

Waltzing Our Matildas Ashore and Afloat:

Australian and US Amphibious Forces

Setting the Conditions and Posturing for Follow On Operations



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ABSTRACT

In a state of persistent competition with China below the level of active hostilities in the INDO-Pacific, the United States would benefit from reframing the way in which it employs forces globally to remain relevant in great power competition. To achieve shared objectives and deter the ascendance of Chinese hegemony in the INDO-Pacific, the Australian and US alliance is best positioned to gain relative advantage through increased training and operational opportunities, specifically between both nations' amphibious forces. This work uses theory bolstered by joint doctrine as a useful framework to evaluate the recommended way ahead for enhanced cooperation between the amphibious forces of Australia and the amphibious forces of the US. Through creative employment of US and Australian forces in the south-west Pacific, both countries gain the opportunity to set the conditions for successful follow-on operations, be they in cooperation or in competition, with China.

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INTRODUCTION

The alliance between Australia and the United States seeks to deter wayward Chinese activities in the INDO-Pacific. In a state of persistent competition with China below the level of active hostilities in the INDO-Pacific, the United States would benefit from reframing the way in which it employs forces globally to remain relevant in great power competition. The current National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the National Military Strategy have directed a focus to five particular threat areas.¹ Specifically, their focus on the Indo-Pacific region is to concentrate interest on China as a peer competitor.² In linking strategic guidance, US Congressional Representative, Michael Gallagher identifies the following: “The National Security Strategy (NSS) and NDS signal a reemphasis on conventional deterrence by denial. Rather than threatening to respond to aggression after the fact, deterrence by denial seeks to deny, degrade, or delay the aggression in near real time.”³ One may interpret this as a call for allied cooperation as the geographic magnitude is unable to be addressed independently by a single state actor. The Indo-Pacific combatant commander’s focus areas afford the opportunity to achieve this, using renewed creativity and innovation, specifically in working with allied partners.⁴ At levels below direct armed conflict, arguably the most logical manner is to participate in partnered actions with friends and allies to the greatest extent possible to set the conditions for mutual success across the spectrum of operations. The Australian and US alliance is best positioned to gain relative advantage through increased training and operational opportunities in the pursuit of shared objectives and ultimate deterrence of Chinese hegemony in the INDO-Pacific. The opportunities for growth between both nations’ amphibious forces are assessed through the factors of space, time, and force.

This work uses theory bolstered by joint doctrine as a useful framework to evaluate the recommended way ahead for enhanced cooperation between the amphibious forces of Australia

and the amphibious forces of the US. A discussion of overlapping objectives as articulated by senior leaders serves as the foundation of the position.⁵ Subsequently, an analysis of the relationship through the operational factors of time, space, and force provide support for greater combined force cooperation. One's freedom of action is achieved primarily by properly balancing factors of space, time, and forces.⁶ Though helpful in gaining greater understanding, it is critical to accept at the onset that "operational factors will rarely be completely, or even approximately, in harmony with one another or with the assigned operational or strategic objectives."⁷ The resulting recommendations necessarily accept that any action taken involves risk that may not neatly align with either country's current desires, but they are still worthy of consideration in the event that circumstances change and hostile action changes the focus of all actors.

SHARED OBJECTIVES

As China continues to mature as a peer competitor and naval force, they exacerbate tensions in the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) region through continued maritime claims and the ever-present potential of forward basing and staging of military assets. While the Chinese may claim the same logic chain, the distinction here is that the US and Australia seek not to fundamentally change the current conditions in the INDO-Pacific but to guarantee opportunity for all actors in the region. In the recently published 2020 Australian Defence Strategic Update, the newly appreciated change in tensions among actors are described as follows: "Strategic competition, primarily between the United States and China, will be the principal driver of strategic dynamics in our region. This competition is playing out across the Indo-Pacific and increasingly in our immediate region: the area ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific."⁸

In July of 2020, senior civilian leaders from both nations diplomatic and military departments came together at the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020 to discuss complimentary concerns and interests. The result was a clearly articulated position on the areas in which little daylight exists between the two nations. The official joint US and Australia press release from AUSMIN reads, “The Secretaries and Ministers expressed serious concerns over recent coercive and destabilizing actions across the Indo-Pacific...they affirmed that Beijing’s maritime claims are not valid under international law. Specifically, they affirmed that the PRC cannot assert maritime claims in the South China Sea based on the ‘nine-dash line,’ ‘historic rights,’ or entire South China Sea island groups, which are incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”⁹ This was a significant departure from Australia’s previous position of neutrality regarding claims in the SCS, and exposed Australia to anticipated retribution from Chinese policies. The Honorable Marise Payne, Australia’s Foreign Minister, stated the following: regarding the allies’ shared position at AUSMIN: “Australia and the United States had a shared interest in an Asia-Pacific region that was free, prosperous, and secure and were broadly aligned on issues including China.”¹⁰ The Brookings Institution’s assessment of AUSMIN found that as “another sign of Canberra’s determination to deal more seriously with Beijing, Australia’s new Defense Strategic Update commits to \$270 billion Australian dollars in defense investments over the next decade and refocuses the military around efforts to ‘shape, deter and respond’ to grey zone challenges and high-end aggression.”¹¹ The Strategic Update refocused the primacy of operations in the South West Pacific and South East Asia, and relegated global campaigns to a lower priority. Both sides agreed to restart the bilateral Force Posture Working Group, providing an opportunity to achieve strategic objectives through combined tactical actions via planning at the operational level of war.¹² The import of the need for a new approach to forces from the US perspective is summarized by Representative

Gallagher as he articulates the role of forces in the area countering China: “The Pentagon needs to articulate how the United States can invest as much ‘tooth ’as possible in what the NDS calls the ‘contact ’and ‘blunt layers ’of the Pentagon’s Global Operating Model. The contact layer is where the U.S. military can ‘compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict ’and the blunt layer is designed to ‘delay, degrade, or deny adversary aggression.’”¹³ Exploration regarding achievement of the security objective through greater amphibious force cooperation via the factors of space, time, and force follows.

FACTOR OF SPACE

The most expansive operational factor is that of space. US Naval War College Professor Dr. Milan Vego attempts to articulate the near infinite possibilities as follows: “The factor of space encompasses not only the physical environment and weather/climate but also the so-called ‘human-space. ’Among other things, the human-space includes such elements as the political system and nature of government, population size and density, economic activity, transportation, trade, ideologies, ethnicity, religions, social structure and traditions, culture, and technology.”¹⁴ While thought provoking and worthy of further scholarly consideration, the human space connections between China and Australia and China and the US, for that matter, are beyond the scope of this piece. To further the discourse, we will address specifically the Australian and US overlap in the context of their alliance.

Having a long-established relationship, citizens of Australia and the US share much of the same cultural space, such as heritage and values, to base trust upon. The shared aims of both nations exist here to provide far less friction for further integration. Fruits of the relationship were established in the introduction of the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin (MRF-D) in 2012, serving as the reenergized movement in attempting to balance space with time and force.¹⁵ The MRF-D concept of employment is to conduct training with the Australian Defence Force (ADF)

in northern Australia and to conduct bi/multilateral security cooperation activities, exercises, and training outside Australia with partnered nations in the Asia-Pacific region to increase theater security cooperation and build/improve partner capacity.¹⁶

While this partnership at the Top End of Australia has been growing, it has occurred near simultaneously with the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has welcomed two amphibious LHDs and one LSD to her Fleet Base East in Sydney. A major expansion of the Port of Townsville, simultaneously conducted, also occurred to accommodate the berthing the L class ships as well as the embarkation of troops and equipment based there. The ADF, in their own words, carry the desire to gain "maximum performance from ADF's military platforms," and as such the relationship is primed for enhancement.¹⁷ Any space gained should be militarily organized to facilitate the planning, preparation, and conduct of major operations or campaigns.¹⁸ In an effort to modernize infrastructure and enhance capability across Australia, the Department of Defence Force Design Plan 2020 intends to add port facilities in New South Wales as well as to consolidate and then expand the Australian Army's water craft fleet in Northern Australia.¹⁹ Participation of the US in these developments provides the opportunity for shared spaces in the littorals, where the greatest training and execution opportunities exist. The ability to work routinely along sea lines of communications within non-lethal environments assists in asserting sea control through combined naval power. As such, these spaces shall remain free, prosperous, and secure. Aligning US Marine Forces in additive deployments beyond rotations to Darwin positions both nations' soldiers from the sea in Australia's near abroad to exert influence through cooperation with maritime partners in the region. While the totality of the current force available, to both nations, may not be equal to what may be needed during armed conflict is beside the point. The imperative is on setting the

conditions to lessen the space between the militaries so that the follow-on factors of time and force are advantaged to the alliance when and if conflict arises.

FACTOR OF TIME

By coordinating partnered training and operations in and around Australia's area of operations, the leadership on both sides of the alliance overcome the tyranny of distance and gain increased time for decision making. In describing the operational factor of time, Vego quips that "time is one of the most precious commodities in the conduct of warfare."²⁰ In truth, time is nonmaterial, without content, and infinite.²¹ Through working in concert, the naval forces of both nations access the opportunity to gain time by establishing enhanced working relationships before the requirements of armed conflict.

The opportunity to expand the combined footprint across the littorals of Australia afford both nations the fleeting opportunity to set the conditions for required actions at sea and ashore for a host of mission sets in support of a free, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific area. By partnering at the military to military level ashore and at sea, there is a reduction of the gap in time (as currently exists due to required mobilization followed by transport from the continental United States to Australia) for the complimentary work toward the strategic objectives through maritime presence. Geoffrey Till accurately identifies that "a forward and sensitive maritime presence can help not only deter malefactors from malign actions or compel them into benign ones; it can also provide a means of signaling interest in a region's affairs, monitoring events at sea and ashore, and of contributing to the development of a sense of international community through a policy of active maritime consensus building."²² The time gained by having forces familiar with each other and their operating environment, be they ship or shore, are invaluable when the need arises.

The US/Australia relationship has, via MRF-D, US forces stationed ashore in the Top End for six months a year. By exploring options for using the other six months, vice accepting a lack of presence in the region, the relationship is far better postured to respond in a crisis or contingency throughout the Indo-Pacific when called upon. In other words, having combined Australian amphibious forces and US amphibious forces paired throughout the calendar year allows senior leaders and commanders more rapid response to hostile actions, as well as for humanitarian assistance and disaster response, in a region where the former is increasingly likely and the latter near certain. While counter-intuitive, the ability to rapidly respond provides greater decision space to both civilian and uniformed leaders. Prepared and prompt response options—without having to overcome calculations of time, speed, and distance before employment—support preservation of the precious commodity of time and best posture the force.

FACTOR OF FORCE

With shared objectives serving as the entry position for this work, we additionally set the conditions for achievement by addressing the operational factors of space and time. The achievement of the objectives, at least in part, have been analyzed by seeking to shrink the space (both physical distance and intellectual awareness) and the time for decision making for civilian and uniformed decision makers. This has thus far been done by the regular deployment of US Marines through Darwin via the MRF-D program, and it has been proposed here that further gains are possible through the cooperative engagement for the remainder of the calendar year in Townsville, Queensland or at sea in Australia's near abroad. The purpose, at the operational level, is to maximize the potential combat capability to respond when called upon. Put another way, the purpose of increased interaction is to maximize combat potential by being best postured to generate force. The effectiveness of aggregating force is designed to achieve Vego's maxim

that, “The greater the factor of force at the operational level, the greater the operational commander’s freedom to act.”²³

The ADF recognized the need for an amphibious force and since 2006 has been in the process of developing and employing forces and securing new amphibious vessels for amphibious force operations.²⁴ As a result, amphibious operations are finally coming of age in Australia and will play a more crucial role in the nation's defense policy for the "Asian Century."²⁵ The time for active experimentation is now from the US Marine Corps perspective.²⁶ As of March of 2020, General David Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote that “the Marine Corps is redesigning the force for naval expeditionary warfare in actively contested spaces, fully aligning the Service with the direction of the National Defense Strategy (NDS).”²⁷ As the US Marine Corps seeks every opportunity to go to sea, there exists a natural cooperative opportunity with the RAN’s amphibious forces. The Australian Department of Defense published that, “Under this new framework, Defense’s strategic objectives are to deploy military power to shape Australia’s strategic environment, deter actions against our interests and, when required, respond with credible military force.”²⁸ Given the environment in both countries for a desire to innovate and experiment, the impediments rest with those wedded to the past and happy with the status quo. It can be argued further that failure to act or change the current system will see the continued expansion of China as has taken place since the start of MRF-D in 2012. One may argue that the ADF must bear the exclusive burden of generating combat potential but that belies the spirit of cooperation being advocated for here. It follows that the ADF will never have enough Infantry Bn’s to influence the expansion of China independently. As a base level of current force design, the ADF can generate an O-6 Marine Expeditionary Unit-equivalent for forcible entry operations, with a Combat Brigade (Marine Expeditionary Brigade equivalent) to follow on and sea/air control provided by the RAN/RAAF. No doubt, this would take a

concerted effort for the ADF to generate and sustain what is minor compared to US scales of force generation. However, it provides enough potency to influence/degrade/deny adversaries in areas of relative superiority and can provide meaningful support to coalition operations. Further, it can assist the US in providing access and demonstrating multinational opposition to Chinese expansion.

As both countries look to refine their amphibious forces, there is ample room, and planned resourcing, for growth in achieving shared objectives. One may logically question the need for the development of an expeditionary strategy by the ADF or US naval amphibious force contributions in furthering their development. Peter Dean from the University of Western Australia offers the following: “In particular an ‘expeditionary strategy’/‘Defence of Australia’ distinction obscures the requirement for Australia’s military forces to operate in the zone between the continent itself and far-off deployment zones—that is, notably, in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. This region has long been characterized by Australian strategic policy as the nation’s ‘area of direct military interest’ or ‘primary operating environment.’”²⁹ The need for creative force design between the two nations is then clear. This is perhaps the most important operational factor as development of combined force application through shared space has the potential to yield greater time in decision making and response vis a vis China. For the operational commanders at their level of war, this may be seen as operational art.³⁰

CONCLUSION

The alliance between Australia and the United States is strong and enduring. The bond between the two has been strengthened in recent years through the shared recognition of peer-to-peer competition between the US and China, with Australia playing a key role as a resident

power in the Indo-Pacific region. Through independent review and research, each member of the alliance has recognized the need to ensure freedom, prosperity, and security in the region. Leaders from top civilian positions in both governments and uniformed leadership alike recognized the opportunity to achieve greater advantage by redesigning forces to achieve these objectives.

This work has acknowledged the objectives from leaders through policy and guidance and then, through the lenses of operational factors of space, time, and force, broached areas of opportunity. Maximizing these operational factors for greatest advantage is achieved through seizing the initiative of force design cooperation in both nations. The US Marine Corps, while operating with her Australian Allies since WWII, has been deploying rotational forces through the top end in Darwin regularly since 2012 during the favorable training season for six months of the year. The RAN has added their second amphibious ship to their fleet and cooperated in joint exercises with the US and Japan Self-Defense Forces in an effort to not only showcase the RAN's amphibious force readiness but also their ability to project power. These are all solid foundational events to capitalize on in the achievement of shared objectives.

The reimagined deployment of the US Marines' and RAN's amphibious forces beyond MRF-D and joint naval exercises provides both countries an opportunity to achieve relative advantage in great power competition with China. Embarkation of US Marines on Australian shipping, and vice versa, regardless of the class of ship, supplies greater understanding of the region, greater responsiveness in the region, and enhanced security for both nations. Viewed through US joint doctrine, the joint forces are better served in all warfighting functions by pursuit of this enhanced relationship.³¹ Alignment with senior leaders' policy direction and guidance is no clearer than in General Berger's force design guidance. He states that "with the shift in our primary focus to great power competition and a renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific

region, the current force has shortfalls in capabilities needed to support emerging joint, naval, and Marine Corps operating concepts”³². The littoral region of Australia and her near abroad are the fertile lands to experiment with like-minded partners who reside in the region. Doing so before China’s influence is too severe to overcome is imperative if the desired future objective to maintain freedom, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific region is to be achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Australia and US naval force to naval force enhanced engagement is the most accessible way to work with an ally in deterring China and ensure the attainment of mutual objectives in the INDOPACOM region. There are quick wins that are available for a prioritization of regional amphibious force integration at the staff level. For example there are exchange billets such as USMC COL in charge of the G7/Amphib development branch at HQ 1 DIV (the 2 star deployable HQ in Australia that is responsible for raising and deploying amphibious forces) that currently oversees the development of amphibious training and doctrine. This would be a great position to tie in closely with Fleet Marine Forces Pacific/7th Fleet to synchronize training and deployment schedules. Closer alignment also provides diplomatic opportunities to the US and Australia beyond the bilateral alliance. The US can leverage Australia’s locality to gain access to countries outside its more formal, larger-scale exercise regime, providing opportunities for building of cultural awareness, relationship development, and a refined avenue of approach for multilateral operations in the region if needed. For Australia, this provides an opportunity to keep the US invested in the region, by integrating the US in local/regional relationship building and gaining reassurance from US presence and commitment to its regional partners.

Further exploration into topics (such as depth to dwell timelines, legal protections, and dynamic force employment considerations) are called for and provide greater opportunities for success. Standard practical roadblocks (such as personnel rotations, ship maintenance schedules, and pre-deployment training) all have some modicum of merit but ultimately fall short in serving as sufficient reasons for not achieving strategic objectives. The opportunity to hone the alliance and accomplish shared objectives through dynamic force employment opportunities is also an area where gains are possible across all joint functions and may be accomplished without direct armed conflict. General Berger states that “future force development requires a wider range of force options and capabilities.”³³ Increased regional presence through year-round contact in the training areas and on the Australian waterfront will serve to further the alliance between the two countries through cooperation and prepare both nations for any test that may come. Through creative employment of US and Australian forces in the south-west Pacific, both countries gain the opportunity to set the conditions for successful follow-on operations, be they in cooperation or in competition, with China.

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“The first operational deployment of the ARG was in 2006, when the ADF was again required to intervene in East Timor as the security situation deteriorated. Its three ships were able

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