

Strategy Research Project

Into the Pacific Expanse: Focusing the USMC on the Pivot

by

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

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This paper examines the roles and missions of the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) within the Asia-Pacific as part of the Department of Defense and U.S. government rebalance towards this important region. It briefly describes the growing importance of the region, the complex and dynamic geo-political environment and postulates a number of illustrated scenarios or vignettes to frame the strategic and operational context for likely USMC missions. Next, the paper assesses the capabilities and roles of the other services within existing concepts (Joint Operational Access Concept, Air-Sea Battle, and the Army's Pacific Pathways concept) and divines the niche capability or "sweet spot" uniquely suitable for the USMC. The paper argues that the USMC should focus on the development and employment of company and battalion sized expeditionary units to meet the related likely contingencies while also focusing on developing a force generation model that assembles a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) for larger more deliberate forced entry operations as part of a larger joint task force. It concludes with recommendations on how to better focus USMC company and battalion force development efforts on USMC "sweet spot" capabilities.

Into the Pacific Expanse: Focusing the USMC on the Pivot

As we work closely with partners across the U.S. government and in the (Asia-Pacific) region to address shared challenges and prevent conflict, we will ensure we are ready to respond rapidly and effectively across the full range of military operations. United States Pacific Command is committed to be agile, flexible, and ready to meet the challenges of an uncertain and dynamic security environment.

—Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III¹

The United States began planning to increase its presence and expand its influence across the Asia-Pacific region when President Obama and then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the “Pivot to the Pacific” in 2011.² While the geopolitical and global economic relevance of the region render the “pivot” vital to U.S. interests, the associated policies and strategies must evolve. In the short time since the announced “pivot” which focused primarily on military related activities, the Obama administration has already modified its approach pursuing more economic and diplomatic efforts inclusive of China.³ While this paper focuses on the United States Marine Corps’ (USMC) role in the Asia-Pacific, all U.S. actions related to the Pacific Area of Responsibility (AOR) must consider the effects on the region in general and China specifically.

Arguably the most critical economic region in the world, the Asia Pacific poses complex strategic issues and challenges. Economically, the United States, China and countries throughout the Asia Pacific remain closely connected with more than one-half of all U.S. imports originating in the region. According to the U.S. Trade Representative, the region accounts for nearly 60% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and roughly 50% of international trade. Since 1990, Asia-Pacific trade has increased 300% along with a 400% increase in global investment in the region. U.S. access to the Asia-Pacific

is of vital national interest and “as an Asia-Pacific power the United States’ economic and security future is inextricably linked to the region.”⁴ The growing influence of China within the Asia-Pacific region will have a profound influence on U.S. policies.

The U.S. must balance its evolving relations with China along with its established relationships with allies and partners in the region. The risks are high. A U.S. failure to support a regional partner may, when confronting Chinese claims, embolden China to take other provocative measures that may affect the entire region. Conversely, an aggressive U.S. response to a regional crisis could antagonize China, undermine cooperation and polarize the region. Each scenario presents dangerous risks to the U.S. strategic shift and military pivot to the Pacific (later termed “rebalance”). “Doing the right things ‘strategically’ and doing the right things ‘operationally’ are difficult choices for the United States everywhere and more so in Asia-Pacific because it involves a rising power, China, with many entangled interests and conflicts.”⁵

Southeast Asia is strategically and geographically vital to the global economy, encapsulating the junction between the Pacific and Indian oceans including some of the world’s most important sea-lanes. “With 10 nations, close to 600 million people, a pool of \$1.5 trillion GDP, a land- mass of over 4.6 million square kilometers, and a vast ocean stretch of over 7.5 million square kilometers,”⁶ Southeast Asia is a hub for world commerce. Likewise, the U.S., the Americas, and the European Union rely heavily on access to the region through the region’s sea-lanes.

The U.S. “Rebalance to the Pacific” reflects the growing U.S. National Interest in the Asia-Pacific, with the goals of improved stability, continued prosperity, and guaranteed access to both regional markets and the global commons. The USMC

provides a critical capability to the U.S. in securing access, responding to regional crises, and deterring and preventing armed conflict within the region. This paper presents the most likely future contingencies in the region and then identifies the key USMC capabilities required to promote and sustain U.S. interests.

The Environment

As the sole global superpower, it is vital that the U.S. sustains credible force projection capabilities. Through credible force projection the U.S. is able to both access and influence regions in support of national interests.⁷ Over the past several decades the U.S. demonstrated its ability to project power throughout the world. In response, countries concerned with U.S. power projection adopted robust Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) strategies. Nations learned that the best way to counter U.S. influence is by developing capabilities to reliably deny the U.S. access and thus negate U.S. force projection capabilities. Countries such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia are among the Asian countries investing in formidable A2AD systems.⁸ Moreover, some advanced A2/AD capabilities are becoming increasingly more affordable and obtainable by third world countries and even non-state actors.⁹ “Lethal AD capabilities . . . include cruise and ballistic missiles; weapons of mass destruction; mines; guided rockets, mortars, and artillery; electronic warfare; and short-range/man-portable air defense and anti-armor systems.”¹⁰

Even allies and countries friendly towards the U.S. are increasingly resistant to granting U.S. basing and over-flight access. The consequences associated with granting U.S. military access include aggravating regional relationships and antagonizing countries such as China, which is already suspicious of U.S. regional intentions. Limited regional access complicates the implementation of long-standing

U.S. regional plans and strategies and the ability to rapidly respond to regional contingencies with forward deployed capabilities. If the U.S. is unable to “assure access to ports, airfields, foreign airspace, coastal waters and host nation support in potential commitment areas,”¹¹ alternative means to gain access become necessary. While continued peacetime engagement with Asian states is important, it will not supplant the requirement for a forcible-entry capability in time of war nor will it assure the needed access during regional crises.

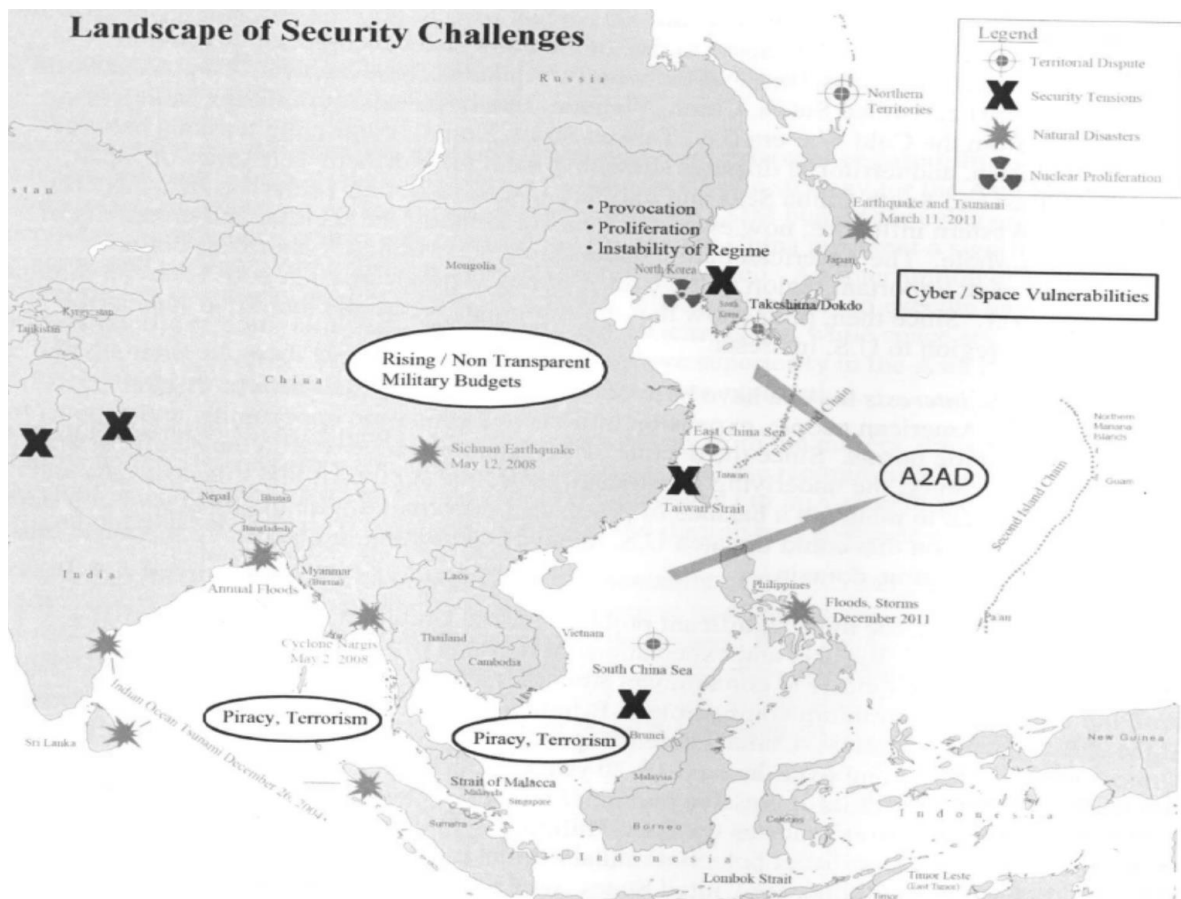


Figure 1: Landscape of Security Challenges¹²

In spite of diminishing shore-based options, Marine Expeditionary Forces provide effective and efficient strategic options to respond to regional crises and, when required,

exercise forcible entry. In a 2011 letter to the Secretary of Defense, General Amos, the Commandant of the USMC, stated that U.S. amphibious forces would continue to “provide the Nation with assured access for the force in a major contingency operation.” While few DOD strategists dispute the need for amphibious capabilities in permissive threat conditions, many question the viability of deploying large-deck amphibious assault ships within twenty or thirty miles of a modern coastal defense. Even the most modern U.S. amphibious ships are extremely vulnerable to “areas defended by smart anti-ship mines, manned and unmanned aircraft, guided anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) and anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs).”¹³ The legitimate threat posed by A2AD technologies demands new and creative approaches to place future opponents at risk.

While gaining and maintaining access to the region is a considerable task, it is only one aspect of regional security. Admiral Locklear, the Pacific Command (PACOM) Combatant Commander, during testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, outlined a “myriad of security challenges in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, including rapidly growing military capabilities, nuclear developments, unresolved territorial and resource disputes, violent extremism, natural disasters, proliferation, and illicit trafficking.”¹⁴ (See Figure 1) This summary paints a daunting regional security picture with unlimited contingency possibilities. Preparing for all potential contingencies within the Asia-Pacific provides a breadth and complexity of associated problem-sets that are impractical to completely respond to and resource. Time and resource constraints prevent the military from preparing for everything; therefore, developing feasible, acceptable and

sustainable policies, strategies and force options relies on risk management and regional contingency prioritization.

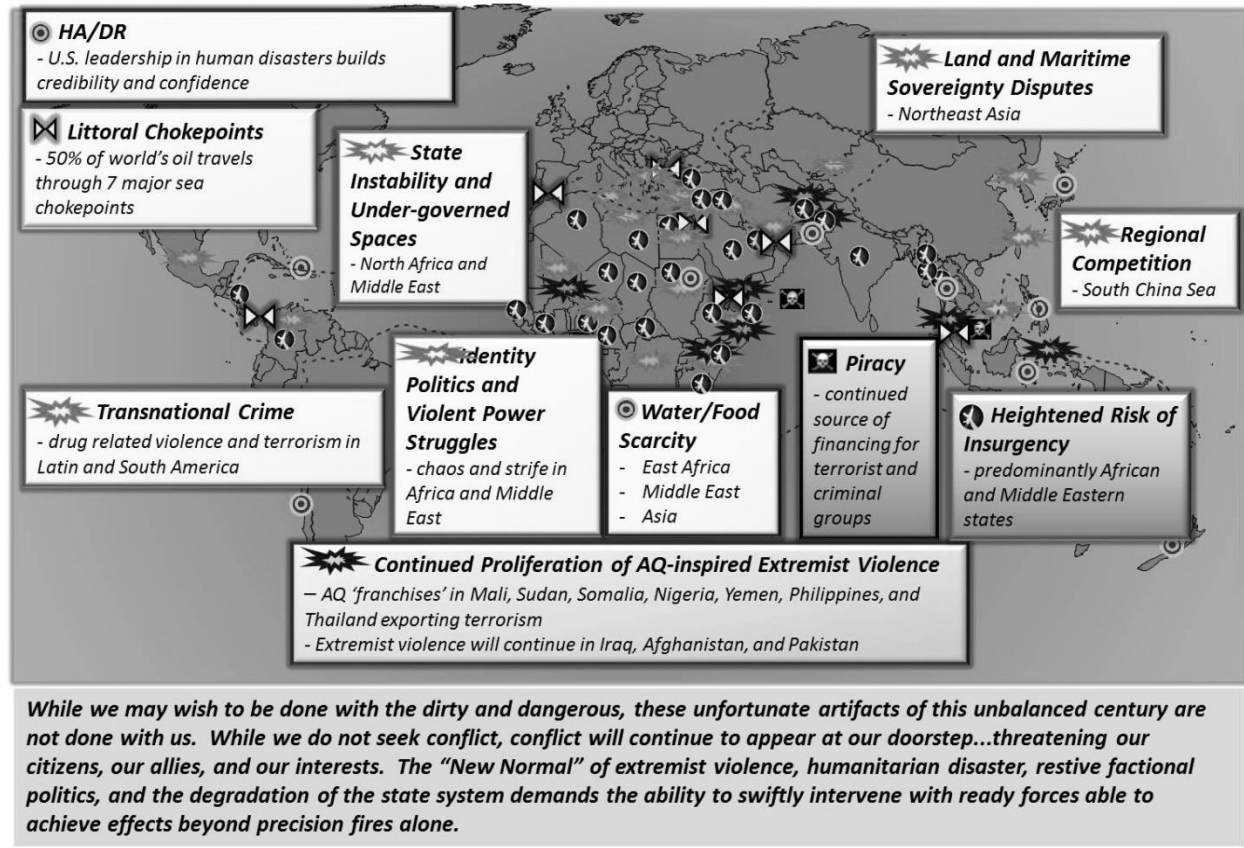


Figure 2. Areas of Instability Overlap with Key Littoral Areas¹⁵

A “comprehensive estimate” should consider: analyses from “regional experts,” a host of possible planning scenarios and related future contingencies. Mark Gunzinger, in his article *Shaping America’s Future Military*, highlights the increased diversity of planning scenarios within the last three Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDR) to include complex “combinations of scenarios spanning the range of plausible future challenges.” Gunzinger suggests the wide range of scenarios created opportunities for services to justify program investment and force structure instead of developing balanced solutions to likely security contingencies.¹⁶ Responding to this criticism, the following contingency

scenarios intend to provide a reasonable context for *likely* USMC roles and tasks in the Pacific.

Vignettes/Operating Environment

The USMC faces a broad range of likely operational scenarios in the Asia-Pacific. In accordance with the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, the Joint Force must succeed in ten revised mission sets, ranging from homeland defense and space, to terrorism and nuclear war. Included within these ten missions are those especially pertinent to the USMC in the Asia Pacific: deter and defeat aggression, project power despite anti-access and area denial challenges, provide a stabilizing presence, conduct stability and counterinsurgency operations, and conduct humanitarian, disaster relief and other operations.¹⁷ Included within these missions is a wide-range of potential operations with extensive associated capability requirements. By better describing the most likely and dangerous operational contingencies, USMC operational and capability requirements can be defined, prioritized and efficiently resourced.

Vignettes in this section are intended to provide the context required to support USMC operational and capability development. Though certainly not inclusive, these vignettes provide a “rational estimate” of the most likely types of contingencies the USMC will face in the Asia Pacific. Selected from a number of sources,¹⁸ these vignettes do not attempt to predict the future but offer the context to help envision the operational challenges facing the USMC. Several of the below listed vignettes, originate from Nathan Freier’s, *Beyond the Last War*. Through Freier’s analysis of the Asia-Pacific security environment, he presents diverse contingency scenarios and outlines the key implications for ground forces. Freier includes “five pacing archetypes for future large-

scale demands: humanitarian response, distributed security, enable and support actions, peace operations and limited conventional campaigns.”¹⁹

Freier uses “Distributed Security” to categorize some of the key scenarios. “*Distributed Security* is heavily weighted toward combat and security operations occurring in response to disorder and focused on gaining control over geography, infrastructure, populations, or dangerous military capabilities.”²⁰ Of his five archetypes, Freier’s study concludes that distributed security is the most probable, most disruptive and potentially the most dangerous. Although *Distributed Security* is a non-doctrinal term, the archetype encapsulates a range of unpredictable threats and offers a useful typology describing mid-intensity crises. The vignettes used for the USMC mission area analysis include Distributed Security as well as two other typologies: Humanitarian Assistance and Enabling Operations.

Distributed Security

Non-State Actors Disrupt Shipping Lanes

Pirates and maritime criminals exploit security gaps resulting from disjointed multi-lateral efforts to secure regional shipping lanes. The inconsistent military presence and fluctuating capabilities of participatory countries lead to disjointed security coverage that create vulnerabilities for cargo shipping. The United States and China lead a regional coalition, eliminating shore-based piracy safe-havens, patrolling shipping lanes, conducting Visit Board Search and Seizure operations, responding to acts of piracy, developing regional partner capacity and providing timely response options to acts of piracy. Relevant vignette considerations include Marine-Naval integration and security, combined training and bi-lateral operational opportunities with China, and building regional partner capacity.

Evacuation and Reinforcement Operations

As Americans travel overseas as a consequence of economic globalization, the requirement to secure them in time of crisis is more prevalent. In this vignette, a violent extremist organization in Southeast Asia destabilizes the security conditions in an urban metropolis and threatens the security of U.S. personnel. Circumstances require the continuation of U.S. diplomatic efforts and continued presence of non-essential U.S. citizens. The U.S. ambassador and Chief of Mission requests additionally security support to avert the evacuation of U.S. personnel and protect vulnerable U.S. economic interests in the country. Relevant vignette considerations include security options beyond the U.S. embassy and consulate, bi-lateral integration with host nation forces, Marine-Naval integration, sea-based sustainment, and planning for and the eventual evacuation of large numbers of non-essential and essential U.S. and allied personnel.

Insurgency

An ongoing dispute between the central government of an Asia-Pacific country and an insurgent group continues to intensify. The overflow of the insurgency into a neighboring country is aggravating regional stability. At the request of the host nation leadership and the U.S. consulate, a limited offensive campaign by U.S. forces along the border is requested. The neighbor nation supports the U.S. military involvement and will conduct coordinated operations to secure their side of the border. Civilian populations along the border are limited to small towns and farming communities and the jungle limits technological advantages associated with Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). Vignette highlights include Marine-Navy sea basing, distributed operations by ground forces due to the associated terrain and relatively large area of operations, and coordinated bi-lateral operations.

Humanitarian Assistance

Based on frequency and geological conditions, response to natural disasters remains the most likely future operation within the Asia-Pacific. Recent disasters, such as the 2004 Indonesia Tsunami, the 2011 Japan earthquake and the 2013 Philippine Typhoon, illustrate both the frequency and devastation of these events. Two distinct vignettes outlined by Nathan Freier in *Beyond the Last War*, include a Pan-pacific Tsunami and a destructive earthquake in an Asia-Pacific nation.

Pan-Pacific Tsunami

The disastrous effects of a massive tsunami that hits U.S. Pacific territories, protectorates, allies and partners overwhelms the international humanitarian response.²¹ The U.S. deploys a large number of military forces in support. Although forecasted as a permissive environment, force protection and security operations alongside host nation forces are required. The Pan-Pacific Tsunami creates several USMC related conditions to include secure access to the sea for amphibious operations, sea-basing opportunities, unified operations and distributed security operations.

Massive Earthquake

A large earthquake occurs in an inland Asia-Pacific nation destroying its capitol and other cities in the adjacent areas.²² A coalition of nations supported by government and non-government organizations deliver humanitarian relief. Aspects of the region present the opportunity for violent extremist organizations and irregular threats to exploit the situation. Considerable force protection measures are required. Significant aspects of this vignette include separation from amphibious shipping, limited initial access to aviation and reliance on service ground transportation assets for the preponderance of logistical support.

Enabling Operations

Forcible Entry

Regardless of the contingency, non- or semi-permissive access to a country may require some degree of forcible entry. This vignette presents a higher intensity conflict in which covert Chinese forces destabilize Taiwan and the political process. Through clandestine measures and direct support to skilled paramilitary groups, China facilitates violent political activism in Taiwan. The ensuing fight between Taiwanese forces and Chinese paramilitaries threatens the security of Taiwan, thousands of third-country nationals and U.S. citizens. An expeditionary force is deployed by the United States to support the Taiwanese government and evacuate foreign nationals.²³ Significant aspects of this vignette includes force projection against a credible anti-access area-denial threat, facilitating the introduction of large follow-on U.S. forces including additional USMC and U.S. Army units, and sustainment through with limited logistics build-up.

Support to Special Operations

Within this vignette, Special Forces participation in Foreign Internal Defense with host nation forces has met with limited success due to expanding influence and capabilities of the insurgents. Conventional U.S. forces are employed for a limited duration search and attack mission in order to relieve pressure on the host nation forces. USMC forces are inserted using company-sized units as part of distributed operations intended to deter and defeat enemy forces. Although intended as a supporting operation to the host nation and U.S. Special Forces, the USMC companies conduct combined operations with host nation forces in remote areas of operations.

The series of proposed vignettes is intended to offer a point of departure for assessing USMC capability requirements. Though the vignettes cover a variety of hypothetical scenarios, the nature and complexity of the crises are illustrative and provide the context for strategic estimates. It is in the collective interests of the DOD, Geographic Combatant Commander and services to explore likely future military operational requirements before establishing comparative operational responsibilities and related priority resourcing.

Inter-Service “Rebalance” Competition

The complexity and breadth of the Asia-Pacific security environment demands a whole of government and whole of DOD approach. While emerging from one of the most cooperative joint military environments in U.S. history, the services are now competing for resources in an economically constrained environment. The competition may prove detrimental. The propensity for inter-service parochialism threatens to limit strategic options most suitable for U.S. military in the Asia-Pacific and are evident in evolving service and joint concepts including the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), Air-Sea-Battle (ASB), and the recently unveiled Army concept: Pacific Pathways. These concepts help define a range of operational approaches that can help prioritize service specific capabilities but undermine opportunities for interdependence, joint integration and efficiency.

The JOAC addresses one of the primary military missions, which is to deter and defeat aggression in anti-access environments. These conditions exist within three of the above postulated scenarios and are considerations whenever responding in a hostile environment. As previously indicated, the threat associated with U.S. military access continues to grow as non-state actors, violent extremist organizations and

terrorists acquire aerial denial technology. Correspondingly, the potential for opposed access exists in nearly every proposed vignette.

JOAC necessitates “gaining and maintaining operational access in the face of armed opposition.”²⁴ It involves regional access to the global commons in addition to access into the enemy’s controlled terrain. This concept encompasses two essential tasks: “overcoming the enemy’s anti-access and area-denial capabilities through the application of combat power, and moving and supporting the necessary combat power over the required distances.”²⁵ Though inclusive of all components of the joint force, JOAC remains heavily reliant upon the projection capabilities of the Navy and Air Force. Not surprisingly, JOAC spawned further service specific concepts.

Air-Sea Battle is a force projection concept developed specifically to confront the growing anti-access and aerial denial challenges in the Asia-Pacific and Middle East. Directed in the 2010 QDR, ASB “addresses how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains--air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace--to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action.”²⁶ ASB is a supporting concept to the JOAC and although inclusive of both the Army and the USMC, ASB again relies predominantly on the capacity, systems and technologies residing within the Navy and Air Force.

Not to be left out of the rebalance, the U.S. Army initiative “Pacific Pathways” is an example of an operating concept designed specifically to advance Army employment opportunities in the region. The U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) Commander, General Vincent K Brooks, initiated the “Pacific Pathway’s” operating concept to posture his forces to rapidly and effectively respond to small conflicts, isolated acts of aggression

and natural disasters.²⁷ Based on the geographical expanse of the Asia-Pacific Area of Responsibility (AOR), General Brooks seeks to make the Pacific Army more maritime and expeditionary. The Pacific Pathways concept proposes a task organization to include a battalion (-) sized ground combat element, a rotary-wing element, nearly 150 vehicles and a brigade level command element. Operationally, this task force would participate in a series of exercises including the continental U.S. based training and combined exercises with allies throughout the Pacific. A combination of commercial and military air and Military Sealift Command shipping would transport the force between exercises. “Basically, think of it as a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) without the ships, the amphibious operational experience or doctrine.”²⁸ Though certainly a reasonable concept considering the geographical challenges and potential contingency response scenarios, it closely resembles the existing capability provided by the Navy-USMC forces already afloat in the region.

The U.S. has traditionally pursued its national security ends in the Pacific with a capable and persistent joint force. The combination of Marines aboard Naval ships and the U.S. service forces stationed in Korea, Japan and the Philippines provided a formidable regional military capacity. Regional force reductions, resulting from a combination of changing threats, host nation demands and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, compelled the Marines and Navy to fill the resultant void with additional deployments throughout the Pacific, including recurring visits to the Philippines and Australia. However, “What the (U.S. Army) Pacific Pathways paper proposes is not a supplement, nor a replacement to this activity, but simply a less-capable replication.”²⁹

Conversely, the ASB concept responds to the proliferation of anti-access and aerial denial threats throughout the Asia Pacific in addition to potential Chinese-centric contingencies. This concept hinges upon the joint capabilities of the Navy, Air Force and USMC to respond to regional crises. "It assumes that the United States is unlikely to need to wage a protracted ground war in East Asia; instead, it envisions the use of Air Force bombers, Navy ships and Marine amphibious forces to respond to near peer provocation."³⁰ The apparent limited role of the U.S. Army in the ASB concept likely drove the development of Pacific Pathways.

With seven of the world's ten largest armies residing in the Asia-Pacific, the opportunities for the U.S. Army to engage in bi-lateral and multi-lateral army-to-army efforts are numerous. However, the creation of an Army pseudo expeditionary traveling exercise force appears redundant and inefficient. U.S. Army deployments and operations in the region should focus on army-to-army engagements, building partner capacity and land-based regional multi-lateral exercises. Though these are traditional Army engagement activities, this opportunity for continued regional influence complements USMC, Navy and USAF activities, vice replacing them. Generally, the requested and desired engagement activities already exceed the availability of resources. To achieve efficiency and effectiveness, each service needs to exploit its inherent capabilities, limit redundancies, and meet diverse regional demands. Regarding the USMC, it should focus an operational niche or "sweet spot" consistent with the Asia-Pacific strategic environment and the roles and missions of its sister services.

Vision

As with any concept or strategy, a clearly defined vision is essential. Until an acceptable service vision is communicated to the nation's leadership, the feasibility and supportability of such initiatives are problematic. The overarching vision within this proposal is for the USMC to assume responsibility for the preponderance of expeditionary Company and Battalion level operations within the Asia Pacific. "This 'sweet spot' provides formations larger than special-operations teams but smaller than traditional army units."³¹

A considerable range of formations and strategic options reside within this "sweet spot" and complement the capability requirements of the postulated vignettes. It is bounded by special-forces on the low end and brigade and division sized units on the high end. While Marine Expeditionary Units maintain the capability to conduct general-purpose operations below company level, the precision and expertise of the special-operations forces cannot and should not be replicated by Marine expeditionary forces. Additionally, special operations forces provide unique covert operational capabilities with a minimal detectable footprint. The proposed operating zone of the USMC offers a "reduced" footprint yet clearly signals U.S. military involvement. The distinction becomes clear when considering the strategic messages communicated by the forces employed - conventional and Special Forces employments convey dramatically different messages and the corresponding level of U.S. commitment.

On the heavy end, the combat capabilities of Brigades and Divisions is infeasible to sustain afloat and therefore, demand a deliberate, lengthy, resource intensive effort to project. Efforts to artificially accelerate the deployment of conventional forces against a formidable enemy in a large-scale high intensity conflict is risky. In contrast, the swift

projection of forces into a mid or low intensity conflict can prevent crises, deescalate conflicts and regain stability.

Timely response to crises is an important factor of the vision and both company and battalion sized expeditionary units offer extremely responsive strategic options. These embarked force packages can be moved to the proximity of the crises without decisively committing those forces. USPACOM's theater strategy emphasizes that, "Particularly in the early phases of conflict, managing crises depends on the ability to rapidly and effectively project power when required."³² Responsiveness is critical in the proposed range of possible conflicts, as the speed of employment of ground capable forces offer a form of influence that strike platforms alone cannot achieve. Though certainly dependent upon the mission, threat and environment, company and battalion sized expeditionary forces should have the capability to access an objective area within days, or even hours, of receiving the decision to commit forces. While this capacity resembles that of the modern MEU, capability gaps, especially at the company level, remain.

Lastly, the vision for strategic employment of the USMC in the Asia Pacific incorporates roles as both a supported and supporting element of the Joint Force. While the "sweet spot" advances the task organization and capability required for particular crises, it also offers tremendous options as an enabling force for other elements of the Joint Force. From securing Sea Ports of Debarkation and Aerial Ports of Debarkation for the introduction of follow-on forces to performing specific tasks in support of special operations, the Marine Expeditionary forces in the Asia Pacific ought to expand capacity to better complement the joint force.

Regional Force Structure and Operating Concepts

The challenge associated with adopting the proposed USMC operational concept in an era of fiscal constraints is with meeting the tenants of feasibility, acceptability and supportability. While the following concepts are certainly contingent upon adequate resourcing, cross-service efficiency remains fundamental to the proposals. Only concepts that balance efficiency and effectiveness are likely to gain support in lieu of the DOD's fiscal climate.

Importantly, the USMC role as America's naval, expeditionary force-in-readiness is central to most contingency scenarios and remains so in the proposed concept. The Corps' expeditionary capability is central to most postulated contingency missions, as "a strategically mobile force that is light enough to get to the crisis quickly, yet able to accomplish the mission or provide time and options prior to the arrival of additional forces."³³ The expeditionary nature of the USMC uniquely enables its central role within USPACOM.

Although Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) was not presented as a vignette, it is a critical facet of proposed USMC operations in the Asia Pacific and is considered fundamental to regional operations. In accordance with the USPACOM Theater Campaign Strategy, building partner capacity and reinforcing regional relationships received renewed importance with the U.S. announcement of the rebalance. While long-standing military and training relationships exist between the U.S. and countries such as Australia, Thailand, Japan, Philippines and Singapore, the USMC must diversify its engagements with other key regional stakeholders. For instance, improved military-to-military engagements with emerging powers such as China, India, and Indonesia could help shape the theater. Distributed and stable relationships with key regional partners

offer significant strategic military advantages that can complement U.S. diplomatic and informational efforts. High-quality TSC builds partner capacity, improves interoperability, and represents tangible and legitimate regional commitment.

This aspect of the USMC role in the region is similar but distinct from U.S. Special Forces and other service components. USMC TSC efforts should concentrate on related host nation conventional forces that it would support, be supported by or complement Marine postulated employment options including: disaster response, humanitarian assistance, Foreign Internal Defense and distributed security operations. Additionally, conventional U.S. forces participating in TSC have a considerably different informational influence than Special Forces. This revitalized TSC proposal deserves consideration when analyzing regional contingencies and the potential for encouraging combined military solutions to emerging crises.

As outlined in two regional vignettes, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief are the most likely missions. The PACOM AOR is subject to frequent and severe natural disasters that require considerable response efforts. The U.S. participation in such tragedies complements American values and its rapid response improves the U.S. image and strengthens relationships in the region. Correspondingly, the USMC should improve the equipping, manning and training of Marine Forces to enable an expanded Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) capacity in the Pacific.

In addition to the human labor force, special equipment is vital to all HA/DR missions, including heavy transport, Reverse Osmosis Processing Units for fresh water, medical care, and engineering equipment. Resourcing such missions demands a logistical surge capacity that does not currently reside in any single unit. Based on the

Maritime Preposition Force (MPF) structure, a “light” HA/DR version should be developed for employment in the Pacific that would reduce or even eliminate the requirement to “mass” essential equipment by pulling it from tactical units. While the USMC has the capability to surge up to a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) worth of manpower immediately following a disaster, the most essential equipment sets for HA/DR life support are limited. The concept of the “MPF-light” would offer an expeditionary HA/DR logistics package that overcomes these common logistics shortfalls and accelerates an effective response. Instead of equipping a force before embarking and deploying to a contingency, the MPF-light would link-up with forces at sea or even at the contingency area based on the situation. While such a capability involves “start-up” and sustainment costs, they are likely outweighed by the improved response capabilities provided to the Geographic Combatant Commander.

The “Distributed Security” vignettes pose the most unique challenges to USMC operations in the Asia Pacific and demand innovative solutions. The vignettes represent a range of mid-intensity conflicts, demanding rapid, potentially kinetic, conventional responses to hybrid threats and are in keeping with the USMC core competency of “complex expeditionary operations.”³⁴ Though debatable, it is far more likely for the U.S. to commit limited land forces in support of an ally or partner in a destabilizing mid-intensity conflict then commit to a major conventional land campaign. The vignettes offer problems that demand expeditionary capabilities within the previously examined “sweet spot” of company through battalion.

The postulated distributed nature of future combat and the unique capabilities required to operate in such environments places unique demands on USMC forces. In

the period 2004-2006 the USMC Warfighting Laboratory began experimentation with developing platoon level “distributed operations”³⁵ capabilities with partial success. Despite rigorous enhanced training programs, additional technology for communications and fire support, and dedicated enablers, conventional platoon level leaders were not consistently able to exercise the necessary command and control and meet the logistical demands of distributed operations. Though the experiment culminated with two successful “distributed operations capable” platoons deploying to Afghanistan, the identified challenges with the proposed design, given the current USMC training and readiness regimen, was deemed insurmountable. Though resourcing was feasible, the training, education and experience requirements exceeded those attainable force-wide in deployable platoons. Notwithstanding, the platoon distributed operations experiment provides the basis for establishing a Company Expeditionary Unit (CEU) concept.

Company structure, leader development and experience are better suited for distributed operations. Additionally, the infantry company command structure supports more flexible task organizations and its ability to employ enablers offers significantly more capability for sustained distributed operations. As previously discussed, direct action precision associated with platoon and smaller scale operations already resides within the U.S. special operations forces. The CEU offers an intermediate option: a capability package between a 6-20 man special operations team and a one thousand-man infantry battalion. In 2010 the USMC Warfighting Laboratory expanded the Distributed Operations Experiment to examine Enhanced Company Operations³⁶ after isolating specific capability gaps identified during the platoon experiment and the follow-on combat operations. This experiment specifically sought to develop the Company

Level Operation Center (CLOC) for command and control and the Company Level Intelligence Center (CLIC) for intelligence collection, analysis and fusion. Although successful in developing the capabilities of the CLOC and CLIC, the experiment did not evaluate the maneuver, fires and logistics capabilities of a distributed company. The CEU provides a task organized expeditionary force of 200-250 Marines, Sailors and enablers capable of sustained distributed operations, possibly with some deficiencies in conducting consolidated sustainment functions.

Focusing on the Company and Battalion sized expeditionary forces also enhances USMC amphibious forced entry capability. As previously mentioned, the postulated mid- and low-intensity crises may necessitate forced entry and therefore deployed forces must maintain that capability. The USMC advertises the MEB forced entry capability but rarely has the opportunity to exercise it. Nevertheless, with some additional training at the CEU and MEU levels, those forward deployed forces (CEUs and MEUs) could augment a MEB with distributed operations capacity when the MEB force was deployed. However, this would require a more comprehensive force generation model managed by the MEB. Specified unit tasks, identified and evaluated by the parent MEB, would facilitate the rapid integration of deployed forces (CEUs and MEUs) if a MEB level crisis develops. The current evaluation process, overseen by the Marine Expeditionary Force, fails to achieve the collective training proficiency necessary for rapid force integration and employment. The USMC most feasible and expeditious means for aggregating a MEB in response to the postulated crises requires the inclusion of already deployed forces, especially in light of current shortages in amphibious shipping. Confirming unit collective training proficiency with MEB specified

tasks prior to deployment would force MEBs to develop operational plans in advance of the crises and contingencies and assign specific training requirements to subordinate units. This effort would accelerate the overall response time of the USMC and provides a more credible and capable amphibious forced entry capability to the Geographic Combatant Commander at the MEB level.

Conclusion

“The U.S. rebalance reinforces to the people of the Indo-Asia-Pacific that the United States remains committed to peace and prosperity for all . . . peace and prosperity that must be underpinned by a resilient security environment.”³⁷ U.S. involvement in the Asia-Pacific is vital to its national interests and optimally, through a whole of government approach, the United States will promote peace, security and stability through improved regional partnerships. Notwithstanding, the notion that U.S. Asia-Pacific partners will solve all emerging regional problems is promising but unlikely. Consequently, U.S. forces must remain prepared for likely contingencies. While the list of potential crises spans the range of military operations, the most likely contingencies, previously postulated, fall within the mid- and low-intensity spectrum of conflict. Forward deployed USMC forces provide a rapid response for such crises and offer unique options for the U.S. PACOM Commander. By improving USMC capability within the “sweet spot,” the CEU and MEU provide expeditionary responses to crises that exceed the precision of special operations without exceeding the threshold for a large logistical and combat force footprint associated with a major theater of war. By identifying and enhancing the capabilities of the CEU and existing MEU, deployed USMC forces will offer a measured response for associated low- and mid-intensity conflicts as well as complement the MEB-level forced entry capability.

For all the services “changes in the geopolitical landscape necessitate a fresh look at American security strategy if the U.S. desires to preserve and protect its interests and influence in the Asia-Pacific region.”³⁸ In the era of compounding fiscal constraints and abstract national policy, the challenge for the DOD is maintaining the capability to respond to crises across the range of military operations. While money certainly drives the DOD “machine,” it is incumbent upon institutional leadership to advance efficient and effective operational alternatives “and to ensure that investment decisions are driven by strategic priorities rather than ‘program momentum’ and parochialism.”³⁹ The USMC CEU and MEU operational “sweet spot” provides efficient and effective middleweight strategic solutions to a broad range of current and future Asia-Pacific problems.

Endnotes

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