

Basic instincts: Resetting the core operational mindset of the USMC

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Facing mounting coastal threats, the US Marine Corps is developing new methods and mindsets to face its foes and remain relevant, as *Michael Fabey* reports

After years of fighting on land in Iraq, the US Marine Corps (USMC) has returned to its naval roots only to find its traditional method of conducting amphibious warfare being challenged in a way modern marines have never before faced. Squaring off against the kind of peer competition that the service has not experienced since the Cold War, the USMC is formulating a new way of conducting combat operations in the littorals while still maintaining its traditional operational skillset.

One of the most promising amphibious warfare concepts being explored and developed by the USMC involves expeditionary advance bases (EABs). The concept, new to the US marines, turns traditional marine basing on its head. Instead of relying on the full-frontal assault and seizure that can be mounted by a traditional amphibious readiness group (ARG) with fixed bases, under the EAB concept small, mobile operations bases would be established inside the attack arc of an adversary.



An F-35B Lightning II aircraft assigned to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 121 takes off from the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp . (US Navy)

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An EAB would enable marines to harass adversaries, keep their ambitions in check, and exert a special kind of sea-land control – or at least prevent a foe from exerting its own.

This 'inside force' is designed to persist forward within range of adversary long-range fires; accept greater risk than the traditional force might; be more passively defended; take advantage of partner proximity; provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) for the ARG 'outside force';

be inherently resilient; invert cost imposition; buy time for other operations; and create enemy uncertainty.

Additionally, EABs would get critical marine infrastructure and vulnerable capabilities 'off the X', as the USMC would say, which simply means creating a smaller, more mobile force that is much harder for enemy forces to target than a traditional base. Marines could employ trucks, barges, ferries, and other non-traditional vehicles to provide the necessary mobility as well as better mission support continuity. An EAB is designed to provide the essential functions of a traditional base but with a less vulnerable, more resilient support infrastructure.

"It's a myth that when we deploy with an intact MAGTF [Marine Air-Ground Task Force] we put afloat and put ashore," USMC Major General David Coffman, US Navy (USN) Director of Expeditionary Warfare, told *Jane's* .

Marines, he warned, can no longer count on using a full amphibious assault to establish a major secure base of operations in relatively virgin territory. "There is no immature theatre," Maj Gen Coffman said. "Somebody's already there."

In the case of an EAB, where the base is deep within what is essentially enemy territory, that somebody is an adversary or a peer competitor, so the goal of a theatre-located EAB is to wrest sea control from that foe.

Interviews conducted by *Jane's* with USMC officers and reviews of marine warfighting laboratory briefings provide details of how marine strategists view EABs and their importance for the future.

EAB operations represent an inherently naval concept to support joint operations by advancing naval and joint sensors, shooters, and sustainment capabilities in a new way to achieve sea control and denial. To do this marines need to develop distributed, low-signature, lethal, networked, persistent, and joint expeditionary capabilities that can endure and operate in greater-risk environments within the arc of enemy long-range fires. It will require the USMC and USN to rebalance force structures at the lower end.

Calculating risks

EAB operations are intended to introduce uncertainty into the enemy's risk calculus by providing more amorphous bases that distribute operationally relevant capabilities and infrastructure.

Additionally, marines believe that EABs enable naval forces to exercise and support sea control and denial activities from key maritime-terrain locations adjacent to close seas. Furthermore, the basing infrastructure clouds enemy situational awareness, expands capacity, and supports more distributed expeditionary capabilities forward.

Marines are relying on EABs to better shape the battlespace, generate integrated layered maritime defences, cover withdrawal when necessary, reassure regional allies and partners with persistent presence, and preclude 'fait accompli' aggression – similar to the kind being employed by China in the seas of the Western Pacific. The kind of inside force offered through an EAB will also likely maintain more persistent situational awareness through hosted ISR capabilities. The concept makes a "virtue of austerity", according to marine officials, by exploiting partner proximity to host additional smaller lethal platforms.

The USMC also believes that EABs will enable the corps to employ more aggressive deception operations, conduct countermining operations, deny the enemy the use of a strait, and perform more

persistent scouting, especially during a confined sea fight. At the same time the inside force will provide targeting and manoeuvre information for the traditional outside force, helping the entire joint force to win the 'hider/finder' competition.

The service has acknowledged that this is an outside-the-box concept for it. However, given the new and expected battles for contested sea space, the USMC has no choice but to draw its littoral operational operations outside, or rather inside, the traditional lines. The corps has to help the USN control the sea and EABs represent the best way to do that in certain locales, such as the island-packed littorals of the Western Pacific.

The USMC is now honing this operational concept. Marines are practising EAB operations during exercises and while conducting routine patrols, as one USMC officer told *Jane's*. Soon, the corps would like to employ EABs throughout areas of contention and competition, so that wherever potential foes might try to exert power there could be an EAB keeping adversarial aggression in check.

One region that the USMC considers to be a prime candidate for EABs is the Western Pacific, where the US has named China as a naval peer competitor and an aggressor because of that country's moves to take over maritime territory claimed by other nations, many of whom are US allies. Throughout most of the administration of former president Barrack Obama, US policy, marine officials note, was one of "non-provocation" towards China, no matter the situation. However, under President Donald Trump the US has begun to take a much stronger stand against China in the region. This follows Chinese militarisation of island features in the South China Sea despite international legal findings against Chinese claims to territories there.

One of the most controversial territories that mainland China claims as its own is Taiwan, which has been the subject of many Pentagon reports and wargames underscoring just how the US might be needed to protect the island. USMC officials have acknowledged that there are discussions under way about putting an EAB on Taiwan to create another hurdle to any Chinese move there.

[Continued in full version...]

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