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FUTURE WAR PAPER

SPMAGTF – The Band-Aid For Marine Corps Relevance: MAGTF Composition Challenges and Opportunities in Support of Future Crisis Response

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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George J. Flynn III, Major, USMC

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Introduction

Crisis is defined as “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome.”¹ A word of Greek origin, “Crises are deemed to be negative changes in the security, economic, political, societal, or environmental affairs, especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning. More loosely, it is a term ‘meaning a testing time’ or an ‘emergency event.’”² Today and for the past five years, the Marine Corps has provided the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) as the land-based, stationary, forward-deployed choice for the geographic combatant commander (COCOM) in support of crisis response.

If the occurrence of a crisis is uncertain and categorized as a “testing time,” what if the Marine Corps SPMAGTF was truly tested, would it succeed? Would its force structure, which currently consists of a regimental headquarters, an infantry battalion, and limited organic logistics and aviation support, be able to respond to crises against the types of near-peer to peer level adversaries that may exist in 2025? Perhaps the continued employment of the Marine Corps SPMAGTF in support of crisis response is simply a Band-Aid for the Corps’ ability to respond to tomorrow’s crises that must evolve or risk being exposed for being woefully inadequate for the threats the nation will face over the next ten to fifteen years.

Imagine a scenario where a force resembling SPMAGTF-Crisis Response (CR) was tested against a peer competitor. The Marine Corps conducted such an experiment with a SPMAGTF (X) evaluated against a peer competitor opposing force (OPFOR) and the results were notable. The experiment found that:

Although the SPMAGTF (X) fielded a wide variety of capabilities, essentially any attrition to a subordinate unit would result in the tangible degradation or elimination of

the particular capability it provided...The ground units of the SPMAGTF seemed to start the experiment one engagement away from combat ineffectiveness. Overall, the SPMAGTF (X) included an impressive breadth of capability, but little depth.³

Advanced warfighting experiment Hunter Warrior identified some challenging limitations regarding the SPMAGTF as the sole solution for crisis response for the future. The greater concern, Hunter Warrior was executed in 1998. The Marine Corps learned these lessons twenty years ago. The Marine Corps has failed to evolve how SPMAGTFs are employed and nested in the greater framework of the MAGTF as it is designed for crisis response.

Since the execution of Hunter Warrior in 1998, the capabilities of the nation's potential adversaries, both state and non-state actors, have evolved while the Marine Corps has not. In the current operating environment, the SPMAGTF has done its job in gaining a foothold for Marine Corps relevance, but the SPMAGTF, as defined in doctrine, was not designed to be the permanent solution. In order to maintain relevance into the future, the temporary solution provided by the increased employment of the SPMAGTF must evolve to the creation of a more modular, flexible MAGTF deployment capability that will continue to demonstrate the operational relevance of the Marine Corps as more than just a force in crisis, but a force in presence. The nation's ever-patrolling security force.

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0 Operations states that a SPMAGTF is formed "when situations arise for which a MEU or other unit is either inappropriate or unavailable."⁴ MCDP 1-0 further defines a SPMAGTF as a MAGTF "of any size-but normally no larger than a MEU-with tailored capabilities required to accomplish a particular mission."⁵ SPMAGTFs are a unique and useful Marine Corps capability when employed as intended. For example, as a result of the mining of the SS Bridgeton in the Persian Gulf in 1987, a SPMAGTF was formed and deployed for a particular, limited duration security mission.⁶

In today's operating environment however, specifically since 2012, the SPMAGTFs has been deployed on a recurring semi-annual basis in support of an enduring crisis response mission. The continued employment of SPMAGTFs in this manner leads to two premises. First, that the Marine Corps does not, and perhaps will not, have the force structure to provide MAGTFs in appropriate capacity and capability in the future and second, that the geopolitical environment that has led to the Marine Corps' continued employment of the SPMAGTF is not an aberration and is indicative of the future operating environment. These two premises lead to the conclusion that if the current geopolitical environment is capable of placing such intense demands on the Marine Corps that its organizational limitations are exposed, then the Marine Corps must consider changes to how it employs its organizational construct to meet the challenges that the country will face in the next ten to fifteen years.

In September 2016, General Robert S. Neller, the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, provided a statement for Congress regarding the President's 2017 Budget that indicated that the "pace of the 21st Century demands a ready Marine Corps to buy time, decision space, and options for our Nation's leaders."⁷ General Neller further remarked that "the unstable and increasingly dangerous world situation is further complicated by a constrained resource environment from which we must continue current operations, reset our equipment, maintain our warfighting readiness, and at the same time, modernize the force."⁸ The Commandant concluded these introductory remarks by stating that the Marine Corps will need to maintain a "clear-eyed vision" and make "pragmatic institutional choices" regarding what will be required of the Marine Corps over the next fifteen years.

Achieving a clear vision for the future role of the Marine Corps involves developing a foundational understanding of where the Marine Corps sees itself as a service today and an

understanding of the geopolitical situation that will drive future service requirements. The Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC), published in September 2016, provides a reference point for achievement of this understanding. The MOC, a document defined by service doctrine, U.S. Code, and guidance from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, provides clarity regarding how the Marine Corps is defined now and for the future. Specifically, the MOC states that “the Marine Corps, as an integral part of both the Naval force and the Combined/Joint force, must be a tailorable, flexible, and versatile force capable of responding to any crisis across the full range of military operations (ROMO).”⁹ The SPMAGTF, as it is described in doctrine, does not appear to be the pragmatic solution for long-term employment of the force as its definition and continued employment implies an inability for the Marine Corps to meet its assigned roles and responsibilities.

Counterargument

The counterargument to the need for the Marine Corps to understand the conditions that led to the continued requirement for SPMAGTF employment and evolve to the creation of a more modular, flexible MAGTF deployment capability is that the SPMAGTF deployments demonstrate an inherent Marine Corps capability and ensure the Marine Corps remains operationally relevant today. The Marine Corps ability to create and deploy the SPMAGTFs is unique to the service and with SPMAGTFs deployed in the CENTCOM, AFRICOM, and SOUTHCOM theaters, ready to respond to crisis in permissive to uncertain environments, the operational relevance of today’s Marine Corps is secure. In terms of cost, the ability for the Marine Corps to experiment in the creation of land-based MAGTFs and the “left-of crisis” change in force size of forward deployed MAGTFs would come at a financial cost that maintaining the current task organizational construct would not require.

With maintenance challenges and increased competition for manpower and resources, the implications for the future could indicate that the easiest solution for the Marine Corps would be to continue with the status quo, create SPMAGTFs as required and assume the operational risk in terms of readiness across the spectrum of conflict. The inherent danger associated with this risk is that continued reliance on the SPMAGTF demonstrates a day-to-day reactionary posture and an assumed level of capability that may not deter a near-peer or peer competitor as was learned in the Hunter Warrior exercise in 1998. In a study of the future operating environment, Marine Major Jesse Cook stated that

Following 11 September 2001...the Marine Corps has focused on the close fight and satisfying near-term requirements...Most efforts to consider future environments used legacy methods to reduce uncertainty. These techniques were highly valuable in the short run but proved less useful further than ten years out.¹⁰

The Marine Corps of today is able to provide the COCOMs and senior leadership options but without evolution those options are limited. When left to consider the future against an adaptive adversary who generally will possess the initiative in terms of creating a crisis, the risk to the force increases.

SPMAGTF – A Band-Aid Requiring Reinforcement

As a result of a gap in crisis coverage that was identified with the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi in September 2012, the Marine Corps formed SPMAGTF-CR. Since that time, a specific SPMAGTF has been created, deployed, and sustained to directly support three of the six geographic combatant commands (GCC). In employing these SPMAGTFs, the Marine Corps' near-term solution has evolved into a long-term operational requirement. With no sign in the short-term indicating the cessation of these missions, concerns exist regarding the continued employment of these SPMAGTFs and their impact on the future effectiveness of the Marine Corps as a crisis response force. Over the next 10-15 years, the future for instability that exists

around the world indicates that the SPMAGTF as a crisis response force is not an aberration, but a new normal for employment of Marine forces. Of note, the consistent continued requirement for these SPMAGTFs demonstrates a potential preference from both the geographic combatant commanders and senior civilian leadership for MAGTFs that are formed and ready as opposed to templated and requiring composition to deploy. As the Marine Corps looks to the future, an assessment of its force laydown is required.

In the interest of maintaining both its service posture as the nation's force in readiness and its preferred means of employment as a MAGTF, the Marine Corps' current operating force task organization that supports a standing MEF construct may require adjustment. The emergence of the requirement for the continued deployment of the SPMAGTF has created an opportunity to vary the size and scope of various MAGTF structures as they execute their deployments across the globe. By taking advantage of the MAGTF's inherent modularity and flexibility to create varying MAGTF structures, both land and sea-based, of varying size, manned and equipped for extended periods of time, the Marine Corps has the potential to increase cohesion, readiness, and institutional understanding of MAGTF employment. An investment in testing such ideas would ensure that the Marine Corps continues to be the service of choice in crisis response as it assumes a greater operational role as a patrolling force in presence. A Marine Corps that invests in the evolution of its inherent capabilities provides an opportunity for better force positioning, training, and responsiveness for the future that awaits in the next ten to fifteen years.

The Marine Corps' current MAGTF force construct is defined in terms of force employers and force providers and this construct varies between each Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) and their specific responsibilities to the theater and global campaign plans that they

are assigned or apportioned to support. While prepared to execute as a force employer, each MEF serves as force provider and generates smaller MAGTF structures and specific main subordinate command support to various operational deployments and contingencies based on the request from the combatant commander. These forces generally assume the MAGTF structure of a MEU but MEBs and MEFs can and have been formed when required to provide additional manpower, equipment, and sustainability as larger crisis unfold. This current task organization construct provides support to the full spectrum of conflict as depicted in Figure 1¹¹.

As today's operational environment has shown, the Marine Corps' current task organization possesses the inherent capability to generate SPMAGTFs to meet an operational or strategic need. In the interest of evolution however, there is an opportunity to evolve the inherent capability of the MAGTF and utilize land and sea-based MAGTFs that can adjust in force posture and capability, disrupt potential adversary action, and deter crises while still being prepared to react to a crisis when it occurs. In order to achieve this end and properly prepare for the future, the Marine Corps must invest the time now in experimentation and doctrine development to determine how best to expand and evolve the inherent capabilities that the

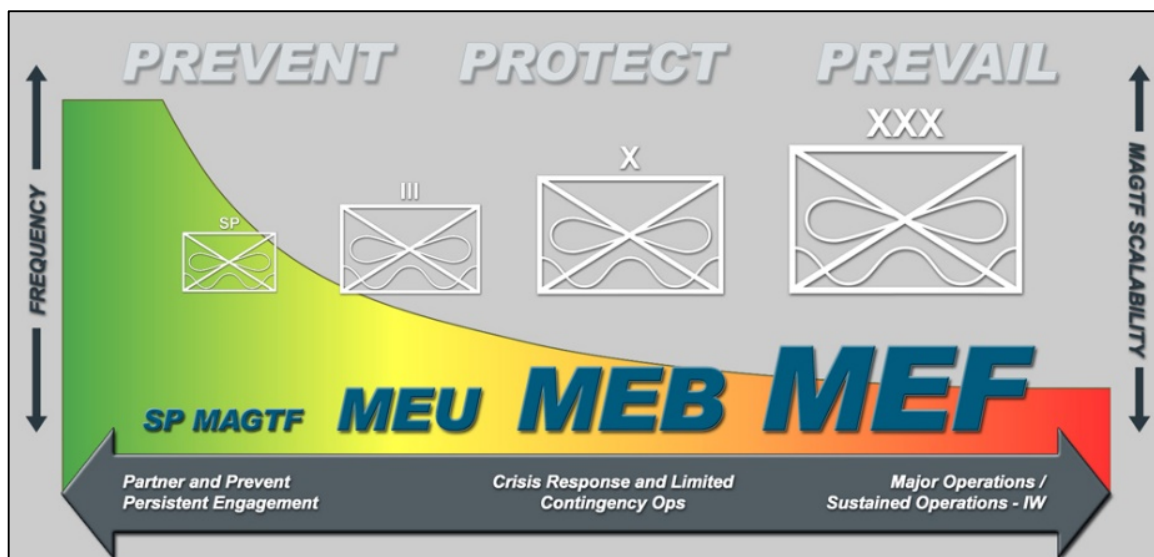


Figure 1.

Marine Corps', MAGTF concept provides the nation.

This experimentation and doctrine development should be focused on three key areas. First, clearly identify the role of the SPMAGTF in terms of how, where, and when it is utilized and when a recurring mission creates a trigger to establish a more permanent or larger MAGTF task organization. Second, identify ways to protect and expand the training and cohesion required of the future force in terms of timing, increased training opportunities, and clear, conditions based standards. Third, identify ways in which to leverage the combined capabilities of the sea-based Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG/MEU) and land-based MAGTF.

SPMAGTF Transition Indicators

The role of the SPMAGTF must be better defined in terms of when it is utilized and when a recurring SPMAGTF mission creates a trigger to establish a more permanent MAGTF task organization. The continued employment of multiple SPMAGTFs highlights a gap in coverage in support to contingencies and is in conflict with doctrinal employment of the SPMAGTF "when a MEU or other unit is either inappropriate or unavailable [in support of] a particular mission."¹² The appropriate doctrinal description of the SPMAGTF imposes a requirement on the Marine Corps to create and make available to the combatant commander the appropriate force structure to support the enduring mission. The challenge that must be explored through experimentation and doctrine development is in identifying when that transition from SPMAGTF to a more enduring MAGTF construct occurs.

Proposed indicators of the need to transition a deployed SPMAGTF to a more enduring MAGTF unit can be identified in two ways. The first indicator is when the mission is no longer the result of a national/COCOM level reaction to a crisis that has occurred such as immediate

disaster relief or embassy security. The second indicator occurs when the mission itself has taken on an enduring characteristic as dictated by the situation or by the guidance of the combatant commander such as the case with a disaster stabilization mission or an enduring request for forces in support of crisis response. If either of these indicators are present and the nature of the mission has constraints or limitations that make the MEU, MEB or MEF an inappropriate option, a composited force must be created that has the time to plan, man, train, and equip prior to deployment in relief or reinforcement of the SPMAGTF.

If these indicators could be further developed, experimented with for viability, and captured in doctrine, the Marine Corps will evolve the capabilities and effectiveness of its existing MAGTF structure. If this future were applied to the situation as it exists today, the current task organization that defines SPMAGTF-CR would change its naming designation to what Brigadier General Jason Bohm proposes as “Crisis Response MAGTF (CR-MAGTF).”¹³ This CR-MAGTF would be a land-based MAGTF with clear roles and responsibilities assigned, that would have undergone an extensive pre-deployment preparation that included mobilization, attachment of MSEs, and the equipping and training of the force to an identified qualification standard prior to deployment.

Build the force, Train the Force, Achieve Cohesion

To achieve cohesion, the inherent flexibility and modularity provided by the Marine Corps MAGTF requires a steady maintenance of repetition to sustain a viable, high level of operational capability. While the SPMAGTF has demonstrated that the Marine Corps possesses a unique capability to quickly composite forces on short notice to deploy in support of crisis response, this cannot be seen as the primary solution for the future. A rapidly composited SPMAGTF must be seen for its limitations as well as its capabilities. Inherent to such

deployment solutions are significant gaps in training, readiness, and shared understanding of force capabilities and limitations that can, and potentially will, hinder the ability of Marine forces to be successful in the future when dealing with a larger crisis created by a motivated, highly trained, and well-equipped force.

As mentioned in the SPMAGTF-CR “Relief in Place and Transition of Authority After Action Report” dated 1 September, 2014, the Main Subordinate Elements (MSE) for the SPMAGTF were “not composited prior to deployment but instead composited once elements were deployed.”¹⁴ The recommendation associated with this stated concern was for the implementation of

a formal command relationship between the CE and MSEs [in order to allow the CE to] influence manning, unit training, planning for deployed training, composition of and planning for TSC events, [and to] synchronize time phased force deployment data (TPFDD) to optimize force flow to best support the RIP/TOA and assumption of the mission in theater.¹⁵

For the future Marine Corps, failure to take on such recommendations and allow the appropriate time for the composition and training of the force when SPMAGTF transition criteria has been met is a significant risk to mission. The future relevance of the Corps will not be able to be defined as it sometimes is today, by a MAGTF whose aviation combat element achieved mission qualification with no ground forces, and whose ground combat element achieved mission qualification by conducting an aerial insert and extraction via the Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement (MTVR) Mk 23 standard cargo truck. The future Marine Corps must have truth in advertising regarding its qualifications and capabilities.

In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) concerning the relevance of the Marine Corps’ ability to be able to conduct amphibious assaults Brigadier General Rick Uribe, Deputy Commanding General, I MEF stated that the Corps’ ability to conduct such assaults

“gives the President options. It allows him to have a force out there and then be able to go to a place at the time of his [the President’s] choosing and be able to go and forcibly, if necessary.”¹⁶

As the Marine Corps looks to the future, the responsibility of providing civilian and military senior leadership options comes with an obligation to ensure that when a SPMAGTF requires transition to a more enduring MAGTF structure that provides long-term presence and a cohesive composite force, that this newly created MAGTF that is designed to provide options is given the appropriate time to composite, equip and achieve that high level of cohesion.

This cohesion can only be gained through training to a clearly identified, validated standard. The employment of a cohesive, properly manned, trained, and equipped land-based MAGTF would, over time, ensure understanding of the capabilities and limitations of such a force. With that understanding, opportunities would be created to further enhance the Marine Corps as the nation’s force in presence by leveraging the combined capabilities of a land-based MAGTF and the sea-based ARG/MEU.

Evolve and Get Creative

In order to identify ways in which to leverage the combined capabilities of the land-based MAGTF and sea-based Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG/MEU), the capabilities and weaknesses of the MEU must be understood. The MEU, serving historically as the Marine Corps’ primary choice for MAGTF deployment, provides combatant commanders a sea-based force in readiness with the capability to gain access to littoral areas via air or sea. Able to self-sustain for a period of fifteen days and further replenish as operations unfold, an ARG/MEU offshore sends a clear message to adversaries and allies alike regarding the strategic significance of a particular area for the U.S. What the ARG/MEU lacks due to its deployment cycle is the ability to maintain long-term presence. This lack of presence capability of the MEU

presents a weakness of this particular MAGTF structure and can also leave a negative impression for partners, allies, and decision makers alike. Grant Newsham, a Senior Research Fellow with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo, wrote that

A key part of MEU activities is a comprehensive bilateral and multilateral training scheme with partner militaries...intended to improve partner capabilities and interoperability. However, a MEU showing up can resemble the famous Harlem Globetrotters basketball wizards coming to town. It's entertaining, even exhilarating, but doesn't leave behind better basketball players.¹⁷

The capability for continued presence is a weakness inherent in the sea-based ARG/MEU construct that is a strength a land-based MAGTF could provide.

With limited amphibious ship capability and recalling previously identified lessons learned, a rotational land-based MAGTF may not have the inherent capability or endurance to respond to all manner of crisis along the spectrum of conflict. What it does provide the Marine Corps by its forward positioning, is a semi-permanent foothold. Land-based MAGTFs that are trained to work in concert with sea-based ARG/MEUs can develop an operationally relevant supported/supporting relationship that minimizes the weaknesses inherent in each MAGTF while maximizing the strengths that each force structure provides.

A Marine Corps of the future can establish and maintain forward presence with the employment of land-based MAGTFs in areas of concern identified by the COCOM. These MAGTF footholds can be then supported by a passing MEU with sustainment and additional basing as required. Conversely the land-based MAGTF can support the MEU when access to a given area is required for deterrence or crisis response. With relationships, previously established and maintained by the land-based MAGTF, the MEU can utilize the foothold gained as a means of access where, if needed, the two MAGTFs can further take advantage of the modularity

inherent in Marine Corps force structure to combine to a MAGTF of even greater scope and capability, such as a MEB.

MEB headquarters that are operational and Joint Task Force (JTF) certified, as is the case with 2d MEB in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and 5th MEB in Bahrain, provide a more robust C2 capability to rapidly assume command and build larger MAGTF force structures from smaller MAGTF structures like a land-based MAGTF, MEU or SPMAGTF. The challenge for tomorrow is to push the envelope of this inherent capability and more frequently build up to and down from a MEB size structure. A MAGTF possessing the ability to transform in size and composition in a given operational area will serve as a means of deterrence and allow for greater repetitions and real-world rehearsals in the event that a MEB is needed for crisis response.

Implications

If a future Marine Corps were to frequently adjust its deployed MAGTF structure and combine and break apart MAGTFs from a light to medium size force capability on a regular basis, the respective operational MEB HQ would consistently have a role to play. With an ability to actively deploy the command element, the MEB commander and his or her staff will have the ability to work to develop over a longer period of time relationships with both the U.S. State Department and countries that could be used for basing. This relationship building and maintenance would facilitate identifying to the COCOM the next position for the land-based MAGTF to occupy and the manner in which an arriving ARG/MEU can provide support. For the MEBs that are operationally capable, their ability to establish and maintain relationships with potential host nations and higher headquarters allows the ability to better manage the probable constraints and restraints that may be applied to any MAGTF force structure.

The benefits of varying the size and scope of the MAGTF at numerous times in a COCOMs area of influence requires an investment beyond training in terms and execution in real-world conditions. The current execution of MEB level training exercises, while important and worthwhile, denies the Marine Corps an ability to expand its inherent capabilities and provide a real-time measure of deterrence to a potential adversary in the uncertainty that an ever-changing, modular MAGTF patrolling the globe provides. A willingness to test and exercise these capabilities now will facilitate greater readiness, timing, and understanding of the limitations of smaller MAGTF structures and the capabilities that a MEU/land-based MAGTF team or medium size MAGTF such as the MEB provides. The Marine Corps of the future, having invested in evolving the means of employment of its already inherently modular and flexible structure can ensure more frequent preparation “left of crisis,” maintain greater operational awareness, and achieve higher standards of performance and effectiveness. The Marine Corps of the future will then provide the nation with a capability much more robust and adaptable than the current solution that has been provided by the continued employment of the SPMAGTF.

As the Marine Corps looks to the future, the concern remains that the continued use of the SPMAGTF is an impracticable long-term solution. The SPMAGTF, while demonstrating the strong flexibility of the Marine Corps as a service, threatens to also demonstrate in the long-term an inability for the Corps to have an appropriate and ready response force when compared to the changing capabilities of the other services. In looking to the future, and in protection of its service relevancy, the Marine Corps must make the investment and effort to develop and exploit the emergent opportunity that the requirement for the SPMAGTF has created. Such an

investment would demonstrate the modularity and flexibility of the MAGTF as a future force of presence, able to both deter and respond to crisis.

Conclusion

In describing the Marine Corps role in the future fight, the MOC clearly states the problem, “The Marine Corps is currently not organized, trained, and equipped to meet the demands of a future operating environment characterized by complex terrain, technology proliferation, information warfare, the need to shield and exploit signatures, and an increasingly non-permissive maritime domain.”¹⁸ The inherent difficulty and concern with the continued employment of SPMAGTFs as the solution for crisis response readiness is that, in so doing, the Marine Corps message continues to be that the Corps is willing and capable of forming and operating in a reactionary posture.

Failure to thoroughly consider the deep future before making long-term investment decisions risks the development of flawed concepts and the selection of inappropriate, outdated, and/or unsupportable capabilities; the end result being the development of a Marine Corps that is vulnerable to strategic surprise, wrong-sized, ill equipped, and unprepared for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.¹⁹

While able to react faster than the other services in terms of force mobilization and deployment, the Marine Corps must evolve for the future.

As the Marine Corps looks to the future, the capabilities of the nation’s potential adversaries, both state and non-state actors, continues to evolve and it must be assumed that those same potential adversaries are paying close attention to when and how MAGTF force structures present themselves in theater. In today’s operating environment, the SPMAGTF has done its job in gaining a foothold for Marine Corps relevance, but the SPMAGTF, by doctrine, is not designed to be the permanent solution. The recent employment of the SPMAGTF demonstrates what the Marine Corps can do, but for the future, the continued reliance on the

SPMAGTF as the solution is not what the Marine Corps should do. Looking forward the types of pragmatic institutional choices the Corps will be required to make must include ensuring that the temporary solution provided by the increased employment of the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) evolves to the creation of a more modular, flexible MAGTF deployment capability that will continue to demonstrate the operational relevance of the Marine Corps as more than just a force in crisis, but a force in presence.

End Notes

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¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rick Uribe, “Marines Insist Storming a Beach Is Still a Military Option,” interview by Steve Walsh, *National Public Radio*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/27/573739723/marines-insist-storming-a-beach-is-still-a-military-option>.

¹⁷ Grant Newsham, “Want to Make Asian Armed Forces Better? Send in the Marines,” *The National Interest*, (Feb 26, 2018), <http://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/want-make-asian-armed-forces-better-send-the-marines-24638>.

¹⁸ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Marine Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Fights in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, September 2016), 8.

¹⁹ Jesse Cook, “Future Operating Environments: Looking Deeper Than Our Traditional Approach to Operations,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (February 2016), <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2016/02/future-operating-environments>.

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