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Guerrilla warfare, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), great power competition, Commandant's Planning Guidance

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Andrew A. MacDougall, USMC


AY 2020-21

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Executive Summary

Title: Maritime Guerrilla Tactics in Support of Archipelagic Defense

Author: Major Andrew A. MacDougall, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The Marine Corps can use its Reconnaissance units as a template for creating Maritime Guerrilla forces which will partner with nations of the First Island Chain to deter aggressive military actions by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in fulfillment of the Marine Commandant, General David Berger's, Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG).

Discussion: The CPG calls for the Marine Corps to reorganize to meet increasing competition in the Western Pacific. The reorganization focuses on Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations to create competition with the PRC within the First Island Chain. This competition will serve as a deterrent force against aggression in the region. Instead of fixed-base installations, a maritime guerrilla force could be employed as a mobile, distributed defense to achieve the same goal. By using Marine Reconnaissance units as a template for training, equipping, and organizing such a force the service can save valuable time in the deployment of such forces. By leveraging unmanned systems that are already commercially available the Marine Corps can increase the frontage and lethality of a maritime guerrilla force inexpensively when compared to a conventional force. The maritime guerrilla force will be partnered with host nations, bolstering the economic and diplomatic governmental strategies which this military strategy aims to support. While tailored for a specific complex threat, the maritime guerrilla force will be adaptable to any battlespace where highly lethal, distributable, and semi-autonomous forces would be of utility.

Conclusion: A maritime guerrilla force can act in a deterrent capacity against an increasingly aggressive PRC by imposing cost for military action and supporting diplomatic and economic initiatives which should remain the nation's primary focus. By using Marine Reconnaissance units as a template for forming such forces the service can employ them quickly and relatively inexpensively.

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Preface

While serving as the Executive Officer of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion in Okinawa, Japan I was tasked with assisting 3D Marine Division's naval integration efforts. This endeavor took me to multiple countries throughout the Western Pacific to engage naval and Coast Guard units in an effort to determine the best way to provide relevant, capable forces that would support the Maritime Component. My battalion's unique aquatic skills seemed to present an obvious opportunity to integrate in a meaningful way.

As the son of a career naval Surface Warfare officer, I had experiences which assisted me in this endeavor. Exposure to the navy's "Streetfighter" concept which spawned the Littoral Combat Ships of today helped me see the utility in fast, swarming maritime forces which could be of utility. In adapting this concept with distributed ground operations, I felt that the Marine Corps had a solution that would benefit the Maritime Component.

Thank you to my family, particularly my wife Cynthia. They have shown enormous support and patience with me throughout my career and in this endeavor. Thank you to Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff for challenging me intellectually and helping me to generate the ideas behind this concept. Thank you to Dr. Nathan Packard who helped me scope this work and saw me through to completion. Special thanks to the late Arthur Corbett who mentored me and provided some of the conceptual basis and feedback for this work before his untimely death.

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Introduction

Reemerging great power competition poses a growing threat to regional and national power and stability. The resurgence of Russian aggression in Europe and the emergence of China as a near-peer competitor in the Western Pacific call for changes in the United States' (US) operational approaches. The rise of networked systems of long-range, Precision-Guided Munitions (PGM), creating contested environments in three dimensions plus the electromagnetic spectrum, present an immense operational and logistical challenge to future competition or combat. The formations and technology of the past three decades will not suffice to curb the aggression of near-peer Great Powers. At the same time, however, a massive expansion in federal deficits and debt will constrain quick organizational adaptation on the part of the US military. The US Marine Corps, as the premiere rapid response force, can and must reorganize, refit, and reorient on these emerging competitors, specifically China, with minimal delay, cost, or friction. Marine Corps Reconnaissance Units can point the way by providing the opportunity to inculcate the methods and mentality of maritime guerrilla warfare, a concept that will adapt and complement Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and the Stand-In Force.

The goal of maritime guerrilla warfare will be to deter Chinese territorial expansion or overt military hostility. Maritime guerrilla forces will exist within host nations' societies and partner with their security forces in a scalable manner which can easily be reduced or eliminated should the situation dictate. Their presence will be overt, but exact locations both guarded and variable. Such forces would employ an economy of force concept, combined with asymmetry to complement the conventional force in broadcasting that seizure of territory would come at a painful price and would be fleeting at best. Such forces would similarly complement diplomatic,

informational, and economic strategies which should be considered the US's main effort in competing with the Peoples' Republic of China.

The maritime geography of the western Pacific region, including the archipelagic dispersal and littoral riverine networks of its constituent nations, favors an inherently amphibious force. Under emerging future operating concepts, the necessary skill sets must reside in every unit, down to the individual Marine. The Marine forces operating in the western Pacific will need to be "maritime guerrillas," with an emphasis on small-boat, distributed-operations tactics. Marine Corps Reconnaissance Units have retained the amphibious skill sets and training methods necessary for such an environment. Marine Corps Reconnaissance Units should not be tasked directly with this mission, but rather can serve as the template for the intended restructuring, thus minimizing the cost, time, and friction inherent in the experimentation now underway. In conjunction with several other key changes to the service's task organization, equipment, and logistical support system, they will enable the US Marine Corps to serve as an asymmetric, low cost, paradigm-shifting force that in turn allows the US to compete under conditions favorable to itself and its allies.

Framing the Problem

The National Security Strategy (NSS) identifies rival powers as "aggressively undermining American interests around the globe," as one of the primary National Security concerns facing the US.¹ China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are identified by name as the four state powers that present competition to US global power, influence, and interest.² The highest priority is stated as maintaining vigilance against terrorist attacks through the protection of the homeland but the Indo-Pacific is listed first when global regional concerns are addressed.³

China is identified by name as using coercion against its geographic and economic neighbors to gain an advantage as a counterbalance to the US.⁴

Likewise, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) lists China first among global strategic competitors.⁵ The NDS more directly identifies the militarization of the South China Sea in addition to the predatory economic policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as means of rebalancing power in the Western Pacific. Both governing documents identify Russia as a close second to China in global competition, which will not be ignored but rather prioritized.

Of these potential adversaries, China has emerged as the primary competitor to the US. This competition is complicated by various factors that keep Sino-US relations necessary despite any strain. Diplomatically, the US and China face strain on the status of Taiwan with the US de facto supporting Taiwan sovereignty, while China views reunification under communist rule as a primary goal.⁶ The CCP sees its current policies as a “realignment of international power” which are balancing strategic power.⁷ China desires, at the least, regional hegemony and a greater influence in world affairs. This regional hegemony comes into direct conflict with the US’s treaty alliance with Japan for defense, as well as non-treaty, traditional defense pacts with the Philippines, Taiwan, and other Western Pacific nations. Relations with each nation in the region, both with the US and China, vary in nature and character and thus require tailored, adaptable, and dynamic policies and strategies for each.

Informationally, China is currently controlling the narrative. Through influence operations and implied military threats, China has intimidated other states to yield to its political and security agenda.⁸ Without a viable and credible alternative to the PRC’s economic and military dominance, smaller states have little option but to accede to Chinese demands and allow continued territorial infractions. Strengthening US partnerships and alliances in the Western

Pacific will do much to provide an alternative to Chinese hegemony. Improvement to such relationships will similarly reassure First Island Chain states that they are not alone in negotiating for improved relations with China and others.

Militarily the US remains the pacing threat, although China continues to exploit intellectual property theft and domestic research, development, and production to maintain competition. The PRC's military strategy remains an "active defense" of the homeland wherein they will attack only when attacked.⁹ The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is additionally quite concerned that the overt establishment of foreign military bases would further erode the image of the PRC as being peaceful.¹⁰ The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) remains ostensibly focused on limiting and mitigating threats to the east coast of China, where the bulk of their economy resides.¹¹ It is thus understandable that the PLAN is directly concerned with the presence of its chief competitor (the US) within the First Island Chain.

Economically, the One Belt, One Road initiative (also known as the Belt and Road Initiative/BRI) has since 2013 served as a massive international infrastructure initiative in which over 100 countries are included.¹² Most projects are in the form of construction or rehabilitation of railways and port facilities. The stated intent of the initiative is to increase economic connectivity with China, but an increasing number of skeptics are wary of the "win-win" cooperation advertised by the CCP.¹³ The centrality of ports to the BRI has led to suspicions that the network of port facilities could be directly linked to the PRC's defense goals.¹⁴ With China's Academy of Military Science terming sea lanes to be PRC's economic "lifelines" it is difficult to see how the PLAN will not leverage control of such ports, especially those around choke points, will not become part of a forward security strategy.¹⁵ China currently relies on host nation

security for such initiatives, but many of these states are potential conflict zones that may present a future potential for intervention.¹⁶

General David Berger, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, issued his Commandant's Planning Guidance in 2019 and clearly articulated the need for a change in the way the Marine Corps is structured and designed to fight. Gen Berger first calls for reintegration with the US Navy, reinvigorating the Fleet Marine Force Concept and Marine support to the Fleet Commanders and Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC).¹⁷ Any future operating concepts will thus need to be inherently maritime in nature and focus. He then outlines how the force will institute cost-effective innovations through a "streamlined force development and acquisitions process." This efficiency can be achieved through leveraging technologies, many of which already exist in the private sector, as well as through the assumption of risk. Gen Berger's goal is to provide a "flexible force for reacting to various threats."¹⁸ However, he wishes to focus on China as our priority threat.¹⁹ This strategy is aimed specifically at presenting a counterbalance to Chinese aspirations for regional hegemony.

Gen Berger's guidance hinges on a transition to EABO and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), both of which are oriented on supporting the naval concept of operations.²⁰ To accomplish these missions the Marine Corps will serve as a stand-in force designed to be disruptive to competitor ambitions in the region and to do so in a distributed manner.²¹ His envisioned force is purpose-built to conduct sea-denial missions in any environment but can be tailored or adjusted for specific environments or regions.²² To achieve this the Marine Corps will utilize mission-type orders focused on low-level initiative, preservation of low signature command and control (C2), use of unmanned systems, and ground-based long-range precision fires.²³

The goal of this shift in operating concepts in the Western Pacific is to impose significant costs on any future military aggression by China, to negate the utility of their Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) threat, and to support the naval concept of operations.²⁴ With distributed forces throughout the various archipelagos combined with existing conventional forces, the United States will disrupt the competitor's decision-making cycle, assure regional allies and partners, and provide an asymmetric threat that the competitor cannot ignore.

Inherent in this problem is the geography of the region in question. China is characterized by a coastline facing the Pacific Ocean, with multiple semi-navigable rivers and ports. To the east of this coastline are multiple nations comprising an island chain running roughly north-south. This island chain, known as the "First Island Chain" comprises Japan, Ryukus, Senkakus, Formosa (Taiwan), the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Further east is a second island chain comprised of the Bonin Islands, Volcano Islands, and the Mariana Islands, including Guam. The First Island Chain provides a natural barrier for seaborne transit from the Chinese coast to the open Pacific Ocean, while the second island chain dominates the Central Pacific Ocean. The US maintains permanent bases in both the First Island Chain (Okinawa and Japan), as well as the Second Island Chain (Guam) which present a strategic forward presence. Despite this projection of power forward, the US still faces a tyranny of distance for the predominance of its forces with most forces based either in Hawaii (part of the Third Island Chain) or the west coast of the continental US.

Given the extreme distances of both the transit from the US and the entirety of the First Island Chain (over 7,500km from Pearl Harbor to Okinawa, Japan), it is necessary to establish a fluid, permeable frontier that can be maintained for long periods from extreme distances. Such a frontier will have deterrence vice containment as a goal and is built upon partnerships with the

nations of the regions. To build such partnerships, the US should employ a distinctly Eastern political strategy which will give the resultant coalition an advantage with strategic messaging, strengthen the diplomatic foundation of the strategy, and minimally disrupt the operating environment.

Philosophical Basis

A distinctly Eastern strategy will require a better understanding of Eastern philosophy as well as a better understanding of guerrilla warfare in general. The contrast between a traditionally Western manner of thought and strategy will find it more difficult to resonate with populations in both adversary and partner nations. While Western philosophy relies heavily on dualism for its structural explanation of the universe, Eastern (Taoist) philosophy is characterized by more flow, interaction, balance, and harmony.²⁵

The philosophical underpinnings of Sun Tzu's Art of War are essentially Taoist in nature and provide a strong basis. *Tao* refers to a pathway that can be traced out to add context to the place and nature of an object or person.²⁶ Along this pathway can be found balancing forces of shadow and light (*yin* and *yang*) which exist in a harmonious balance as opposites that cannot exist without each other.²⁷ This concept of balancing yet offsetting existence characterizes the growth of China as a global and regional power with a desire to balance and offset the US. The economic ties between China and the US make them mutually reliant on the other for continued growth. The desire of China to upset the status quo in pursuit of what they perceive to be a more harmonious co-existence is in keeping with the Taoist concept of "*ho*."²⁸ Any new strategy should make all attempts to incorporate this concept. This can be achieved with the concept of "*tao*" which is best described as a pathway to make one's place and context in the environment

coherent.²⁹ This pathway, with the endstate of harmonious balance, can achieve what is known as “*shih*.”³⁰

“*Shih*” is roughly translated to “strategic advantage” by which one builds an advantage through the influence of surroundings by one’s particular place in the environment.³¹ The CCP is manipulating its position in the environment to gain such an advantage. Through manipulative foreign aid programs and monopolizing critical supply chains the CCP has developed “*shih*” over trading partners both regionally and globally. The resultant economic leverage and advantage have been translated into a growing military, more specifically a navy with open water ambitions.

The goal of this harmonious balance is to create a strategy in which China cannot feel existentially or territorially threatened. The world needs China as much as it needs free and independent states in the Western Pacific. The goal of the US’s strategy should not be to *defeat* China, but rather to rebalance the coexistence with China, and protect the sovereignty of other nations. Large amphibious formations wreak of offensive intentions, and fixed permanent bases tend to evoke memories of colonialism and endless wars in the Middle East. Any rebalancing forces should seek rather to operate *through* local populations and territory to assist in defending them against incursions both from the sea and economically. The US will not be seeking to rebalance by increasing its own “*shih*” but by building “*shih*” in regional and global partners with shared values and goals, thus providing multiple, independent counterbalances to the PRC’s power. Increasing the number of partner nations and bolstering their abilities to ensure their own security will reestablish a US regional military advantage.³²

By flowing through the environment the proposed force will act as energy flowing through media. The wave is in one way predictive and discernable as a deterrent force, but

conversely can be modulated by amplitude and frequency (duration and size of forces) to achieve constant, variable change. The goal of such a force is to reach “resonance” by interacting with the environment in such a harmonious manner as to produce a reinforcing effect in the environment. As sound or light pass through air, the guerrilla force must not negatively disrupt their environment but flow through it. Just as two waves have an additive effect when their crests are coincidental, the partnering forces could eventually serve as exponentially powerful deterrents to PRC aggression in the Western Pacific with the backing of US conventional force projection. More importantly, the forces would work to minimize negative disruptions to the environment and local population.

The Pacing Threat

Andrew F. Krepinevich’s work on Archipelagic Defense breaks down the specific nature of defending the “First Island Chain” against Chinese aggression in the western Pacific. To accomplish this, he first addresses the sources of China’s current behavior, China’s end state, sources of relative advantage and disadvantage in a potential conflict, and the conduct of the defense of the archipelago. China’s actions over the past two decades have been increasingly revisionist in nature, including territorial claims over Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and much of the South China Sea.³³ An environment ripe with aggrieved neighbors is an opportunity for the US to create or strengthen partnerships that would reinforce sovereignty and independence from the regional power. China has defied Japanese and US efforts to shape its growth into a responsible stakeholder in the international and regional system.³⁴ Krepinevich states that “the Alliance” (Japan and the US) must “have as its objective deterring Beijing from acts of aggression or coercion along the first island chain.”³⁵

The CCP prioritizes the preservation of its power as its top priority.³⁶ The CCP’s power rests primarily on two pillars: economic growth and nationalism.³⁷ With a slowing economy and an aging population, China requires a steady increase in markets to maintain cash flow for entitlement services as well as sustainable employment.³⁸ Any significant hit to the Chinese economy would detract from the CCP’s legitimacy, as well as its pride and prestige. After a “century of humiliation” China is “unified... under a single central government and set... on the path toward being an object of respect—and fear—by other countries.”³⁹ The CCP, therefore, seeks to maintain its economic position and to expand its regional hegemony in order that China may “be accorded what it believes to be its proper place in the international order or, more precisely, to establish a new international order.”⁴⁰ China denies this ambition externally, but the CCP’s actions indicate otherwise.



Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2017, available online at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/docs/refmaps.html> ; and Asia Maritime Transparency Institute, “Island Features of the South China Sea,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, available online at: <https://amti.csis.org/scs-features-map/> .

Figure 1. The First and Second Island Chains

China is seeking, in particular, to push the US-Japanese alliance's influence further out of the region. The CCP is insecure and manifests this insecurity in its accusations of subversion on the part of hostile western forces.⁴¹ Militarily, China does not seek a kinetic fight; rather, it intends to negate the US's capabilities through its own expanding military umbrella, realigning the current balance of power both regionally and globally. In a larger sense, China's military strategy is secondary to its economic and diplomatic strategy which many believe to be predatory in nature. The "One Belt, One Road" (alternately the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) is a series of infrastructure projects in developing countries with the stated intent to facilitate Chinese commerce with the west. Many see the investment, in ports in particular, as potential power plays in the future for military projection.

In waging "anti-intervention warfare," the PLA seeks dominance in all domains (including information and space) to create a deterrent that would allow expansion while avoiding a fight altogether.⁴² Dominance over the First Island Chain will be critical to this design as it currently acts as a natural obstacle to the PLAN's access to the open Pacific Ocean as well as a barrier to their Missile Engagement Zone (MEZ). The PLAN has expanded in size and capacity at a rapid rate in recent years and seeks better access to open ocean lines of communication to achieve influence outside of their immediate region.⁴³ This increasingly hostile expansion and its dominant nature are critical to the informational strategy of US partner building. The US cannot be seen as merely offering an alternative master, but must genuinely seek the self-determination and independence (both legal and economic) for partners from the PRC.

The PLA's increasing arsenal of A2/AD and Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBM) are designed to create a "no-go" zone in the western Pacific for the US and its allies.⁴⁴ If hostilities

were to occur, China would be able to target the US-Japanese alliance's high-value bases and surface ships in the region.⁴⁵ A key element for future US strategy must be to show that the benefit of such relationships and bases are worth the risk of provoking China. China likewise seeks to create economic "no-go" zones through their BRI initiative, a series of "carrot and stick" operations to destabilize competitors and reward partners.⁴⁶ The US must provide a viable alternative to such economic overtures and investments in a manner that does not stoke fears of neo-colonialist aspirations.

Despite its ambitions, China faces many constraints by virtue of the first island chain. This island chain comprises Japan, Ryukus, Senkakus, Formosa (Taiwan), the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Further east is a second island chain comprised of the Bonin Islands, Volcano Islands, and the Mariana Islands, including Guam. Geographically, the first island chain restricts Chinese access to the high seas.⁴⁷ Many of the nations that it comprises have been resistant to China's overtures. Chinese access to the open ocean is not in itself a problem as long as the PLAN interaction with vessels of other nations is peaceful. The issue arises with the aggressive manner in which the CCP is attempting to coerce and intimidate the nations of the First Island Chain into cooperation. This aggression has taken the form of asserting territorial rights beyond those acknowledged by international law. Through the "nine dash line," an arbitrary line derived from a questionable survey conducted in 1946 by the Republic of China, PRC has created artificial islands made of reclaimed earth and continues to violate the maritime Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of its neighbors.⁴⁸ These actions have been challenged in international court successfully, but PRC actions continue without an enforcement mechanism.

The distributed nature of the island chains favors the defender and the CCP's desire for a "short, sharp war" could be disrupted by a determined force. Defense of the archipelago, therefore, calls for a force to adopt a forward defensive posture.⁴⁹ This posture would necessarily require not just the cooperation of US allies in the region, but their express invitation. A small, distributed force with minimal fixed bases would help garner such an invitation from countries reluctant to overtly bring large numbers of US forces into their countries. Given such an invitation, the US could assist and *empower* its allies and partners to launch a combined effort from ground, sea, and air across a coalition of resident states which could deter and hamper the ability of China to project a force quickly into the island chain.

Arthur Corbett's "Stand-in Forces: Bending the Character of Future War" delves into the specifics of this archipelagic defense. Corbett first defines the stand-in force as a naval *concept of engagement* designed to influence the *future* development and employment of disruptive new tactical capabilities. Exploiting the persistent and sustainable forward *posture* and *positional advantage* enabled by Expeditionary Advanced Bases (EABs), Stand-in Forces (SIF) will contribute to a persistent force *structure* that can operate forward from key maritime terrain, within an adversary's long-range Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ), to defend allied sovereignty and US interests, and control or deny access to close and confined seas.⁵⁰ Corbett's concept of defense addresses the highly distributed forces demanded by the CPG and tasks the Marine Corps with establishing (whether temporary or permanent) a series of small outposts capable of disrupting Chinese operations in the first island chain. More importantly, the mere presence of such forces will serve to compete or displace Chinese actions below the threshold of military action. His concept presumes a fully integrated future naval force which is served by Long Range Precision Fires (LRPF), a reduced signature communications capability, and pairing

with autonomous, unmanned systems to achieve low-cost disruption to the current operating system.⁵¹

The CCP, PLA, and PLAN are countering the US's naval supremacy with high-tech solutions in the form of A2/AD missile threats. By threatening US capital ships with missiles that are inexpensive in comparison the CCP has developed an asymmetry in their advantage. Developing high-end countermeasures for ships, while necessary, will evolve into an arms race in which the CCP can continue to invest comparatively little while utilizing stolen technology. This would force the US to develop ever more expensive evolving capabilities to overcome the A2AD threat. Low tech solutions leveraging existing technology, acceptance of greater risk, and positional advantage through allies and partners could reverse the asymmetry. Small units of highly mobile, distributed, amphibious forces paired with host nation forces can project power forward at a relatively low cost. Such a force would pair with unmanned systems and form a highly distributable partnered force capable of harassing, interdicting, or attacking adversary forces, but also capable of complementing the conventional force when required. Such force's exact location would be kept secret, while enemy knowledge of their general locations and capabilities would form the basis of an unconventional deterrence to an increasingly conventional threat. This maritime guerrilla force would provide a capable SIF capable of disrupting CCP territorial and influence expansions in the First Island Chain, while reassuring partners and allies by sharing in the risks.

Guerrilla Warfare

Both the broad concept of Krepinevich's "Archipelagic Defense" and the more focused nature of Corbett's "Stand-in Forces" essentially call for a maritime guerrilla force. Mao Tse-

tung's "On Guerrilla Warfare" provides some guiding principles that are applicable to this concept. In his work, Mao discusses the ability of a guerrilla force to take on a more powerful aggressor as well as the importance of a guerrilla force to coordinate with the operations of the regular army.⁵² Given Chinese economic and positional advantages in the western Pacific, this defensive force will be operating from a position of strength in any hostilities. Like the concept of a maritime guerrilla force, the concept of EABO is designed to be asymmetric, attacks the enemy in unexpected ways, and is capable of striking without warning.⁵³ A highly distributed SIF would be acting as a partner force with indigenous forces, hence the importance of support from the people will be of paramount importance. The remote nature and necessarily light logistical footprint would also make it likely that EABs would require support from the local economy.⁵⁴

Mao's later writings on the application of guerrilla warfare against the Japanese can shed further insight into a potential future operating concept. Mao illustrated the concept of guerrilla warfare in an operational defense against a materially and technologically superior force that had invaded a sovereign China. This strategy traded control for time which would allow a paired conventional-unconventional force to erode the adversary of people, support, and money.⁵⁵ His overall concept matches well with the proposed maritime guerrilla operations in that they use initiative by conducting offensives within a defense and conducting operations in concert with a regular force.⁵⁶ The essential elements of flexibility of the forces, limited central bases, and an accumulation of small victories have similar merit to the archipelagic defense. Mao's strategy focused on the simultaneous political organization of his forces; while the nature of EABs need not be political, a focus on counter-CCP ideology and a persistent information campaign to

remind both Americans and host nation civilians of the dangers of the CCP's control, collusion, or influence is essential.⁵⁷

These principles are further developed by Ernesto "*Che*" Guevara when he outlines his principles for the conduct of guerrilla warfare. Guevara stressed the requirement for guerrilla fighters to maintain popularity with the local population, conduct hit and run tactics, and preserve the force.⁵⁸ Guevara's concepts of sabotage through mining roads and railways, harassing attacks on bases, and criticality of supplying guerrilla forces are equally adaptable to the maritime domain, specifically with the pairing of semi-autonomous vehicles for attack or resupply, and raids on their artificial islands.⁵⁹

Critical to both the broad concept of archipelagic defense and maritime guerrilla warfare will be three elements: the invitation of the host nations in the first island chain, the deterrent effect of the stand-in force, and, in the event of deterrence failure, the acquisition of time for the conventional force to adapt and react to the aggression. A number of historical cases demonstrate the importance of these three elements to operational success. They range from T.E. Lawrence to the Western Pacific in WWII, as well as Clausewitzian "people's war" from the Napoleonic era. The deterrent nature of maritime guerrilla forces would be the threat of a costly people's war, should China opt for aggressive military action, but not to preemptively arm mass local militias.

The invitation of US forces by host nations within the first island chain will be essential as the US, contrary to 1941, does not exercise sovereignty within the first island chain. The need for an invitation by a sovereign people also invites parallels to the WWI Arab Revolt facilitated by T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence found himself awaiting the assent of the Sharif of Mecca following a failure at Gallipoli which caused the Arabs to doubt British naval supremacy.⁶⁰ Lawrence's awkward situation resembles growing questions of US naval supremacy in the Western Pacific

today. Ultimately, diplomacy resulted in British forces being welcomed by local forces to facilitate guerrilla campaigns similar to what would be required in defense of the archipelago.⁶¹

In WWII, US control of islands in the Western Pacific eliminated the problem of an invitation, but the targeting of US installations there quickly led to the collapse of Wake Island and the Philippines, due in large part to an ineffective deterrent force and unpreparedness of the reacting forces.⁶² As joint planners discovered then, the ensuing offensive sea and air operations against adversary sea communications would have been made more feasible had the first island chain (specifically the Philippines in this case) been “made as strong as possible in peacetime.”⁶³

Finally, as in the Pacific War, the stand-in force must be able to buy time for the US and its allies to formulate what Louis Morton called, in the Philippine case, a robust, primarily naval⁶⁴ response, in this case to Chinese aggression. The stand-in force would assume the risk of a similar “inadequately defended [force]” but would gain the benefit of being able to facilitate intelligence collection, target acquisition, and coordinated surprise attacks with the conventional force.⁶⁵ This strategy would also be in keeping with Clausewitz’s vision of small wars in which a small force could serve to “reconnoitre the enemy’s positions and harass his line of communication” in support of larger fleet maneuvers and strategy.⁶⁶

The maritime guerrilla force would fulfill all such requirements. The first mission would be diplomatic in nature to get host nations not to allow, but to invite such forces into their countries. This could be accomplished through a variety of approaches. The maritime guerrilla forces would not require large, permanent structures which would allay concerns about neo-colonialism as well as fears that US forces would never leave due to investing so much in facilities. Without permanent facilities, the maritime guerrilla force would live off the local economy. Far from foraging in the jungle (although that may be required at times), this would

consist of living among the people, purchasing sustenance from them, using them for intelligence, and sharing their culture. All of these would result in an economic benefit for what are largely impoverished areas of the First Island Chain nations. The forces would be partnered with host nation forces, helping to expand military relationships, host nation forces' capabilities, and access to US technology and intelligence. The presence of maritime guerrilla forces would show potential allies that the US is willing to put literal skin in the game. The presence of US servicemembers means that the US cannot simply ignore treaty obligations or promises of support if China applies military or economic pressure. Such forces are not easily generated, nor are they simple to sustain, but similar forces already exist. By using existing training templates for amphibious, highly distributable forces the Marine Corps could shorten the fielding time of maritime guerrilla forces.

Marine Reconnaissance and Force Reconnaissance units provide a ready-made template for fielding the maritime guerrilla force. Recon units are the ground reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF). Among their missions are amphibious reconnaissance, ground reconnaissance, battlespace shaping operations, specialized limited scale raids, and special insertion extraction.⁶⁷ “Access-oriented reconnaissance” specifically could be leveraged as a potential employment concept for limiting adversary freedom of action, conducting deception operations, and controlling the tempo and momentum of military operations.⁶⁸

The task organization of Recon platoons (the base tactical unit of Recon units) is 23 personnel, broken into three teams of six which keeps their numbers within the small scale suggested by Guevara for guerrilla squads.⁶⁹ Such a size would also allow for additional squad members from host nations to achieve a truly partnered force, without a significant footprint.

Such small units, with high levels of training, are ideal for operating in a distributed environment without fixed Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) as was typical in recent conflicts. This small size makes such units difficult to track or locate, but also makes them relatively inexpensive to support. Their ability to flow through the operating environment and population with their host nation partners achieves the resonance sought by the proposed maritime guerrilla force.

Recon units' training in distributed command and control (C2) would provide an essential element to the future maritime guerrilla force, as would training in amphibious operations.⁷⁰

Recon units are trained to work in a distributed operating environment and to use long-range communications. Their expertise in field expedient antennas and High Frequency (HF) radios are ideal for distributed operations across the First Island Chain because of the difficulty in intercepting or jamming such communications. This further negates the risk that conventional forces take in their overreliance on satellite communications which are, in contrast, easily intercepted or jammed.

The most significant benefit of using Recon as a template for structuring the maritime guerrilla force is the readiness of the template. Recon training already exists, the facilities and training plans are adaptable to current training organizations and could be scaled up to meet demand. Procurement of new equipment for the maritime guerrilla force is sped up by the current table of organization of Recon units which would bridge the acquisition time for fielding future programs of record. By simply taking the Program of Instruction (POI) for the Basic Reconnaissance Course (BRC) and removing the Recon specific training (such as parachute, dive, and reconnaissance reporting procedures) a maritime guerrilla training program could be established with ease relative to starting from nothing.

Support to the Maritime Guerrilla

The people comprising the maritime guerrilla force will be of the highest importance to success, but they will require unique support to achieve success. To build a small-footprint, low-cost, asymmetric deterrence the maritime guerrilla must be paired with advanced technology allowing them to present a threat that cannot be ignored or taken lightly. Pairing the maritime guerrilla with multiple unmanned systems can help reduce the substantial threat to such forces while increasing the covered frontage of their defense and lethality. Much of this technology already exists and costs less than the A2/AD threats the CCP has developed.

As stated in the Fiscal Year (FY) 21 Defense Budget Review, “China’s spending specifically targets key U. S. military advantages with new capabilities in space, cyber, electronic warfare, undersea warfare, fighter aircraft, bombers equipped with long-range cruise missiles, and other anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.”⁷¹ With both China and Russia investing in weapons systems that counter US strengths, it is tempting to engage in the constant improvement of existing stand-off weapons systems, but at an unrealistic cost.⁷² The resulting asymmetry will quickly put friendly forces at a disadvantage, as financial resources become disproportionately consumed, without gaining access for the defense of the attacked territory. Thus, low-cost, versatile, distributable solutions should be sought instead.

The use of Unmanned Surface Systems (USS) swarms, Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) swarms, and Unmanned Underwater Systems (UUS) swarms will all complement the maritime guerrilla. By presenting the adversary with many potential threats, in multiple domains, simultaneously the guerrilla force gains advantage and survivability. The use of such systems allows the relatively small maritime guerrilla force to increase their frontage through semi-autonomous combined arms. When additional threats are added in the electromagnetic spectrum

and cyberspace the decision-making ability of the adversary commander becomes increasingly complex.



Figure 2. Narco autonomous submersible

An example of a low-cost sea denial capability against a great power can be found in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN). The IRGCN has crafted a force that utilizes geographic advantages, low tech-high tech pairing, and asymmetric methods to create overlapping and complementary capabilities to counter the US Navy.⁷³ The IRGCN continues to maintain conventional naval capabilities but realizes that taking on a great power navy head-on is a losing venture.⁷⁴ As Thaddeus Drake explains, “The IRGCN layers long-, medium-, and short-range anti-ship cruise missiles (launched from sea, land, and air); fast attack craft/fast inshore attack craft (FACs/FIACs) armed with shorter-range cruise missiles, rockets, heavy machine guns, and boarding parties; explosive boats (both manned and unmanned, ‘waterborne IEDs’ and targeted versions); suicide drones; [and] mining (with both basic and advanced mines.)”⁷⁵ The cost of these assets pales in comparison to even the lowest-priced capital ship in the US or Chinese inventory, yet together they render much of the Chinese A2/AD threat overpriced.

Other options include the pairing of manned-and unmanned systems. USS, UAS, and UUS can provide a relatively low-cost, low risk offset to Chinese A2/AD networks. Small, expendable unmanned systems that can be launched from larger aircraft, boats, or land bases have the ability to swarm vessels of interest or terrestrial targets to collect information or to attack with small charges.⁷⁶ One example is the Coyote Drone, launched from the sonobuoy tubes of a P-3 Orion patrol aircraft. Such Drones have shown the ability to send data to a launch aircraft as far as 50 miles away, and they have up to 90 minutes of flight time.⁷⁷ The pairing of such systems with a distributed SIF could take on the appearance of “Warbot” units, which would create semi-autonomous weapons and collections swarms in a signature-controlled environment.⁷⁸ This concept is in keeping with Michael Mazaar’s argument in his article, “Toward a New Theory of Power Projection,” in which he advocates the same swarms of unmanned systems, and also the addition of anti-ship missiles to the Marine Corps’ capabilities.⁷⁹ The extended fight that such capabilities would impose on an attacking PLAN forces would thwart the expressed aims of the CCP.

Such a distributed force will not solely be concerned with lethal warfighting functions. While C2 has already been addressed, logistical support of such forces will become increasingly complex. The goal of the maritime guerrilla force is to operate as a deterrence from within the MEZ making the logistics of both movement and resupply increasingly risky and complex. Here, too, technology exists that mitigates much of this risk either with speed or stealth.

The large radar cross-sections and electromagnetic signatures of conventional surface vessels make them less than optimal for such missions. The PRC’s A2/AD threat was specifically designed to counter such large, expensive surface vessels. The paucity of and risk to both strategic lift aircraft and the runways to support them undermines this option as well. With

the PRC A2/AD MEZ negating conventional transport and resupply resources, alternate options must be sought. Solutions may arise from the unlikely sources of our current adversaries and competitors.

Russian experimentation with waterborne Wing-In-Ground effect (WIG) vehicles shows promise for low signature, high-speed delivery of large quantities of personnel or materiel.⁸⁰ Such craft are able to move at aircraft speeds, but carry ship-like tonnage, which would be ideal in a maritime theater with limited runways and contested SLOCs.⁸¹ Unlike emerging technology, WIG craft have been around for decades; their production becomes therefore a matter of choice rather than research and development. WIG craft could use speed as security to rapidly transport personnel or equipment at low altitudes over long distances. This would be one of many simultaneous, redundant, and complementary tactics to operate in a contested environment.

Another available option is semi-autonomous, semi-submersible, low profile vessels currently used extensively by drug cartels. Such craft have an estimated 85-90% success rate in a much smaller theater when being hunted by the US Coast Guard. Paired with “mother ships,” whether existing naval auxiliary vessels or emerging light amphibious warships, such craft could resupply a distributed SIF with little risk of intercept. If intercepted the craft could simply scuttle itself, or it could submerge until the threat is neutralized and then continue with its mission. Such a craft would simply beach at a predetermined time and place; land forces would unload its contents, push it back into the sea and it would return to the “mother ship.”⁸²

Employment of a Maritime Guerrilla Force

The role of the proposed force would be deterrent in nature. As such the existence of the force needs to be known to the adversary while maintaining ambiguity about the exact locations

of units. The existence of partnered, irregular guerrilla forces deters PRC aggressive military actions by threatening to impose disproportional losses on their forces. The US's experience fighting insurgencies over the past two decades serves as an example of a great power state struggling to achieve strategic and operational goals because of the losses incurred by a distributed, irregular force. Maritime guerrilla forces would seek to threaten the same fate to a future adversary but would add the additional element of a complementary conventional force in support.

The maritime guerrilla force would be deployed within the First Island Chain in a highly distributed and mobile posture. Fixed headquarters elements would be limited in both scale and scope to avoid unnecessary imposition upon host nations and to deny the adversary a targetable node. Such headquarters would serve as limited C2 and logistics nodes but would not be critical to the function of the actual forces. The actual forces would rely on mission-type orders and modified foraging (living off the local economy) to sustain the force. Mission-type orders would provide each maneuver force a sector of responsibility within which the force would move about at random, to provide overt security and presence. Each force would be allocated sustainment funds to purchase lodging, food, water, fuel, or other supplies on the local economy negating the need for robust logistical support networks.

The limited supplies that would be required through traditional military networks would be supplied autonomously. The maritime guerrilla force would arrange for ammunition or maintenance parts (just two examples of resources the force would likely need to control) to be delivered at a particular time and place. Either by airdrop, drone, or by the autonomous, unmanned mini-submersibles the delivery would be made. If an attempt was made to intercept the submersible, it would simply scuttle itself and another craft would be sent to replace it. The

craft would beach itself at a predetermined location, the force would offload the supplies, and simply return it to the ocean so it could autonomously return to a logistical supply mothership or port.

The maritime guerrilla force would maneuver both ashore and at sea. Ashore their operations would not be dissimilar to those of other guerrilla forces. Patrolling, engagement with local populations (including civil affairs projects), and enabling the partnered local force to maintain security would all be common operations. At sea, their operations would bridge from the actions of a coastal patrol force to an offensive swarm. Their presence among offshore fisheries would provide security for host nation exclusive economic zones and deter incursions by competitor nations. The use of small boats would be essential, and the integration of the unmanned aerial, surface, and subsurface systems would increase the areas such small forces could influence.

Should the maritime guerrilla force transition to the offense the unmanned systems could be coordinated into a swarm. This swarm would create a mass of simultaneous threats that would create multiple dilemmas for the commanders of adversary vessels. Swarming would potentially defeat countermeasures and force protection systems by presenting too many targets simultaneously. The mass of systems simultaneously would additionally mask which systems are manned by the actual maritime guerrilla force, increasing the survivability of the force. Such swarming operations could be used to either harass or attack adversary threats, creating asymmetry favorable to the US and partnered forces.

Such offensive operations would be limited in scope and would be complemented by conventional forces. The maritime guerrilla force could serve as a disruption to an amphibious assault into the first island chain, imposing costs on an invading force and buying time for a

conventional response from host nations or the US. The maritime guerrilla force could serve as a queuing asset to facilitate conventional force strikes on such forces. The maritime guerrilla force could serve as a demonstration to attacking forces that their intended target is not a “soft” target, and the environment they are entering is anything but permissive. While the goal of the maritime guerrilla force is to deter such scenarios from ever occurring, they would also be trained and equipped to impose a cost upon the adversary for aggressive military actions.

The small footprint of such forces would be a major selling point to host nations, whose invitation and cooperation would be required to ever initiate such a design. By keeping maritime guerrilla forces small and requiring them to be partnered with local forces, the US can increase the coverage of the First Island Chain defense, and also host nation defensive military capacity. The small size also makes redeployment or scaling of such forces relatively easy compared to those with large, fixed footprints. The US can therefore avoid any image of colonialist occupation or domestic concerns on exit strategies. The small size can be compensated for with technology through the use of unmanned systems for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), fire support, resupply, and swarming attacks. All of these technologies are currently available, reliable, cheap, and expendable.

Maritime guerrilla forces could evolve further from the defensive, deterrent role described previously. Either from advanced shore bases or from sea bases, the same swarms of small boats paired with unmanned systems in multiple dimensions could create an asymmetric threat to an adversary littoral region. With forty percent of the world’s population living within 100km of the coast, and eighty percent of global trade occurring on the carried by sea there is much to be exploited in the littoral regions of any country with a coast line. The previously

discussed A2/AD systems attempt to deny access to this environment, but such systems are designed to counter US capital ships.

Maritime guerilla forces launched from submarines or fast surface ships such as the US Navy's Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) could access the littoral regions mitigating the risk to larger, slower aircraft carriers or amphibious ships. Once access is gained, the maritime guerrilla force is able to conduct reconnaissance in support of larger forces or raids in support of strategic or operational objectives. Raids could include raids on commercial infrastructure or ports to affect local or regional economy, raids on military facilities to attrit naval forces in port, or to disable A2/AD networks in support of larger fleet objectives. Each of these options for raids complements the conventional force, creates an asymmetrical threat (on the lower side) to adversary capabilities, and maintains a limited scope of mission while limiting risk.

Such offensive operations would not be the primary intent of maritime guerilla forces, but would certainly present greater opportunity and utility. Such forces could be similarly employed against any adversary with a coastline. The four state adversaries identified in the US National Security and Defense Strategies all have extensive coastlines, maritime trade interests, and navigable estuaries. This is not to imply that access to such littorals is easy, but rather that opportunity exists to employ littoral forces in support of National Strategic interests.

Addressing Dissenting Views

Combining these concepts with existing naval capabilities will cause a destabilizing dilemma for the CCP should they choose to go on the offensive. As Mao noted, the guerrilla force alone cannot achieve victory, but rather is one element of a winning combination. The maritime guerrilla force is not a replacement for conventional forces, but rather a complement to

them. Maritime guerrilla forces are similarly not the answer to US policy challenges with the PRC, but rather one aspect of one element to what should be a holistic, coordinated strategy. They will however meet much of the Commandant's intent of a highly distributable, flexible, amphibious force.

Not all voices are in favor of the Commandant's bold changes to the way the Marine Corps operates. Notable among these voices is retired Marine, former Secretary of the Navy, and former Senator James Webb who considers shaping the nation's force structure to a single adversary will simply give them the ability to adjust.⁸³ Senator Webb notes that the changes proposed by General Berger are "potentially irreversible" and that they "eliminate...key capabilities" from the service.⁸⁴ Senator Webb also warns of a return to subordination to the Navy, turning back the work of "centuries of innovative and ground-breaking role models."⁸⁵ Senator Webb fails to account for three points: First, the predominance of the Pacific Ocean in General Berger's primary proposed operating environment necessitates reliance on the navy to operate; second, the divestment of "key capabilities" is offset by embracement of Joint principles; and third, the proposed concepts, while currently tailored to an East Asia conflict, are adaptable to any competitor with which the US seeks to compete and contain.

Another form of dissent can be found among those who do not think archipelagic defense maritime guerrilla warfare or the CPG goes far enough. Major Jake Yeager proposes the formulation of "Expeditionary Advanced Maritime Operations."⁸⁶ This concept would take the CPG from advanced bases to "small, mobile, lethal, and low-cost capabilities" that would be "optimized...for purely sea-based, tactically offensive operations [that] would complement the littoral strike forces."⁸⁷ Maj Yeager justifies this concept by asserting that archipelagic defense would still be land-based in nature and thus fall under the primacy of the Army.⁸⁸ He further

proposes a “sea-based littoral force that employs small boats and high-speed assault craft” in a manner similar to that proposed by LtCol Thaddeus Drake’s article.⁸⁹ Maj Yeager’s proposals truly embrace the Commandant’s direction to return to the sea, but his proposals also reinforce criticism (like Senator Webb’s) that the service is abandoning its recent history as America’s global force in readiness in favor of a tailored doctrine of maritime offensive defense.

Conclusion

The necessary technological and structural concepts exist to achieve the Commandant’s stated vision. The Marine Corps will have to embrace certain changes in both ethos and structure to achieve the modernization that is required. Reconnaissance units provide a clear path forward to achieve the end states of an amphibious, highly distributable force able to operate in austere environments. Current infantry structure and equipment will be insufficient to support distributed operations in archipelagic defense. Both the size of infantry units and their relative inability to distribute will have to be addressed to make them employable in archipelagic defense operations. Investment in both equipment and training that put Marines back in the maritime environment as more than a passenger are required.

This modernization may require some sacrifice in manpower, together with changes in the way Marines train and prepare for operations.⁹⁰ Current technology exists to assist such modernizing forces to bridge the gap between identification of requirements and fielding ultimate programs of record. The unmanned systems identified are but the first step in creating manned-unmanned pairing that can truly distribute the force across the First Island Chain. Adaptation of the tactics used against US forces over the past twenty years of war will help create an asymmetric threat to our competitors that cannot be ignored.

Partnering with host nations will be essential. Diplomatically it will give the maritime guerrilla force legal access to sovereign territory in the First Island Chain. Informationally it will help keep both the people of the host nations and the PRC focused on the inherently defensive nature of such forces. Militarily it will act as a force multiplier in that the host nation forces will be operating and developing to defend their own homelands. As partnered forces develop capacity and capability, it provides a ready off-ramp for US forces to recede into more support-oriented roles and decrease forward-deployed forces. Economically these forward-deployed forces will be a stimulus to local economies as the forces live among the people and sustain off the economy. Their access to local people and infrastructure will help build requirements for US infrastructure aid that can compete and offset those offered by the PRC's BRI.

Just as the maritime guerrilla force seeks to harmonize and balance the competitor, it also must exist in balance within the US armed forces. The maritime guerrilla force must exist in balance with conventional forces and the two must complement each other. The threat of conventional forces such as aircraft carriers, Marine Expeditionary Units, Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCT), and Air Force Wings forward-deployed must continue to be part of the US strategy in the Western Pacific, just not the only part. A balance between asymmetric and conventional forces will build uncertainty and controlled chaos into the operating environment which will benefit the US and partner nations. The credible threat of both combined with the existing unconventional threats of US Special Operations Command serves to complicate the decision-making of CCP and PLA leaders.

The adaptability of such units will be of further importance. By focusing on littoral operations in a distributed environment the maritime guerrilla force remains adaptable to other regions. Skills in land-based warfare will continue to be honed in addition to those in the

maritime domain. The ability of such forces to transition to other regions that are less dominated by the maritime domain will ensure such adaptability and avoid obsolescence in the future. This combined with the complementary nature with conventional forces will render much of the criticism of the CPG moot.

A maritime guerrilla force grown out of existing doctrine and training is possible. The technology to enable and support such forces already exists in multiple forms. The units such a force would be based upon have a proven record of success in a variety of environments. The complementary nature of this force would ensure that all global contingencies can continue to be met, while still providing a tailor-made force to deter the threat of the PRC in the First Island Chain.

Notes

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