power, as well as the capabilities of our international partners. Seapower will be a unifying force for building a better tomorrow (emphasis added).⁶⁶

Collectively, the two strategic documents marked a significant change in tone. *CS21* in particular was decidedly de-escalatory in nature and placed cooperation on a much higher plain than any previous strategy document. Further, by making “preventing wars” equivalent in importance to winning wars, it shifted the Navy’s focus to partnerships with other nations and built upon the 1000-ship Navy concept first proposed in 2005.⁶⁷ This earlier vision, eventually rebranded the “Global Maritime Partnership,” purported to link navies around the globe with common goals and shared tactics while mitigating a shortage in U.S. ship numbers. In short, it proposed a worldwide network of allies and their vessels on the seas instead of a U.S. dominated umbrella of protection. As one naval officer working in the heart of the Navy’s policy office stated, “We’re

“As one naval officer working in the heart of the Navy’s policy office stated, ‘We’re trying to hit singles to advance the runner now. We’re not trying to hit home runs.’”

trying to hit singles to advance the runner now. We're not trying to hit home runs."

The proposed Global Maritime Partnership seemed to break new ground on the foreign policy front, shedding traditional notions of bilateral arrangements and reciprocal obligations for a looser, self-sustaining structure. It stressed humility and voluntary networks in order to address common problems.

No single nation has the sovereignty, capacity, or control over the assets, resources, or venues from which transnational threats endanger global security.⁶⁸

The challenge is for individual nations to come together by determining where their national interests intersect and to determine what contribution they can make to this already-emerging network to meet those common interests.⁶⁹

These documents also reflected a broader, military-wide shift toward the low end of conflict. In stark contrast to the "lighter and faster" mantra that reigned supreme only a few years earlier, counterinsurgency doctrine began to dominate media reports and official defense discussions. From the Bush Administration "surge" of 20,000 soldiers in Iraq in 2007 to President Obama's 2009 decision to dramatically increase Afghanistan force levels, overseas combat troop levels were debated in the tens of thousands, and the Army and Marine Corps had 65,000 and 27,000 personnel added to their permanent end strength, respectively.⁷⁰ Moreover, these troops traveled in increasingly heavy vehicles plated with armor to protect against Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). In the new COIN era vision, standoff "shock and awe" strikes of the 1990s would accomplish little.

Meanwhile, frustrated with the services' ongoing obsession with large, expensive weapons systems ostensibly more suited for the Cold War, the Secretary of Defense used a January 2009 article in *Foreign Affairs* to codify the concept of "balance" as a guiding principle for acquisition.⁷¹ Later that year, he expanded on this guidance by describing the fiscal year 2010 budget as "10 percent for irregular warfare, about 50 percent for traditional, strategic and conventional conflict, and about 40 percent dual-purpose capabilities."⁷² In the following months, service programmers scrambled to adjust their acquisition plans while witnessing the demise of central key platforms like the Air Force's F-22 and Army's Future Combat System. "Balance" replaced "transformation" as the buzzword that necessarily accompanied any pitch for new military hardware.⁷³

Accompanying this new, more tempered view of future forces was an emphasis on the importance of logistics. The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan together encompassed approximately 200,000 military personnel and a comparable number of civilians and defense contractors, and the debate over the 30,000 additional troops allotted for Afghanistan by President Obama in December 2009, centered as much on the logistical issues of getting them there as it did on their efficacy.⁷⁴ If overseas conflicts would continue to be such numbers-intensive land campaigns, then clearly they would require large-scale logistics efforts and the ports and airfields necessary to sustain such massive efforts.

Seabasing, however, had never been designed to such a scale, at least not since World War II. As we have seen, even the Marines' MPF(F), the most ambitious seabasing proposal in concrete form, was intended to support approximately 10,000 troops ashore. Thus, the modern counterinsurgency campaign demanded logistics capabilities far beyond the seabasing construct.

The difference in scale underscored diverging intents. Modern COIN doctrine was encapsulated by the new mantra of "clear, hold, and build;" its population-centric approach necessitated large numbers of ground forces. But the legacy, large-scale amphibious model of World War II, so central to 21st century seabasing advocates, followed more of a "kill, hold, build" style of complete dominance over occupied territory. Even in its revamped, 1990s *OMFTS* form, modern amphibious doctrine never planned for the pacification of large populations. Whatever role sea-based forces were suited to perform, it was clearly not the large-scale counterinsurgency that so occupied the nation's attention.

Reality slowly began to overtake rhetoric as *CS21's* coalition-centric naval strategy was implemented. For its part, the Navy viewed regional cooperation through the lens of the new Global Fleet Station (GFS), a partnership in which a U.S. warship, or group of ships, would serve as a nexus for an assemblage of foreign vessels, training together in semi-permanent worldwide "stations." The Navy began to implement its vision by setting up Partnership Stations in the Caribbean and off the coast of Africa. It also conducted Partnership cruises in the Pacific, notably with amphibious ships available for such missions because the MEUs that would otherwise be riding them were busy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In anticipation of more cooperative mission sets, the Marine Corps postulated that amphibious ships, like the new LPD-17, would serve as the ideal central platform for the GFS, advancing their claim that amphibious ships were the most versatile ships available.⁷⁵ While, this helped to justify the continued acquisition

of such vessels, the Global Fleet Station was a far cry from the three-MEB amphibious assault that had driven Marine seabasing concepts in the past and implied a significantly different role for the 21st century Marine Corps. As the two services promoted their own seabasing visions, from Admiral Mullen’s “city at sea” to General Conway’s “port and airfield” at sea, something different began to emerge from the grey area in between.

Unfortunately, however, the Navy’s ambiguous definition still posed difficulties. This murky foundation was highlighted in September 2009 when the Obama administration announced its decision to rely on sea-based ballistic missile defense for Eastern Europe in lieu of the previously arranged ground-based interceptors (GBIs) that were promised by Bush administration officials. The movement of a traditionally land-based capability to sea, completely consistent with an expanded concept of seabasing, set off a firestorm of Polish indignation and concern that left administration experts bewildered.⁷⁶

It quickly became apparent that to the Poles having U.S. troops stationed on Polish soil was of far more strategic importance than creating a missile shield against a belligerent Iran.⁷⁷ In other words, while the sea-based BMD solution was a better *tactical* answer to the missile problem, it failed completely as *strategic* assurance; the Poles were not convinced that the U.S. was committed to their defense. Consequently, the seabasing construct created significant ambiguity by not requiring (or allowing) foreign allies to host U.S. forces on their soil. Independence from allies was clearly a double-edged sword.

As the decade drew to a close, the seabasing concept appeared to be on the ropes. The original Joint venture had lost impetus, and the Navy was instead advocating its Global Fleet Station concept and similar partnerships at sea while it struggled to field sufficient vessels to meet its own, expanded mission set. The Marine Corps, continued to argue forcefully for a return to its amphibious roots and especially for the 21st century realization of its *OMFTS* vision. But, given the counterinsurgency focus of the nation’s “long war” against violent Islamic extremism, however, it was unclear what exigencies would call for brigade-sized amphibious assaults. Moreover, the proliferation of missile technology and exponential use of unmanned technology, even by non-state actors, called into question the plan to discharge large quantities of troops from ships near the shore. Meanwhile, the foreign policy implications of reliance on a sea-based force remained relatively unexplored and only gained visibility after the discussion of Eastern European missile defense.

“It was an anticlimactic end: billed as the Marine Corps’ means to transform 21st century warfare, the demise of the MPF(F) was celebrated only by a minor accounting footnote.”

Not surprisingly, the collective uncertainty about seabasing was soon reflected in programming decisions. The Navy's Fiscal year 2009 30-year shipbuilding plan stated, "The Navy has delayed MPF(F) procurement (\$14 billion) in order to resolve the concept of operations."⁷⁸ Details of the Navy's FY 2011 shipbuilding plan began to leak in late 2009, and an *Inside Defense* article on December 12 stated that the Navy's new force structure target "drops the requirement for 12 new Maritime Prepositioning ships," clearly the MPF(F).⁷⁹ By way of justification, the article merely quoted its anonymous source as saying the concept is "valid but not currently within the Navy's fiscal reach." It was an anticlimactic end: once billed as the Marine Corps' means to transform 21st century warfare, the demise of the MPF(F) was celebrated only by a minor accounting footnote.

Ultimately, ambivalence towards seabasing reflected the nation's broader uncertainty about the nature of foreign wars and policy planners' ability to accurately predict them. The concept had incubated for years in an environment that favored unilateral military intervention free of dependence on allies and that scorned the introduction of large-scale ground forces. In late 2009, however, the reality was quite the opposite: the U.S. was actively seeking allied assistance, whether through force contributions in Afghanistan or via involvement in coalitions, and the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq was offset by an increase in Afghanistan. Given the dominant issues of the day, seabasing no longer appeared to be a pressing issue, even in military circles.

¹ Quoted in Robert O. Work, "Seabasing: All Ahead Slow," CSBA Powerpoint brief, 14 November 2006, p. 5, available at <http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/S.20070206.Seabasing__All_Ahe/S.20070206.Seabasing__All_Ahe.pdf>.

² General James, T. Conway (address, Surface Navy Association, 15 January 2009).

³ For a good summary of this turning point, see Mark Mazzetti, "Iraq War Compels Pentagon to Rethink Big-Picture Strategy," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 2005.

⁴ Thomas Friedman, "Iraq: Politics or Policy?" *The New York Times*, October 3, 2004, available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/opinion/03friedman.html>>.

⁵ See Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, pp. 271-272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-238.

⁷ See Admiral Vern Clark, "Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, October, 2002.

⁸ Costa, interview.

⁹ Lorenzo Cortes, "Speed Drives MPF(F) Idea, CNO Says," *Defense Daily*, Aug 6, 2004.

¹⁰ "MPF(F) Analysis of Alternatives," available at <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/mpf-f-aoa.htm>>.

¹¹ Geoff Fein, "Fleet of 14 MPF(F) Ships Provides Lower Cost /Schedule Risk, Navy Says," *Defense Daily*, 12 July 2005.

¹² For a good overview, see "Seabasing Concepts and Programs," Marine Corps Combat Development Command, June 2008, available at <http://www.quantico.usmc.mil/seabasing/what_sb/index.htm>.

¹³ LtCol Roger Galbraith, "Move 1: Steady State Assistance," *Information Dissemination*, 22 February 2010, available at <<http://www.informationdissemination.net/2010/02/move-1-steady-state-assistance.html>>.

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- ¹⁴ See especially U.S. Navy Dept., *Seabasing for the Range of Military Options*.
- ¹⁵ For basic descriptions of MAGTF compositions, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Air-Ground_Task_Force> and <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usmc/magtf.htm>>.
- ¹⁶ Bradley's statement is still a subject of intense controversy. While some have argued that he was misunderstood, his statement is such a part of Marine Corps lore that it continues to be a rallying cry for amphibious advocates. See Krulak, *First to Fight*, p. 71.
- ¹⁷ Matthew T. Robinson, *Integrated Amphibious Operations Update Study: (DoN Lift 2+)—A short history of the amphibious lift requirement* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2002), p. 23.
- ¹⁸ Note that this capacity is separate from and in addition to any *non-forcible entry* lift capacity, such as the Maritime Prepositioning Squadrons, which collectively can lift 3.0 MEBs to prepared, deep-water ports.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32. The focus on vessel numbers does not tell the whole story, as new amphibious ships tend to be larger in size and greater in capability than their predecessors. But the amphibious lift capability today is still roughly half the 1991 capability. Of note, this decline is comparable to the halving of the Navy's inventory, from the 600-ship goal of the 1980s to roughly 286 vessels in the inventory in 2010.
- ²² *Strategic Planning Guidance, FYs 2008-2013* (Washington, DC: March 2006).
- ²³ U.S. Navy Dept., *Report to Congress on Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for FY 2011* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 2010), p. 15.
- ²⁴ LHA: Amphibious Assault Ship. LHD: Amphibious Assault Ship, well deck. LPD: Landing Platform Dock; LSD: Landing Ship: Dock.
- ²⁵ This deployment schedule is typically communicated as a number depicting how many ESGs are, on average, deployed at a given time. A 2007 article, for example, argued for an increase from 2.7 to 4.0 ESGs. See David A. Anderson, "Naval Forward Presence," *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 2007.
- ²⁶ *Marine Corps Operations*, MCDP 1.0 (Washington, DC: 2001), p. 2-9.
- ²⁷ *Maritime Prepositioning Force (Future) (MPF(F)) Program Overview*, Powerpoint Brief, October, 2009.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* See also *Marine Corps Prepositioning Road Map 2025* (Washington, DC: July 2009).
- ²⁹ Fein, "Fleet."
- ³⁰ Martin Murphy, *Littoral Combat Ship: An Examination of its Possible Concepts of Operations* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2010), p. 9.
- ³¹ Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program: Background, Issues, and Options for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RL33741 (Washington, DC: CRS, 08 April 2010), p. 4.
- ³² Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy DDG-51 and DDG-1000 Destroyer Programs: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RL32109 (Washington, DC: CRS, 23 December 2009), p. 1.
- ³³ For an emotional discussion of the Marine perspective on the lack of naval surface fire support, see Gary W Anderson, "Taking the High Road to Hell," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2008, p. 14.
- ³⁴ See especially *National Concept of Operations for Maritime Domain Awareness* (Washington, DC: December, 2007), available at <http://policy.defense.gov/sections/policy_offices/hd/assets/downloads/UNCLAS%20MDA%20CONOPS%20Final%20071213.pdf>.
- ³⁵ Michael D. Shear and Ann Scott Tyson, "Obama Shifts Focus of Missile Shield," *The Washington Post*, 18 September 2009, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/17/AR2009091700639.html>>.
- ³⁶ See Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RL33745 (Washington, DC: CRS, 26 April 2010).
- ³⁷ See, for example, Michael Richardson, "China's Navy Changing the Game," *Japan Times*, 13 May 2010, available at <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ea20100513mr.html>>.
- ³⁸ Robert O. Work and Jan van Tol, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: An Assessment* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2008), p. 21.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ⁴⁰ Office of Budget Department of the Navy, *Highlights of the Department of the Navy 2011 Budget* (Washington, DC: February, 2010), p. 1-13, available at <http://www.finance.hq.navy.mil/FMB/11pres/Highlights_book.pdf>.

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- ⁴¹ Dan Taylor, "House Panel Disputes Navy Fighter Shortfall, Demands More F/A-18 Buys," *Inside the Navy*, 01 June 2010.
- ⁴² Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Ford (CVN-78) Class Aircraft Carrier Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RS20643 (Washington, DC: CRS, 13 April 2010), p. 1.
- ⁴³ *An Analysis of the Navy's Fiscal Year 2011 Shipbuilding Plan* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, May 2010), pp. vii, viii.
- ⁴⁴ *Resource Implications of the Navy's Fiscal Year 2009 Shipbuilding Plan* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, 09 June 2008), p. 31.
- ⁴⁵ Professor Robert Rubel (Naval War College), interview by the author, 06 January 2010. "EMCON," or "Emissions Control," technically denotes the suppression of radio and electromagnetic emissions. In the common vernacular (as in this case), it denotes complete silence.
- ⁴⁶ U.S. Navy Department, *Seabasing*, NWP-3.62M/MCWP 3-31.7 (Washington, DC: August, 2006).
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.
- ⁴⁸ U.S. Navy Dept., *Naval Operations Concept 200*, (Washington, DC: 2006), p. 30.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ⁵⁰ The updated 2010 *NOC* uses guarded language but at least suggests a much broader interpretation of seabasing. See U.S. Navy Dept., *Naval Operations Concept 2010* (Washington, DC: 2006), pp. 21-22.
- ⁵¹ *Naval Operations Concept 2006*, p. 9.
- ⁵² Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., "Future Corps," *National Journal*, 10 May 2008.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ The discussion about the aircraft carrier's vulnerability to missiles has a long history, but 2009 marked an especially prolific year for writers, starting with the publication of Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "On the Verge of a Game Changer," *Proceedings*, May, 2009.
- ⁵⁵ Freedburg, "Future Corps."
- ⁵⁶ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, (address, Navy League Air-Sea Exposition, National Harbor, MD, 03 May 2010).
- ⁵⁷ It is telling, for example, that most Marine Corps briefs on seabasing programs are entitled, "Marine Corps Seabasing."
- ⁵⁸ See Paul McLeary, "U.S. Army and Navy Greenlight JHSV Program," *Aviation Week*, 09 February 2009, available at <<http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story.jsp?id=news/DTI-JHSV.xml&headline=U.S.%20Army%20and%20Navy%20Greenlight%20JHSV%20Program&channel=dti>>.
- ⁵⁹ Greg Grant, "It's Official: FCS Cancelled," *DOD Buzz*, 23 June 2009, available at <<http://www.dodbuzz.com/2009/06/23/its-official-fcs-cancelled/>>.
- ⁶⁰ See "Time for Air-Sea Battle Concept," *Defense News*, 09 November 2009, available at <<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4366297>>.
- ⁶¹ See Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, and Work, "On Seabasing."
- ⁶² Work, "On Seabasing," pp. 128-131.
- ⁶³ See Michael Abramowitz, "Many Versions of Bush Doctrine," *The Washington Post*, 13 Sep 2008, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/12/AR2008091203324.html>>.
- ⁶⁴ Tom Donnelly, "The Pentagon's New Plan," *The Daily Standard*, 24 Mar 2005, available at <<http://www.aei.org/article/22203>>.
- ⁶⁵ *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2005, p. 4, available at <<http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>>.
- ⁶⁶ U.S. Navy Dept., *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington, DC: 2007), p. 3.
- ⁶⁷ See John G. Morgan and Charles W. Martoglio, "The 1000-Ship Navy: Global Maritime Partnership," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, November 2005, p. 233.
- ⁶⁸ Morgan and Martoglio, "The 1000-Ship Navy."
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ Carl Conetta, "No good reason to boost Army, Marine Corps end strength," *Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Report #20*, 31 Jan 2007, available at <<http://www.comw.org/pda/0701br20.html>>.
- ⁷¹ Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009, available at <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63717/robert-m-gates/a-balanced-strategy>>.

⁷² Robert M. Gates, DOD News Briefing, 06 Apr 2009, available at <<http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4396>>.

⁷³ This was not a trend without critics. See Nathan Freier, "Defining and Operationalizing 'Balance' in Defense Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 05 Oct 2009, available at <<http://csis.org/publication/defining-and-operationalizing-%E2%80%9Cbalance%E2%80%9D-defense-strategy>>.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Ed Hornick, Chris Lawrence and Frederik Pleitgen, "Logistical problems could plague Afghanistan troop surge," *CNN.com*, 03 December 2009, available at <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/12/03/afghanistan.troop.issues/index.html>>.

⁷⁵ See, for example, David Axe, "Old Amphibious Work-Horses Prove their Worth," *warisboring.com*, 17 June 2009, available at <<http://www.warisboring.com/?p=2282>>.

⁷⁶ See Eben Harrell and Katerina Zachovalova, "Mixed Reactions in Europe to the U.S. Missile Defense U-Turn," *Time.com*, 17 September 2009, available at <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1924530,00.html>>.

⁷⁷ See Robert Kaplan, "The Bear Still has Teeth," *The Atlantic Online*, September 2009, available at <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200909u/missile-defense-russia>>.

⁷⁸ U.S. Navy Dept., *Report to Congress on Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for FY 2009* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the CNO, February 2008), p. 7.

⁷⁹ "Navy Raises 313-Ship Goal to 324, Boosts Focus on Missile Defense," *Inside Defense*, 07 December 2009.

CHAPTER FOUR

Steering a New Course

“Long-range heavy lift -- the ability to move masses of equipment, supplies and people across the world -- is a demonstration of American global influence. It may be the best definition of that influence.”¹

– Michael Gerson, *The Washington Post*, 17 February 2010

Put the Base Back in Seabasing

The Afghan surge in the waning months of 2009 epitomized the degree to which contemporary events had eclipsed not only seabasing but sea-based issues in general. 2010, however, restored some luster to both. Following a catastrophic 7.0-magnitude earthquake in Haiti in January, the Navy and Marine Corps dispatched considerable assets to the scene, including the USS *Carl Vinson*, a 95,000 ton Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, the USS *Bataan* Amphibious Assault Ship and corresponding vessels, together carrying a 2,200-member Marine Expeditionary Unit, and the USNS *Comfort*, a hospital ship with 12 operating rooms and 1000 beds. With Haiti’s primary airfield overwhelmed with traffic and the main sea port disabled by wreckage, staging extensive relief efforts at sea fit neatly within the “port and airfield” model so integral to seabasing constructs.² Remarkably, the Haiti operation even included an actual amphibious landing from the *Bataan*.

Haiti, of course, was not the kind of anti-access threat that the Marines had planned for. Aside from occasional unruly mobs, the operation did not encounter a hostile population inland or an attack on the amphibious ships near the coast. Moreover, the “iron mountain” that the Marines built ashore consisted of humanitarian supplies and foodstuffs, hardly a critical vulnerability. When the military deployed Maritime Prepositioning vessels to Haiti as part of the Army-Navy Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) program,³ therefore, they were well-suited to the task, since that program was specifically designed for unopposed cargo transfer in areas without prepared ports. But the ships off Haiti were still widely referred to as a sea base, and the event served as a reminder that the seabasing concept was still alive even if the MPF(F) was dead.

Even though the MPF(F) was scrapped, it is worth examining just how it occupied the forefront of seabasing conversations for nearly a decade. Specifically, while the MPF(F) was a product of the unique and tortuous

conceptual path of the previous decade, it had foundations in four key areas that continue to be both controversial and relevant: at-sea logistics and sustainment; prepositioning; amphibious lift, and; employment. Assumptions of speed and scale dominated all four issues. Therefore, to adequately evaluate seabasing, each issue must be examined in turn. Only when the MPF(F)'s conceptual roots are deconstructed can the its strange, hybrid character be understood and the sea base separated effectively separated from its missions and tasks.

At-sea logistics lies at the heart of the seabasing concept. As previously noted, Marine Corps MAGTFs, especially in the 2,200-member MEU form, generally deploy in certain mission-ready configurations aboard amphibious ships. Their ability to tailor their capabilities and equipment while underway are limited. Whatever the size, a MAGTF that goes ashore typically moves its logistics ashore as well: maintaining all supplies and performing all corresponding equipment maintenance at sea is not feasible at this time. A 2003 *Proceedings* article that discussed the Expeditionary Strike Group also addressed this limitation:

Sea Basing facilities will include the ability to transfer vehicles or ammunition from amphibious ships to Marine prepositioned cargo transports or roll-on/roll-off logistics support ships and back again as the situation requires. This capability will be particularly useful to ESG and expeditionary unit commanders, who in years past have had to tailor their loadouts in the United States prior to deployment.⁴

At its core, the at-sea logistics function is about having a *base* at sea: a port, an airfield, maintenance facilities, and command and control. Without this capability, seabasing, regardless of its other strengths and weaknesses, cannot exist.

The MPF(F) was also expensive. The Navy, of course, does all of its maintenance and supply for a Carrier Strike Group at sea. But the Navy does not normally have to move heavy vehicles around. An aircraft, for example, flies on and off the carrier; it virtually never has to be moved to or from a ship at sea by other means. Even in port, the craning of an aircraft off the ship is only done when severe maintenance problems preclude fixing the aircraft at sea and flying it off before the carrier enters port. To support ground operations ashore, heavy vehicles and equipment would have to be shuttled around at sea, a daunting task that has very little recent operational precedent. This issue explains why the DSB's 2003 report stated that seabasing requirements were "far beyond" current Navy-Marine Corps capabilities and called for an extensive period of experimentation.⁵ Four years later, a 2007 RAND study reiterated this problem, stating, "Despite [emerging] technologies, heavy load transfers between large

ships and from large ships to MLPs [Mobile Landing Platforms] remain a challenge.”⁶

The comparison between aircraft and ground vehicle services at sea illustrates a deeper conceptual schism for seabasing. Because capabilities are lacking for maintenance and transfer of ground vehicles at sea, seabasing development has focused almost entirely on amphibious warfare and ignored aspects of a sea base that already exist, such as carrier aviation, precision-guided missiles, naval gunfire, and the sea-based logistics that currently support ships at sea. By dwelling solely on large-scale amphibious operations and the capability to support them, Marine Corps advocates have equated seabasing with amphibious warfare instead of building on a broader conception of a sea base in which amphibious warfare is only a part. In this broader vision, improved logistical capabilities would add to *existing* sea basing concepts.

If the Marine Corps is guilty of overemphasizing amphibious assault, the Navy is certainly as guilty of overemphasizing precision strike. Given dramatic improvements in guided weapons, especially the incorporation of Vertical Launch System (VLS) cells in all of its surface combatants, the Navy enjoys a near “twenty-navy firepower standard” over other navies, not including the abilities of its carrier air wings.⁷ Yet, such precision weapons are of little use in a Haiti-like scenario where the most important piece of equipment may be a bulldozer. If the Marines think seabasing is all about the land, the Navy seems to think seabasing is only about *bombing* the land. As a result, each service has used its individual priorities to tilt seabasing’s definition to its own advantage.

“The issues of speed and scale were left undefined and unresolved. Prepositioning is an important capability. But how much – and how fast – is enough?”

In either case, the operation in Haiti demonstrated that sea bases exist today and are not just figments of a future military. But whether the sea base is created to provide aircraft support, hospital supplies, or an amphibious assault, the ability to maintain, transfer, and support the corresponding equipment and supplies is essential.

The second issue, prepositioning, has long been compared to at-sea logistics in the MPF(F) model. The original prepositioning requirements were built around a need to *rapidly* reinforce friendly nations in the event of an enemy advance and implied the need for large quantities of material dense packed in forward locations and available in short periods of time. The Marines’ seabasing construct clings to that need for rapid reaction and simply moves the delivery

location to sea. But the MPF(F) ships, with their mostly civilian shipping standards, were not designed to be forcible-entry capable. By themselves, they could not support an opposed, amphibious landing, but would instead have to wait for the more muscular amphibious fleet to arrive on scene.

As previously discussed, between two and three Expeditionary Strike Groups are almost always forward-deployed, but they have a much more limited capability than the MEB-sized operations for which the MPF(F) was designed. A MEB-sized or larger amphibious task force could take anywhere from 30 to 60 days to arrive on scene from CONUS, obviating the need for the MPF(F) quick arrival. In that timeframe, the *at-sea supply and sustainment* portion of the operation could simply have sailed from CONUS along with the amphibious task force. Even if an MEB-sized force were instead assembled on-scene by combining the forward-deployed MEUs and augmenting them with additional vessels (out of Japan, for example), the desire for speed still conflicts with the need to practice an assault.

Prepositioning, in short, has issues of both speed and scale. These characteristics are important when reinforcing allies through prepared ports and airfields, but their necessity and feasibility are questionable for opposed assault involving a brigade or more onto a hostile shore. Attempting such an assault in a period of two weeks, for example, would probably have to be done without that brigade's heavy amphibious ships. While a brigade-sized, *unopposed* amphibious operation could conceivably be done by the MPF(F), it is not clear what kind of scenario would call for such a force.

Ultimately, the whole concept of prepositioning is due for reevaluation. If the intent is to fall in quickly on allies through prepared ports and airfields, then the current prepositioning model remains viable. Speed is possible in such a scenario because personnel can be flown in to marry up with their equipment. But it is unreasonable to assume that the same speed and scale can simply be transferred to sea and applied to an amphibious invasion with a similar timeline. If, on the other hand, the intent is simply to support smaller, scalable operations, like raiding, special operations, and humanitarian assistance/disaster response, then a smaller sea-based prepositioning force would almost certainly suffice. A 2004 Government Accounting Office report that examined the use of prepositioned stocks during the opening phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom noted this absence of clear operational context:

Perhaps it is time for DOD to go back to the drawing board and ask: what is the military trying to achieve with these stocks and how do they fit into future operational plans.⁸

Indeed, the same GAO report expressed similar ambivalence about the concept of seabasing itself and contemporary plans to use prepositioning ships as offshore logistics bases:

Such ideas seem to have merit, but are still in the conceptual phases, and it is not clear to what extent the concepts are being approached to maximize potential for joint operations.⁹

The basing and global posture discussions of the previous decade emphasized prepositioning as a critical enabler of a smaller, more dynamic and more responsive U.S. military force. But the issues of speed and scale were left undefined and unresolved. Prepositioning is an important capability, but how much is enough?

The third issue, amphibious lift, is closely related. As noted, the 3.0 MEB goal has been a rallying point for Marine Corps advocates since the early 1990s. The Navy and Marine Corps have struggled over the years to meet this requirement due to the sheer cost of building sufficient amphibious ships. The MPF(F) model attempted to satisfy the amphibious lift requirement by deploying two full MEBs via amphibious ships and by deploying the third via the MPF(F). The personnel for the third MEB would fly from CONUS and meet up with the MPF(F) at an Advanced Staging Base and join the amphibious task force at sea as the third, reserve force for a typical “two-up, one back” Marine Corps operation (though, as discussed, the MPF(F) could counter-intuitively be the first to arrive on the scene). Together, the combined force would amount to a division-sized infantry force, supported entirely from the sea.

While the Soviet Motorized Rifle Division was the planning construct for the amphibious assault plans of the 1980s,¹⁰ it is unclear what the construct is now. Marine planners typically deflect this question by referring to “COCOM requirements,” suggesting that various geographic component commanders’ classified, operational plans for regional conflicts are driving the Marines’ specific force structure. But while geographic component commanders actually fight wars, they are not responsible for setting realistic budget priorities. The latest comprehensive amphibious lift study (1990’s DoN Lift 2) was conducted under Cold War assumptions using Cold War metrics. Like prepositioning, then, amphibious lift is in need of review.

“This is not to say that the U.S. currently has too much amphibious lift; it may, in fact, have too little, as the Marines have argued consistently. But the argument...cannot take place in a vacuum.”

A DoN Lift 3 Study (or Seabasing I Lift Study) could address this conceptual gap by closely examining the operational plans for amphibious forces and using that framework to re-evaluate the amphibious lift requirement. Such a study should weigh the amphibious mission against other naval missions under the assumption that DoN budgeting is probably a zero sum game, and any changes to amphibious shipbuilding will affect other naval shipbuilding. This is not to say that the U.S. currently has too much amphibious lift; it may, in fact, have too little, as the Marines have argued consistently. But the argument for or against amphibious lift cannot take place in a vacuum. It needs a broader operational context, one that is measured against probable mission scenarios and other naval priorities rather than 20 year old planning constructs. The closing remarks from a 2002 Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) history of amphibious lift suggest that such a study will not be initiated by the services themselves and will instead need outside impetus.

Looking back at previous DoN lift studies, it is important to recall that each was initiated by an external party above the Navy and Marine Corps – either the Secretary of Defense (for DL1) or the Secretary of the Navy (for DoN Lift 2).¹¹

The final issue to address in the deconstruction of Marine seabasing is the employment of forces from the seabase. In this context, employment means launching ground operations from the sea. While the MPF(F) was designed to provide some employment ability, this capability *already exists* in the current inventory. Many of these amphibious ships were designed and are currently operated for just that purpose. The need to have the MPF(F) employ forces grew largely out of the obsession with speed and the 10-30-30 requirements that characterized the Rumsfeld-led Department of Defense, as well as the need to more cheaply build the amphibious lift for the third of three Marine Expeditionary Brigades.

As we have seen, however, there are inherent problems with rapid, large-scale amphibious assault from the MPF(F). For smaller contingencies, a deployed Expeditionary Strike Group would be better suited, as it is loaded and trained for exactly such amphibious operations. In that sense, the need to have the MPF(F) employ forces in lieu of dedicated and forward deployed amphibious ships is not entirely apparent. If, instead, the Expeditionary Strike Group were to act as a supply and sustainment squadron, a delivery force for additional personnel, and an at-sea staging area, then it could almost certainly perform these tasks more cheaply than an MPF(F).

Again, conceptual issues lie at the heart of the problem. As currently framed, Marine Corps seabasing, and indeed, joint seabasing, encompass not only the

vessels and equipment that constitute the sea base but the operations ashore as well. This is in direct contradiction to the *Sea Power 21* construct in which sea basing was *separate* from the missions. It is worth repeating that the term seabasing can be misleading. Its logical equal, land basing, obviously does not constitute all the possible operations *from* the land base; it simply includes the facilities and corresponding logistics. Indeed, if we look at it from the five-pronged approach of the 2005 JIC – Close, Assemble, Employ, Sustain, and Reconstitute – we see that “close,” “employ” and, to some degree, “reconstitute” already occur within the existing amphibious fleet. The missing pieces, “assemble” and “sustain,” are essentially basing, supply and logistical functions. Thus, “transformation” confused the issue considerably because it distracted from seabasing’s core needs: the basing, supply and logistics critical to all the services.

The cancellation of the MPF(F) provides an opportunity to reevaluate many of the assumptions that grew out of the last 20 years. Whatever foreign policy framework emerges, it is clear that the ability to operate independently of ports and airfields ashore will continue be important in the 21st century. Fortunately, not all is lost on the acquisition front. The latest Navy and Marine Corps shipbuilding plan aspires to a more limited, incremental seabasing capability by building three Mobile Landing Platforms to reduced specifications and combining them with three dry cargo T-AKE ships and three LMSRs acquired from the Army.¹² These vessels, the remnants of the MPF(F) plan of old, would fold into the existing Maritime Prepositioning squadrons and allow them to experiment with seabasing concepts while also evaluating different technological solutions, thereby including the important experimental phase recommended by the DSB in 2003. Thus, even if the Marine Corps’ transformative vision has been shelved for the time being, reports of seabasing’s demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Sea-based logistics, prepositioning, amphibious lift, and employment are all important issues that require further study and difficult compromises. But that does not imply that the concept of seabasing need be held hostage to specific capacity discussions these crucial issues often entail. Seabasing, *the basing at sea of aircraft, artillery, and ground forces*, can and does exist to a significant extent regardless of specific decisions about capacity, as Haiti demonstrated. In other words, seabasing need not be tied to a three-brigade plan or unsubstantiated prepositioning concepts. It need not be tied to unrealistic, “transformative” timelines for conducting large-scale amphibious operations. Instead, any concept of seabasing *must* involve achieving a degree of independence from land, if only temporarily. By putting the base back in sea basing, it is easier to disentangle the host from its missions and, more critically, examine what a sea base is supposed to do.

Think Inside the Box

If seabasing is more than amphibious assault, then how is it best conceptualized? The Navy defines its missions in a series of tactical publications, but perhaps the simplest inventory derives from CS21 and its six “expanded core capabilities,” a list of missions that the Navy holds central to its own commitment to broader strategy. These consist of: forward presence; deterrence; sea control; power projection; maritime security, and; humanitarian assistance and disaster response.¹³ Ample study has been devoted to these missions and the relative importance of each. But to more adequately understand seabasing’s relevance to the Navy’s core capabilities, it is important to understand how the Navy views itself.

Historically, the Navy has operated in scalable configurations with individual ships either acting with specific roles as part of a larger configuration or, alternatively, as individuals split from the group. Carrier Strike Groups, for example, typically consist of an aircraft carrier, an air wing, five surface ships, and associated personnel.¹⁴ Within the CSG, each ship has clearly defined roles subordinate to the group. But each ship can also be tasked to split off and operate independently.

There are several natural analogies to naval organizational structures, and some have taken on great historical resonance. The German U-boat “wolf packs,” for example, were notorious for their ability to roam together as groups, “herding” their targets and then attacking and killing individually. The “swarm” model, analogous to a congregation of wildlife or even insects,¹⁵ is the model used to describe attacks by large numbers of small boats, one of the greatest threats to the Navy in littoral waters today. The 20th century U.S. Navy, however, with its centerpiece aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships, has more closely hewed to a hierarchical structure: the Navy is familiar and comfortable with the concept of using its ships to surround, protect and to be deployed from larger, central capital ships. Described in various forums as a “hub and spoke” or “mothership” concept, it has a strong historical legacy in Naval theory.¹⁶

The hub and spoke concept is not the only one vying for primacy in navy strategy. Capital ships in general, and the aircraft carrier in particular, have long been criticized for their vulnerability to attack. Inspired by

“The expansion of the multifunction concept to a more pervasive, modular ethos has the potential to fundamentally change the way the Navy sees itself as a fleet on the seas.”

the revolution in information technology, especially under the network centric formulation of the 1990s, advocates of a very different force structure have lobbied for a networked conglomeration of small ships, none individually representing the center of the group's strength.¹⁷ Conceptually, this is a structure of spokes *without* a hub. It is a quantity over quality approach, that represents one side of an ongoing, decades-old debate. Indeed, like a naval version of Plato versus Aristotle, the small versus large ship arguments often seem to constitute little more than a series of footnotes to the Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett strategy discussions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁸

The competing views have led to dramatically different opinions about shipbuilding. As previously discussed, the Navy has struggled in recent years to meet its force structure goals, and the gap between mission needs and vessel quantity has become an increasingly urgent concern. The most obvious solution is to build cheaper, specialized vessels in larger quantities, an approach that dovetails nicely with the netcentric, small-ship crowd. But over the years, the Navy's conscious decision instead has been to make each of its vessels as capable as possible, thereby making each applicable to a wider variety of missions and scenarios. From the fighter/attack capability of the F/A-18 to the cutting edge air defense systems that complement anti-submarine capabilities on the Arleigh Burke destroyer, the Navy has demonstrated a dedicated and passionate commitment to a multifunction ethic in material, organization, and in mission.

The newly operational Littoral Combat Ship takes this multifunction ethic to a new level, but it also marks a significant third trend in shipbuilding. Designed from the ground up to host interchangeable modules in a "plug and fight" fashion, the LCS has little identity apart from its mission packages. It is just a floating box. This evolving modular ethic seems to have infected the Navy as a whole. Robert Work, the Undersecretary of the Navy and supposed architect of the Navy's most recent 30-year shipbuilding plan, has described *all* of the Navy's ships, from the LCS to the aircraft carriers, as boxes or capability containers of various sizes able to individually deploy and act as motherships for wider congregations of vessels and aircraft, manned and unmanned.¹⁹ This new, descriptive vocabulary carries hints of industry and the information age: it is scalable and tailorable to the environment. The ships aggregate, disaggregate, and perform distributed operations.²⁰

The expansion of the multifunction concept to a more pervasive, modular ethos has the potential to fundamentally change the way the Navy perceives itself as a fleet. In this light, the core issue is less a quantity versus quality debate than a realization of the ability to rapidly and creatively tailor capabilities of various sizes. It can be applied to individual ships, to groups, and even to entire fleets.

In short, it allows for the extension of the “plug and play” model from equipment, to vessels, and to entire organizations.

Seabasing fits comfortably into this modular vision because it can be so loosely defined. A sea base formed around an aircraft carrier or amphibious assault ship constitutes a traditional, hierarchical model of seabasing centered around capital ships. But small ships like frigates, patrol craft, and even the Navy’s new Littoral Combat Ship, with their smaller range and fuel loads, would benefit from an at-sea “base” as well. An LCS hosted by a “mothership” would be comparable to the Navy’s jet fighters using the carrier as a base. In short, there is the potential for a seamless and modular conceptual gradation from patrol craft to the amphibious assault capabilities of the Marine Corps. In any seabasing scenario, ships, aircraft, and people come together for some sort of support, whether individual or collective, and then are deployed individually or as groups on specific missions.

The modular approach lends itself well to the littoral focus that the Navy has assumed since the early 1990s, and, indeed, to the six core capabilities noted in CS21. Scalable, tailorable, and multi-function in nature, roving sea bases can be used for missions of almost any type by addressing *logistical and hosting* issues of various magnitudes. Seabasing then would be more about the ability to provide capability than about individual missions; it would be the “means” answer to the “ways” question. Large or small, the modular concept of a series of ships aggregating as a “base” and then disaggregating as the mission requires is a powerful one.

Before elaborating further on the potential for modular seabasing, however, it is worth addressing its vulnerabilities. If a sea base is fundamentally just a base at sea, then it must have similar weaknesses to those of a land base. Destroy the base and the fighting force evaporates. In fact, attacks on capital ships constitute perhaps the most worrisome of criticisms against the modern U.S. Navy and of the aircraft carrier in particular. In this sense, the sea base, and especially the large sea base, mirrors the aircraft carrier in its vulnerabilities. Discussions of carrier employment are generally applicable to seabasing as well. Thus, as carrier advocates debate the implications of missile technology and other anti-access technologies on carrier aviation, so too must they debate their impact on seabasing.

The boxes analogy is important here as well. Modular constructs address “packages” of capability in a very detached and clinical manner, devoid of much of the dogma and bias of naval tradition. By examining the Navy’s capital ships in this way, a different view begins to emerge. Specifically, it may indeed be the case that the aircraft carrier, like the large sea base, is better suited for low and

middle end conflicts than its traditional role as the pinnacle of American naval power. Most importantly, the carrier may thus be demoted without losing any of its relevance to 21st century conflict. If this is true, then naval doctrine is misaligned, and the need for a new modular vision is much more urgent.

This alternate view of the aircraft carrier and, indirectly, of the sea base, has begun to emerge in naval strategy circles only recently, though it builds on earlier concepts of netcentric warfare.²¹ In a 2007 article, for example, retired Captain Wayne Hughes, a senior lecturer at the Naval Postgraduate School, argued for a bimodal force to implement the fledgling maritime strategy (CS21).²² In Hughes' formulation, the Navy should build a force structure that is able to confront a peer competitor while simultaneously conducting "small operations." To Hughes, however, carriers and large amphibious assault ships are better suited to the latter than the former. His "third rail" approach is thus quite different from the traditional small versus large ship thinking in that, rather than favoring one over the other, it simply swaps their traditional roles. Hughes expresses tentative support for retaining the Navy's capital ships, stating, "Carriers are efficient and of proven versatility in almost any *small-war* contingency" (emphasis added).²³ His view of the Marines is of a similar vein.

The Marine Corps will continue to win the support of Congress and the American people as staunch, adaptive fighters, but they will retain that support by being proficient in *small wars and peacemaking operations* (emphasis added).²⁴

This shift in roles for the Navy and Marine Corps' ostensibly high-end force was echoed in a 2009 article by Professor Robert Rubel of the Naval War College.²⁵ Expanding on Hughes' ideas, Rubel argued for a new force comprised of four principal segments: an access generation force; a power projection force; a maritime security force, and; maritime operations centers. In Rubel's formulation, the carrier retained its role in the power projection force but was displaced in the access generation force by networked surface combatants and submarines. Neither Hughes nor Rubel, however, attempt to undermine the importance of the carrier. Rather, they argue that it is better suited to scenarios in which access to a foreign shore is not significantly contested. This more utilitarian view of the carrier aligns well with arguments by the unabashed advocate Rear Admiral Terry Kraft, who stated in a recent article touting the carrier's utility for hybrid wars, "[Carrier-based] aircraft, special operations forces, and helicopters have played key roles during the last 11 years in a wide range of security operations,

"But if ships at sea are vulnerable, then bases on land, whose coordinates never change, almost certainly are more so. And no one seems to be arguing that land-based forces are obsolete."

none of them reaching the level of an MCO [Major Combat Operation].”²⁶

The aircraft carrier, when stripped of its inflated and often distracting role as a symbol of American power, is simply an airfield at sea or, as Robert Work states, an “extra, extra large container.”²⁷ And the aircraft carrier is thus obsolete only when the use of aircraft becomes obsolete, or, of course, when the threat to the carrier becomes so severe that its use becomes prohibitive. Fortunately, the modern aircraft carrier’s vulnerability has not been assessed outside of exercises and war games. Krushchev’s 1958 claim that the Soviet Union could turn the Navy’s carriers into “flaming coffins,”²⁸ for example, was never put to the test. In the meantime, it has proved a tremendously flexible and useful tool. There are certainly important debates about the proper size, cost, and configuration of aircraft carriers, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. But by considering the carrier in this modular construct as simply an airfield at sea, its core purpose, like seabasing’s, can be evaluated more rationally.

Consistent with this line of thinking, naval forces’ vulnerability to “anti-access” threats (mines, diesel submarines, cruise and ballistic missiles, etc.) should be evaluated not only in the most dire of possible scenarios but also in circumstances that American forces are likely face. As the 2006 Hezbollah cruise missile attack made clear, the threat to navies is significant and cannot be ignored. The worst threats, however, still require some degree of operator sophistication and therefore have some barrier to entry: non-state actors are unlikely to employ diesel submarines or ballistic missiles. Therefore, these weapons will not be a factor in scenarios short of outright conflict between nations. For anything short of more traditional state conflict, naval forces’ ability to operate off the coast and to create sea bases remains compelling. Carriers, for their part, have been criticized as obsolete since the end of World War II yet have served in every major conflict since that time. And before ruling out amphibious warfare, it is helpful to refer to Hughes’ assertion that “under no foreseeable circumstances would we invade China.”²⁹ If China epitomizes the high end of 21st century warfare, perhaps the Marines’ critics are examining amphibious warfare in the wrong context.

Seabasing, therefore, cannot be dismissed based solely on worst case scenarios. Mobility has been a hallmark of self-protection on the seas for centuries; yet if the technologies have changed, then the targeting of mobile vessels still poses significant difficulties. The Navy and Marines still worry about well-equipped opponents harboring significant anti-access weapons, a worry that has produced the Navy and Air Force’s fledgling AirSea Battle concept. But amphibious forces in particular can mitigate these risks by increasing offshore launch distances, keeping their sea bases moving, or by attacking multiple points onshore with

smaller forces instead of coming ashore at one point in large quantities. These tactics are consistent with 1990s Marine Corps doctrinal concepts.

Modular seabasing's potential as a broader unifying concept is only partially fulfilled. Internally, the Navy is already largely structured in a modular fashion. At the low end, the Global Fleet Station constitutes a simple sea base that conducts training and builds partner capacity. The middle is comprised of Surface Action Groups (SAGs), disaggregated Amphibious Readiness Groups (ARGs), ballistic missile defense SAGs, and independently-steaming submarines. At the high end, the Navy still deploys large, concentrated strike groups centered around major capital ships, including aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships. Although not explicitly stated in its doctrine, the Navy has begun to create a force of modular sea bases that bridges the large and the small mission sets.

There is ample room to expand the vision, however. For example, between the launch of the "Thousand Ship Navy" concept in 2005 and CS21's publication in 2007, the Navy's Strategic Studies Group experimented with several concepts intended to utilize the broader maritime force as an adjunct to the Navy's high technology warships, a concept strikingly consistent with modular seabasing. As one document argued,

We must start within our own service and gradually expand outward to form an effective Naval Fleet with the Military Sealift Command and Marine Corps, a National Fleet with U.S. Coast Guard, and full expansion to the U.S. Total Fleet by incorporating and integrating with the full capabilities resident in afloat elements of the U.S. Army, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and finally those commercial entities of potential Maritime Consortiums.³⁰

What is perhaps most notable about this assertion is that it does not demand new shipbuilding or a radically different force structure. Instead, it argues for a new way of organizing and utilizing what already exists. This SSG initiative builds upon earlier 1990s efforts to rethink naval organization in a modular sense, an intellectual movement whose legacy is still pervasive in Navy doctrinal documents. The core theme was encapsulated in a 1993 report by the Congressional Research Service.

In the post-Cold War era, it may be more accurate and useful to conceive of naval forces as modular entities that may include varying combinations of carriers, surface combatants, attack submarines, and amphibious ships, with each ship type

contributing a certain mix of capabilities. Naval force planning under this concept would focus less on notional force compositions and fixed ratios among ship types, and more on how and where these ship types may be either complementary or substitutable.³¹

The Marines are witnessing similar trends. As discussed, the Marine Corps designed their seabasing constructs around a three brigade-force, an amphibious capability not employed since Korea. Meanwhile, however, the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab is experimenting with reducing the lowest level Marine Corps unit from a reinforced battalion, as seen in today's Marine Expeditionary Unit, to a reinforced company, creating a small amphibious operations capability that could fit on one ship.³² This experimental Company Landing Team, or COLT, is a classic example of modularity. The Marines also are planning to deploy on the LCS and Joint High Speed Vessel and have created Special Purpose MAGTFs (SPMAGTFs) dedicated to Security Cooperation.³³ This trend towards organizational modularity mirrors the Army's own reorganization begun in 2004 from division-sized fighting units to modular Brigade Combat Teams. Then Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker's claimed that he "had too many \$100 bills and not enough 20s."³⁴ The Navy and Marine Corps, it would seem, are in need of some fives and ones.

If plug-and-play has become the new *de facto* mantra of the modular, 21st century Navy, its most important modules may those *external* to the U.S. force. How does the Navy plug into other forces or to the world at large? Answering this question requires an expansion of the discussion; if modularity provides an alternative conceptual foundation to 20 years of seabasing literature, it still does not adequately explain *why* such a sea-based force is necessary. The DOD has focused mostly on ground insurgencies during the last five years, and naval issues have taken a back seat. But as the nation winds down a major war in Iraq while surging 30,000 troops into an even longer conflict in Afghanistan, perhaps it is time to step back from the wars at hand and examine broader U.S. strategy. This may be an opportunity to identify what role seabasing could play in America's foreign policy and determine what is worth salvaging from 20 years of inconclusive debate.

Send Foreign Policy Back to Sea

Seabasing derived much of its historical relevance from the push across the Pacific in World War II. Unprecedented in scale, it involved every aspect of combined arms doctrine – aviation, artillery, infantry, and logistics – and all were supplied from the sea. As such, it provides a compelling narrative for strictly military capability. But the campaign in the Pacific was the direct product of a specific wartime objective: the successive subjugation of a distant, maritime

nation entrenched on countless islands across a vast ocean. No such enemy exists today nor does such an enemy seem likely to emerge in the foreseeable future. What then, is the geopolitical environment that calls for seabasing?

While Halford Mackinder's early 20th century heartland theory offered a compelling account of Cold War strategy, no compelling geopolitical theory exists to explain the post-Cold War era. Strategy documents since the 1990s have devoted ample verbiage to instability, terrorism, the competition for resources, and the blurring line between state and non-state actors, but these storylines lack the historical and geographical allure of the previous century's conflicts. The Bush administration attempted to define a new era in geostrategy by declaring a Global War on Terror.³⁵ The War on Terror, however, if taken to its semantic conclusion, is really a war on a tactic, and it is therefore agnostic about geography.

Perhaps the most compelling geographic narrative instead lies in the "arc of instability" that ranges from Africa in the West to North Korea in the East and that threatens to embroil nations in mostly unconventional, escalatory regional conflicts involving terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, smuggling, piracy, and even genocide. Since discussions of this model began in the 1970s, there have been several permutations of the "arc" theory.³⁶ Certainly an arc of instability model, much like the heartland model of the 20th century, is an oversimplification subject to endless exceptions.

But it is not essential to define the exact geographic boundaries of such an arc in order to illustrate the central point. Mackinder's Eurasian heartland of yore, no longer poses an existential threat to the United States or Western democracy in general. It is no longer the nexus of conflict.³⁷ And even if the War on Terror is

"Even Iraq and Afghanistan ... lie on the northern rim of this arc, rather than at the center. The nexus of conflict...has moved decidedly south."

viewed as a global ideological struggle against militant Islamism, its geographic nexus is not in the heart of Eurasia. It instead has a decidedly littoral nature and encompasses non-heartland nations such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia and the Philippines. In this context, even Iraq and Afghanistan, sites of major U.S. COIN efforts, lie on the northern rim of this arc rather than at the center. The nexus of conflict, it would seem, has moved decidedly south.

If conflict follows population, then demographic trends support this conclusion. More than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas,³⁸ and most of those cities lie in a coastal region only 120 miles wide.³⁹ Such high population

densities, coupled with massive urban slums, create the potential for littoral conflict that could make current counterinsurgency campaigns seem tame by comparison. Like the islands of the Pacific in World War II, these burgeoning littorals threaten to be the new center of action in the 21st century. The nature of such conflict, however, promises to be very different from traditional amphibious assault. Marine Corps General Charles Krulak stated over a decade ago that future conflicts were less likely to be the beloved “son of Desert Storm” and more like the “unwanted stepchild of Chechnya.”⁴⁰ To use the same metaphor, in the future, littoral conflict is more likely to be the unwanted stepchild of Mogadishu than the son of Iwo Jima.

If geostrategic context has changed, then it is appropriate to re-evaluate the objectives as well as the ways and means used to achieve them. First and foremost, such reevaluation needs to clearly define the threat. Recently, this has not been easy: an alliance against Islamism is politically dangerous,⁴¹ and instability, a term that dominates modern strategy documents, is an elusive target. In recent years, Western strategy documents have coalesced around protection of the global commons as a backbone to 21st century coalitions. In other words, rather than identify a specific enemy, the nations of the world will agree to enforce free use of sea, air, space, and cyberspace, and to police these mediums. On the seas especially, this has evolved into an unwritten alliance of the maritime commons. The sea is the lifeblood of commerce, and the freedom of the seas is therefore a goal to which virtually every nation can agree.⁴²

Naval advocates’ promotion of the maritime commons as the backbone of the international economy enables the wider perception that navies are the guarantors of free markets. The United States’ diminishing ability to act as the sole guardian of this commons, if only for lack of ships, means that the Global Maritime Partnership is best understood as an attempt to address the need for a constabulary force on the world’s oceans and waterways, not as a U.S.-led global navy. The language used in the 2005 “launching” of the Thousand Ship Navy is instructive here.

The process of globalization has inextricably linked nations together in a de facto security arrangement that has resulted in increased interdependence and reliance on international cooperation as a prerequisite for national prosperity.⁴³

This choice of language implies that the world’s collective navies need not *choose* to join the arrangement but instead are effectively and necessarily *already* a part. Admiral Mike Mullen expanded on the concept in a 2006 speech, saying,

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 – good neighbors interested in using the power of the sea to unite, rather than to divide. The barriers for entry are low. Respect for sovereignty is high.⁴⁴

VADM John Morgan, the architect of the 1000-ship Navy and of CS21, explained the new alliance structure as centrally organized, yet independent endeavor. Quoted by Robert Kaplan in a 2009 *Foreign Affairs* article, he stated, "The system should be like the New York City taxi system: driven by market forces and with no central dispatcher."⁴⁵ No one nation, including the United States, would be in control. The global maritime alliance, purportedly one of the most crucial in the 21st century, would form from the bottom up rather than the top down.

It is still unclear exactly what this means: the strategy sounds more like Facebook than foreign policy. But the evidence also suggests that it resonates with the international audience. The last International Seapower Symposium in September 2009, for example, was attended by 102 countries and 91 chiefs of services, nearly double the attendance prior to CS21's publication.⁴⁶ Such a maritime partnership is not conducive to the standard military organization flow chart, but as senior officers have stated, "Just because it doesn't brief well doesn't mean it isn't worth doing."⁴⁷

Allusions to this alliance of the commons are increasingly prominent in modern literature even though it lacks strategic context. Robert Kaplan, for example, writing in *Foreign Affairs* about the emerging centrality of the Indian Ocean, states that the alliance framework cannot be a "NATO of the seas" but instead should consist of "multiple regional and ideological alliances in different parts of the Indian Ocean."⁴⁸ He emphasizes the importance of the new geostrategy by asserting, "the crowded hub around Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia will form the maritime heart of Asia: in the coming decades, it will be as strategically significant as the Fulda Gap, a possible invasion route for Soviet tanks into West Germany during the Cold War."⁴⁹

"Extrapolating to the coastal regions, littoral conflict is more likely to be the unwanted stepchild of Mogadishu than the son of Iwo Jima."

Echoing this increased focus on the commons, a recent study by the Center for New American Security states, "Dependable access to the commons is the backbone of the international economy and political order, benefitting the global community in ways that few appreciate or realize."⁵⁰ The study argues for the creation of coalitions, stating, "The status quo, in which the United States is the

sole guarantor of the openness of the global commons and other states free ride, is unsustainable.”⁵¹

Two distinct trends are emerging: a troubling but important world littoral region involving countries with burgeoning coastal populations, and; an emerging “Social Networking” model of maritime alliances that is not only popular internationally but apparently very *necessary* due to an increasing inability on the U.S.’s part to police such regions alone. If these alliances vary from region to region based on unique local circumstances, however, then they themselves are, in a sense, modular. And modular alliances argue for modular solutions.

It is within this worldview that modular seabasing begins to make sense in a wider, strategic context. A sea base in the international arena need not be solely a U.S. enterprise, and it need not be part of a larger, overarching alliance framework. Moreover, it need not even be about complete *independence* from the land. Rather, it can be an amalgamation of various nations’ capabilities tailored to local problems that can be addressed at sea *when they cannot* be addressed on land. Modular seabasing offers a “base” which other countries may join voluntarily without territorial or sovereignty concerns, bridging the gap between bases ashore as necessary. This strategy both protects the maritime commons and uses that commons to influence events ashore, providing a means to address a variety of international missions. In short, it mates a modular sea-based approach and a modular U.S. force structure with the emerging modular concept of alliances.

To a limited degree, the modular, regional approach is already appearing. Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), for example, is a voluntary international task force dedicated to fighting piracy off the coast of Somalia. Command rotates between member nations, and there are no formal demands of members. Indeed, CTF-151’s mixed success has less to do with its ad hoc nature than the requirement for large numbers of ships to patrol such a vast area. As a recent editorial in *Defense News* argues, however, seabasing has the potential to mitigate this issue as well.

A mix of barges, converted commercial platforms, prepositioning vessels, and amphibious and auxiliary ships could form a chain of persistent sea bases, interspersed along the coast to support coastal patrol craft, smaller boats and helicopters.⁵²

Much further east, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have come together in recent years to successfully fight piracy in the Strait of Malacca. And although the effort is consistent with the Global Maritime Partnership, the U.S. is not directly involved. This further illuminates the common benefits that nations can

reap by policing the maritime commons. As *Time* magazine stated, the real key to success in this anti-piracy struggle was simply that “a new spirit of cooperation took hold along the strait.”⁵³

It is important to emphasize the differences between the Global Maritime Partnership’s philosophy and seabasing’s intellectual foundations. Emerging seabasing constructs are not about independence from fickle allies, as they were in the 1990s, but are about providing a global construct that will *attract* hesitant allies. Kaplan conveys this global, modular ethic when quoting an Australian commodore’s vision of 21st century maritime coalitions as a hub around which various international spokes can gather.

“It sounds more like Facebook than foreign policy. But the evidence also suggests that it resonates with the international audience.”

...the model should be a network of artificial sea bases supplied by the U.S. Navy, which would allow for different permutations of alliances: frigates and destroyers from various states could "plug and play" into these sea bases as necessary and spread out from East Africa to the Indonesian archipelago.⁵⁴

This hypothetical architecture may sound good in theory, but what guidance does an updated geostrategic approach to seabasing provide for specific modern scenarios? Any answer to that question must begin with the *purpose* of the alliance. Nations join alliances for various reasons, and alliance theory typically labels these rationales as either balancing mechanisms (power, threats, or interest) or bandwagoning mechanisms, so called because a nation simply joins the greatest power’s bandwagon or its opposing power’s bandwagon.⁵⁵

In the aforementioned case of Eastern Europe sea-based missile defense, it is easy to infer that the Poles saw the alliance in a balance of threat context reminiscent of Mackinder’s world. Having little faith in NATO’s Article V and unconvinced of Russia’s beneficent intentions, especially in the wake of Russia’s 2008 conflict with Georgia, Poland looked to U.S. forces on its soil as a guarantee that the U.S. would come to its defense against an aggressor from the East.⁵⁶

Ironically, missile defense in Poland highlights a case in which the two signatory countries, the U.S. and Poland, joined with very different geostrategic contexts in mind. For the U.S., missile defense was largely about provided stability through deterrence against an unstable nation (Iran). For Poland, however, the agreement was intended to contain possible future aggression by Russia, the traditional heartland power. Placing missile defense assets at sea, however, did

not meet this objective. It is also worth mentioning that Russia had a strong adverse reaction to the missile defense shield, stating that “even toned-down missile defense plans were intended to weaken Russia and that the U.S.-led NATO alliance remained a ‘serious’ threat.”⁵⁷ For the three nations involved, individual perceptions very much colored reality. Clearly, a seabasing solution that merely seeks *independence* from land will not always be the preferred foreign policy solution.

In the arc of instability, seabasing makes more sense. Yemen and Somalia, for example, increasingly warrant close American scrutiny, both as a combined threat to the maritime commons and as sources of terrorist aggression against the homeland. Addressing the problems in such countries could begin with an alliance of the commons approach that works to prevent piracy, water-borne terrorism, and smuggling. A sea base off the coast could build on operational successes by providing humanitarian supplies and development assistance. Special forces and small Marine units would be available as necessary for surgical raids, and aircraft and missiles could be used for surgical strikes. Partnership navies could plug into the sea base and add capability incrementally. The U.S. presence ashore could remain small, reducing American visibility and preventing widespread animosity. And U.S. amphibious resources could still be reassembled to provide the maximum assault capability for the rare instance in which greater force is needed.

Such a seabasing construct does not preclude *land* basing, which proceeds apace in locations like Bahran and Diego Garcia and via informal partnerships in countless littoral locations like India, Singapore, and the U.A.E. Forward basing continues to be important and relevant, but it is evolving in the less-stringent manner envisaged by the “places, not bases” philosophy of the Rumsfeld years rather than via formal, long-term agreements.⁵⁸ In short, sea bases are not taking the place of land bases but are instead bridging the gap between them.

Not all alliance members may agree on the geostrategic context that underpins an agreement’s objectives. Japan, for example, has long historical ties to the United States and has been a key strategic partner in the Western Pacific for decades. But the acrimonious debate over the Marine Corps base on Okinawa has revealed widespread Japanese public opposition to the hosting of U.S. forces. The furor has persisted even after Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned following a failure to renegotiate the 2006 Japan-U.S. basing agreement.⁵⁹

“The U.S. need not wait until the ink is dry on a new world order before devising the ways and means to support it.”

The nature of bilateral relation with Japan depends heavily on the geostrategic context within which it is viewed. Previously a cornerstone of anti-Soviet containment efforts, it is now a cornerstone of a neo-containment policy against Chinese aggression, in which case U.S. forces in Japan are essential. Alternatively, an alliance of the commons approach focused more on littoral stability would suggest that Japan serves primarily as a base for U.S. forces whose focus is on matters further east, and the Japanese are therefore justified to at least renegotiate the size of the U.S. presence. Both geostrategic contexts argue for a continued U.S.-Japan alliance, but the exact context has important implications for the specific nature of bases and force structure.

Yoichi Funabashi, the *Asahi Shimbun* editor in chief, examined these two contexts and, while he acknowledged the possibility a resurgent Chinese threat, he argued that the best approach to the greater region was through “a multilateral structure for maritime stability in the South China Sea and the East China Sea,” and that such a pact needed to “evolve from being ‘against’ something to one that is ‘for’ something.”⁶⁰ This is consistent with an alliance of the commons framework.

The decision regarding U.S. basing cannot stand alone; it cannot be understood apart from the broader geostrategic context. In Funabashi’s words, “Incorporating the base issue within the process of constructing a new vision for the alliance will be crucial. The question now is how to go about creating that new vision.”⁶¹

If a new vision of Pacific alliances is imminent, then a new vision for seabasing will necessarily have to follow. But the clues are already there, and the U.S. need not wait until the ink is dry on a new world order before devising the ways and means to support it. Multilateralism, plug-and-play, and modular scalability are the clear and emerging themes. As such, they must guide not only foreign policy but acquisition as well. Here the results are mixed.

Even if the Navy and Marine Corps have rightly tempered their MPF(F) plans, their residual seabasing programs are still too inward-looking. The Mobile Landing Platform, for example, is designed to move heavy assets around at sea, but those assets are decidedly *American*: the MLP will join the Maritime Prepositioning Squadrons and transfer cargo between the large LMSRs and the smaller LCACs and JHSV. This is an important yet currently absent capability, and the Marines are certainly justified in pursuing it. But it also illustrates that defense acquisition is not well-aligned with emerging foreign policy. To be consistent with the vision espoused in the Global Maritime Partnership, U.S. shipbuilding will need to keep one eye on the ways that proposed force structure will attract plug-and-play allies. If maritime partnerships of the future will be

largely voluntary, then seabasing platforms must *offer* something to foreign participants. Facebook-style foreign policy will need Facebook-style acquisition.

This will not be an easy proposition. Most notably, NATO has developed a fledgling sea basing doctrine, and its intellectual formulation is largely consistent with that of the United States: “Sea basing, as a potential Alliance capability, is a transformational concept for projecting, employing and sustaining military capabilities and multi-national joint forces utilizing seaborne platforms.”⁶² Beyond doctrine, however, there are significant differences in member nations’ capabilities, making interoperability all the more crucial. Indeed, this was the primary concern during a 2005 conference on international seabasing. “If we’re going to make this massive investment into sea basing...then it is vital that we get interoperability built in at the onset,” said one Royal Navy Commodore.⁶³

If interoperability is a difficult proposition in a formal Western alliance more than a half-century old, it will be an order of magnitude more difficult in a loosely structured, informal alliance system like that envisioned by the Global Maritime Partnership. Unfortunately, U.S. leaders tend to view interoperability discussions through the very narrow lens of digital networks and partners’ abilities to connect to such networks. Many smaller nations have limited technical capability and are easily intimidated by the U.S. Navy’s size and obsession with technology. Incorporating such nations into effective coalitions will therefore require the development of processes and procedures that are *less* technologically intensive, not more. Without plug-and-play capabilities at *all* levels, modular seabasing will never get underway.

Even within the conventional U.S. force structure, plug-and-play issues abound. For example, although the fledgling AirSea battle is usually discussed in the context of a high-end conflict against China, it is fundamentally about interoperability. As a recent CSBA paper argues, AirSea Battle “rests fundamentally on the tight integration of Air Force and Navy operations.” If AirSea Battle roughly mimics the AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1970s and 1980s, however, it is remarkable that no comparable *SeaLand* Battle doctrine exists with its own corresponding need to integrate multi-service capabilities. The absence of such doctrine is particularly notable given the relative importance afforded to the littorals in 20 years of defense studies.

If the littorals do constitute the geographic nexus of conflict in the 21st century, then seabasing will be an important capability for the *joint* force. The Army in particular has its own fleet of landing craft, and it would almost certainly participate in any major land operation. If interoperability is key, then Air Force assets should at least have some role to play in coastal conflict as well. The Marine Corps, as the service with the most amphibious (and seabasing)

expertise, is best positioned to develop such joint concepts in the same way that it developed joint amphibious concepts prior to World War II. The processes need to incorporate all services into a modern, coherent SeaLand doctrine, however, remains largely undeveloped.

After twenty years of conceptual development, therefore, seabasing deserves a fresh look. While it has important implications for doctrine, acquisition, and even service identity, it must derive from broader strategy and foreign policy. Rooted in World War II concepts of amphibious assault and nurtured in heady, post-Cold War environments that encouraged military unilateralism, seabasing became a debate about platforms before the new, emerging geostrategic context was clearly defined. In the 1990s, seabasing discussions were at least somewhat about strategy, but a decade later they were almost solely about shipbuilding. Seabasing became a program instead of a vision. What was lacking more than specific platforms, however, was a coherent concept of 21st century military operations informed by a coherent global strategy and approach to foreign policy. During inflated talk of transformation, the tail began to wag the dog.

It is time to reverse that trend. As the nexus of conflict moves south from Mackinder's heartland to the nations of the world's littorals, so too must U.S. military operations focus on new methods in these areas, enabled and supported by appropriate organizations and platforms. In this world, seabasing constitutes a powerful and coherent model for amphibious assault and a modular "plug and play" approach to the littorals that invites both joint and international participation. By putting the base back in seabasing and thinking "inside the box," the U.S. can begin to adjust to this new nexus of conflict and begin to send foreign policy back to sea.

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- ¹⁷ See, for example, A.K. Cebrowski and Wayne P. Hughes, "Rebalancing the Fleet," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, November 1999. Importantly, Cebrowski and Hughes argues for a small, network centric fleet *in addition* to the Navy's larger capital ships, not in lieu of. However, their "streetfighter" concept still remains one of the best encapsulations of the small-ship ethos.
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of its quest lies in the nation's littorals. See Robert Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?" *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2010; and Parag Khanna, "China's Final Frontier," *Prospect*, 4 June 2009, available at <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/06/chinasfinalfrontier/>>.

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CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In a foreword to the 1942 reprint of Halford Mackinder's seminal 1919 treatise, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Major George Fielding Eliot wrote, "World strategy is not, alas, a science to which the English-speaking peoples have given any great attention. We have produced few authorities on this subject, which is yet so vital to our very existence as free peoples."¹ Perhaps it is time to heed Eliot's warning.

Seabasing is not world strategy, of course; it is simply a means to an end. But it is also uniquely suited to a region of the world that is rich in both resources and potential conflict and that increasingly warrants American attention without undue visibility. The Navy and Marine Corps, struggling to define themselves after a decade of ground conflict and shipbuilding travails, are uniquely suited to address this region and thereby position themselves at the forefront of the nation's geostrategic efforts. But they will require some direction.

The Department of Defense should provide this direction by developing a new *Joint Integrating Concept* for seabasing that focuses on joint logistical and sustainment metrics, rather than metrics solely applicable to brigade-sized ground forces. This is not to argue that such ground forces will never be necessary but that seabasing must encompass and enable a much wider range of missions than just amphibious assault. In short, DOD must put the base back in seabasing. To complement this effort, **DOD needs to comprehensively reevaluate its requirements for both prepositioning and amphibious lift in light of expected 21st century conflicts and missions.** It is high time for a DoN Lift 3, or a Sea basing I, study, and it is time to reevaluate the "fall in on our allies" model of prepositioning that endures today.

As the Department of the Navy struggles with its own shipbuilding plans, it must **continue to develop modular constructs for its equipment, its personnel, and its organizations.** It must move beyond the "small ships versus large ships" debate to embrace a new vision of rapidly transformable "containers." It must develop creative ways to scale rapidly from security patrols to strike groups, while the Marines must develop scalable, self-contained units ranging from platoons and companies to Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEFs). Perhaps most importantly, **these platforms and organizations must be accessible and**

conducive to the joint force and to plug-and-play allies. To leverage the maximum capability, it will be necessary to think inside the box.

Finally, the Department of Defense needs to initiate a **serious dialogue about 21st century geostrategy, placing appropriate emphasis on littoral nations** and especially the arc of instability. As important as it is to win the wars we are in today, it is as important to prepare for the world of tomorrow.

A revised concept of seabasing has a critical role to play in this world. Born of World War II amphibious assault, and nurtured in a unilateral environment that eschewed allies, seabasing holds the potential to unite allies in loose, regional networks of modular platforms. As the military's answer to the emerging Facebook-style foreign policy, it is an innovative solution for the 21st century. As such, seabasing has the potential to drive, and not just to reflect, American grand strategy in the coming decades.

¹ Major George Fielding Eliot, in Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (1919; repr., New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1942), p. vii.

GLOSSARY

A2/AD	Anti-Access, Area Denial
ACE	Aviation Combat Element
AOA	Analysis of Alternatives
APS	Army Prepositioned Stocks
ARG	Amphibious Readiness Group
ASBM	Anit-Ship Ballistic Missile
ASW	Anti-submarine Warfare
ATF	Amphibious Task Force
BCT	Brigade Combat Team
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
CAOC	Combined Air Operations Center
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
COCOM	Component Commander
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CNA	Center for Naval Analyses
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
COLT	Company Landing Team
CONOPS	Concept of Operations
CONUS	Continental United States
CS21	Cooperative Strategy for 21 st Century Seapower
CTF	Combined Task Force
DLA	Defense Logistics Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
DoN	Department of the Navy
DSB	Defense Science Board
EFV	Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle
EMCON	Emissions Control
ESG	Expeditionary Strike Group
FCS	Future Combat System
FOC	Full Operational Capability
FY	Fiscal Year
GAO	Government Accounting Office
GCE	Ground Combat Element
GFS	Global Fleet Station
IA	Individual Augmentation
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IOC	Initial Operational Capability
JC2	Joint Command and Control

JCIDS	Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System
JFEO	Joint Forced Entry Operations
JHSV	Joint High Speed Vessel
JOA	Joint Operations Area
JIC	Joint Integrating Concept
JLOTS	Joint Logistics Over the Shore
JROC	Joint Resources Oversight Council
K2	Karshi-Khanabad Airfield, Uzbekistan
LCAC	Landing Craft, Air Cushion
LCE	Logistics Combat Element
LCS	Littoral Combat ship
LHA	Amphibious Assault Ship
LHA(R)	Amphibious Assault Ship (Replacement)
LHD	Amphibious Assault Ship (well-deck capable)
LMSR	Large, Medium-Speed Roll-on, Roll-off Ship
LPD	Landing Platform Dock
MAGTF	Marine Air-to-Ground Task Force
MCO	Major Combat Operations
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade
MEF	Marine Expeditionary Force
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit
MLP	Mobile Landing Platform
MNS	Mission Needs Statement
MOB	Mobile Offshore Base
MPF	Maritime Prepositioning Force
MPF(F)	Maritime Prepositioning Force (Future)
MPSRON	Maritime Prepositioning Squadron
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDAF	Navy, Defense Logistics Agency and Air Force
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NEO	Non-combatant Evacuation Operation
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NOC	Naval Operations Concept
NSP	Navy Strategic Plan
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OMFTS	Operational Maneuver from the Sea
OPNAV	Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
PGM	Precision Guided Munition
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
ROMO	Range of Military Operations
RMA	Revolution in Military Affairs
RSOI	Reception, Staging, and Onward Integration

STOM	Ship to Objective Maneuver
SAG	Surface Action Group
SSG	Strategic Studies Group
T-AK	Legacy Cargo/Container Ship
T-AKE	Dry Cargo/ Ammunition Ship
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USS	United States Ship
USNS	United States Naval Ship
VLS	Vertical Launch System

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After flight training and designation as an EA-6B “Prowler” pilot, Commander Gregory J. Parker completed multiple tours on four different aircraft carriers and commanded Electronic Attack Squadron 134 (VAQ-134), an expeditionary Prowler squadron which deployed to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. His duties ashore have included instructing at the Electronic Attack Weapons School in Whidbey Island, Washington and a tour as an action officer with the Joint Chiefs of Staff J-3 Deputy Directorate for Global Operations, Strategic Operations Division. During his time at the Pentagon he also served as a briefer in the National Military Command Center, building and presenting a daily operations summary for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He served as a 2009-10 Federal Executive Fellow at Brookings.

Commander Parker graduated from the United States Naval Academy with a B.S. in physics. He subsequently received an M.S. in applied physics from Johns Hopkins University and an M.Phil. in history and philosophy of science from Cambridge University, England.

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