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The latest US national strategy documents indicate a return to great power competition with Russia and China. After almost two decades of prosecuting terrorism, the drawdown of deployments in the Southwest Asia presents the Marine Corps an opportunity to reposition forces and enhance the strengthen the United States' military posture and force projection in Asia. Accordingly, the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) construct is a preliminary direction for near-term defense adaptation to "gray zone" operations.

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Executive Summary

Title: Time To Stand Up SPMAGTF PACOM

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Thesis: A rotational SPMAGTF deployed in the Indo-Pacific could serve as a tremendous asset that can assist USPACOM implement the US military strategy in the region, actualizes the latest Sea Service force employment doctrine, and is much needed in the AOR.

Discussion: The latest US national strategy documents indicate a return to great power competition with Russia and China. After almost two decades of prosecuting terrorism, the drawdown of deployments in the Southwest Asia presents the Marine Corps an opportunity to reposition forces and enhance the strengthen the United States' military posture and force projection in Asia. In light of the "four plus one" scenario, what actions, if any, can US Pacific Command take to make steady state operations in the Western Pacific more effective? As the US takes a whole-of-government approach to optimize and organize in response to threats that blur the lines between peace and war, the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) construct is a preliminary direction for near-term defense adaptation to "gray zone" operations.

Conclusion: US Pacific Command and US Marine Forces Command should consider the importance of a forward-stationed SPMAGTF in the Indo-Pacific Region. As a force multiplier, an SPMAGTF stationed in the Western Pacific could be the essential asymmetric maneuver force that either accomplishes the mission or provides national decision makers with decision space in the most critical region to the US.

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INTRODUCTION

In the evening of September 11, 2012, armed militants attacked the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, resulting in the death of four American citizens including J. Christopher Stevens, the first US ambassador slain on duty since 1979.¹ Among only a few quick reaction forces identified to respond to the Benghazi crisis, the two forward-deployed US Marine Corps (USMC) Fleet Anti-Terrorism Support Team (FAST) platoons stationed in Rota, Spain were the first to arrive in Libya, but there were obstacles that drastically delayed their arrival. First, despite being packed and ready to go, the FAST platoons waited about six hours for US Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft based in Ramstein Air Base, Germany to airlift them to Libya. Second, the C-130s transporting the FAST landed in Tripoli, requiring the Marines to rely on the US Embassy in Libya for vehicle support and move them another 630 miles by ground to Benghazi.² While sufficiently manned and highly trained, taking nearly eighteen hours to move underscores the FAST's lack of a self-contained capability for rapid inter-theater and intra-theater movement, preventing them from responding more expeditiously.³

After Benghazi, the Department of Defense (DoD) authorized the creation of a Marine crisis response force assigned to US Africa Command (AFRICOM).⁴ Applying the lessons learned in 2012, this crisis response force consists of a reinforced Marine rifle company, similar to a FAST, but with its own complement of MV-22 Osprey assault transport tilt-rotor aircraft and KC-130 tanker airplanes. As designed, this force can rapidly respond to short-notice, limited-duration contingency operations in a Geographic Combatant Command's (GCC) designated Area of Responsibility (AOR) independent of other units, services and agencies. This highly mobile, self-sustaining, self-deploying expeditionary force is called a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF), a model that has proven to be an essential tool in a Combatant Commander's (CCDR) toolbox. SPMAGTFs are not a new force construct. The smallest among the five types

that form the basis of Marine Corps organization spanning the range of military operations (ROMO), the SPMAGTF is unique in the sense that it is specifically task organized and tailored to a specific mission.⁵ While the use of an SPMAGTF in AFRICOM is fairly recent, the Marine Corps has successfully deployed SPMAGTFs as early as 1983 following the Marine Corps barracks bombings in Beirut.⁶ Nevertheless, the 2012 Benghazi attack triggered a shift in SPMAGTF employment from sea-based units conducting missions typically limited in duration such as natural disasters, to alert contingency MAGTFs with crisis response as an enduring mission.⁷ Since 2013, the Marine Corps has SPMAGTFs assigned to three GCCs, namely, AFRICOM, Central Command (CENTCOM), and Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

This paper discusses the advantages of standing up an SPMAGTF in the Pacific Command (PACOM) AOR. This paper is based on qualitative research utilizing military doctrinal and concept documents, research publications, periodicals, and correspondence with USMC subject matter experts to support the paper's thesis. It begins by asserting that the Indo-Pacific remains as the most vital region to the United States, and how an SPMAGTF can assist PACOM implement US military strategy in the region. Next, the paper illustrates how an SPMAGTF assigned to PACOM actualizes the latest Marine Corps and Sea Service force employment doctrine. In addition, the paper attempts to analyze why an SPMAGTF has not been established in PACOM when the construct is being used in other GCCs. In closing, the paper provides recommendations on the composition, required operational capabilities and specialized equipment, and location of the proposed unit.

INDO-PACIFIC THE MOST VITAL REGION TO THE US

With an AOR encompassing more than half of the global population, one-third of the world's gross domestic product, and seven of the ten largest militaries, PACOM's region is arguably the most vital to the United States.⁸ For over 70 years, the US military, particularly the Sea Services, have played a critical role in maintaining security and stability in the region. By helping maintain freedom of navigation, the US maritime forces have been instrumental to the unimpeded flow of global trade. The US presence in the region has brought about remarkable economic prosperity, as evinced by eight of the world's ten busiest container ports belonging to the Asia-Pacific region and 30 percent of the annual global maritime trade passing through the South China Sea, with the US accounting for \$1.2 trillion of the \$5.3 trillion worth of goods transiting through the South China Sea each year.⁹

In December 2017, the Trump administration released its first National Security Strategy (NSS). The document is a comprehensive translation of President Trump's "America First" approach into foreign and security policy. Although it may not use the same term popularized by the previous administration, there are clearly elements of the Rebalance strategy in the Trump NSS.¹⁰ First, elevating the Indo-Pacific ahead of Europe and the Middle East in the NSS section devoted to regional priorities unequivocally affirms the region's preeminent strategic importance.¹¹ Second, the document recognizes and welcomes "India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner" in the Asia-Pacific.¹² Lastly, the reinvigoration of the 2006 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) signifies the United States' attempt to revive the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," the quasi-alliance between the US, Japan, Australia and India.¹³ Founded upon the shared democratic values of four of the region's most capable maritime powers, the Quad seeks to maintain a rules-based order and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, primarily focusing on maritime security.¹⁴ Even

though the 2017 NSS avoided using the term “Rebalance,” the Indo-Pacific region is still the United States’ top priority. While US security aid to Southeast Asia represents a small fraction of US Foreign Military Financing, recent developments suggest that the US is boosting its support to assistance to Southeast Asian nations.¹⁵

Additionally, the NSS states that the US “will maintain a forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary.”¹⁶ The US has continued to underscore the importance of the Indo-Pacific through ‘hard power’ projection by forward stationing cutting-edge weapon systems in the region such as the F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning II 5th generation airframes, littoral combat ships, and beginning in January 2018, the deployment of nuclear-capable B-2 Spirit stealth bombers to Guam.¹⁷ While the Marine Corps usually typifies hard power, an SPMAGTF in the Indo-Pacific can also project ‘smart power’ in the Indo-Pacific by conducting military operations other than war (MOOTW). At present, the three SPMAGTFs assigned to other GCCs have served as key enablers of naval power projection by enhancing regional stability through security cooperation and crisis response. Previous USMC support to the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines, and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal demonstrates how a USMC crisis response force model such as an SPMAGTF can be effectively task-organized, mission-tailored, and rapidly deployable in the PACOM AOR.¹⁸

Aside from forward military presence, strengthening the United States’ “long-standing military relationships and encourage the development of a strong defense network with our allies and partners” is a US imperative in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ In the section that discusses the strategic implications of the region, the NSS pledges to revitalize defense partnerships, particularly with treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines.²⁰ Although the US has steadily conducted and enhanced military-to-military engagement with the Philippines, in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte

discontinued the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and the Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX), two major annual exercises between the two nations.²¹ The cancellation of these exercises may be interpreted as an attempt by the Philippines to defuse an already strained relationship with China.²² On the other hand, the reduction in US military engagement could also be construed as a response to “systemic neglect,” a viewpoint held by some Southeast Asian countries of the United States’ seeming absence in the region.²³ This belief is more pronounced after the United States’ withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and pertinacity in maintaining neutrality on South China Sea disputes.²⁴ Nevertheless, President Trump affirmed the Philippines’ strategic importance to the US, not merely for trade “but for military purposes” during his state visit in November 2017.²⁵ To this end, the introduction of an SPMAGTF can strengthen the US military’s position and underscore the United States’ commitment to allies and partners and the region. An SPMAGTF could take the place of the canceled exercises through military-to-military training with co-located host-government armed forces units in the case of the Philippines. SPMAGTF PACOM can promote security cooperation through training and engagement initially with the Philippines, and subsequently rotating through other regional partners.

Lastly, the NSS, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the National Military Strategy still resonate the “four plus one” framework, the force-shaping lens that DoD looks through to identify the current challenges and future capabilities that the US needs to focus on in this century. What is informative is that in view of the “four plus one” challenges - Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations, all except Iran are found in the Pacific. If the challenges posed by Russian strategic bombers patrolling beyond the First Island Chain after years of absence, China’s rapid militarization of Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reefs in the South China Sea, North

Korea's accelerated nuclear weapons program, and the rise of ISIS-affiliated terrorism in the Philippines are overlaid in a region defined by highly dense urban areas concentrated near the coast lines, one can recognize that the potential for conflict in the Indo-Pacific is increasing every day. It is the PACOM AOR's inherent littoral geography that justifies the expeditionary character of warfare in the region, which is why the preponderance of all USMC forces is based in the Pacific. Although a full-scale war with a near-peer competitor remains as the most dangerous threat to US security and interests, if the absence of a direct US military conflict in the Pacific in the past 40 years is any guide, then the most likely missions in this region will be short of a major operation, or "small wars."²⁶ Since small wars epitomize the nature of USMC operations, it is the Marine Corps that is best suited to meet the gray zone challenges in the Pacific. As the US takes a whole-of-government approach to optimize and organize in response to threats that blur the lines between peace and war, the SPMAGTF construct is a preliminary direction for near-term defense adaptation to gray zone operations.

SPMAGTF: INNOVATIVE AND ADAPTIVE

In September 2016, the Commandant of the Marine Corps signed the Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC), the broad, twenty-first century approach that the Marine Corps will shape future capabilities to fulfill its responsibilities for national defense against the challenges of a future operating environment (FOE). As a capstone document, the MOC reiterates the Commandant's guidance to develop the Marine Corps' full capabilities and capacity in support of Naval and Joint operations in 2025 and beyond. In order to maintain an advantage, the MOC specifies five critical task areas the Marine Corps must address to properly organize, train and equip for the FOE. One of these critical tasks is to "integrate the Naval force to fight at and from the sea."²⁷ As a component of America's maritime forces, the Marine Corps must be scalable and flexible to operate seamlessly with the US Navy. In terms of organization, the Corps must examine

existing and conceptual command and control structures to determine the method that achieves synergy and enables rapid responsiveness in the maritime domain. The MOC also proposes going beyond the traditional Amphibious Ready Group (ARG)/Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) formation and exploring alternative ways Marine combat power can be brought to bear to attain sea control and power projection.

The unpredictable and austere fiscal environment, coupled with an increasingly volatile FOE, has compelled the DoD to adopt force employment innovations. The summary of the NDS assesses that the United States is “emerging from a period of strategic atrophy,” and that the armed forces have been operating on Cold War-era force employment models and posture.²⁸ In order to provide an enduring regional presence, the Sea Services advocate for increased forward presence through forward basing of forces, and a highly networked but more globally dispersed expeditionary force.²⁹ The flexibility, mobility, and scalability of the SPMAGTF allow it to operate with a light footprint, whether afloat or ashore. While budget cuts and the paucity of amphibious ships led to an ARG/MEU absence in the Mediterranean, one SPMAGTF has effectively filled the gap, supporting AFRICOM’s operational commitments while also augmenting US European Command’s theater capabilities.³⁰ An SPMAGTF is indeed a force multiplier, a true asymmetric maneuver force that either accomplishes the mission or provides national decision makers with decision space for the arrival of more capable, follow-on forces.

On account of the scarcity of L-class ships in the Navy’s surface inventory, deploying an SPMAGTF in the largest AOR is an innovative solution to the current deficit in sea basing platforms.³¹ An independent, right-sized SPMAGTF would be an immense asset to PACOM by supporting multiple GCC requirements at the low end of the ROMO, i.e. low-intensity missions such as military engagement, security cooperation, and limited crisis response.³² This adjacent,

smaller MAGTF could free up the full-spectrum ARG/MEU to be re-tasked for more demanding operations. This additional capability is critical in the Indo-Pacific, especially if hostilities start in the Korean Peninsula. In such an event, most of PACOM's assets and resources would be focused on combat operations, while the SPMAGTF can serve as a quick reaction force and address contingencies. In a hostile environment, an SPMAGTF can reinforce Navy Coastal Riverine Force units by providing force protection of Maritime Prepositioning Force, Expeditionary class ships, and other platforms with a limited self-defense capability from the landward portion of the littorals to the objective area. While not directly involved in the close and deep fight, an SPMAGTF supporting rear area operations enhances the Joint Force's freedom of action and extends its operational reach. Alternatively, an SPMAGTF can also be used as a theater reserve during a major operation.

SPMAGTF CAPABILITIES AND PACOM REQUIREMENTS

Doctrinally, every SPMAGTF's size and capabilities are tailored to a specific mission; no two SPMAGTFs are identical.³³ That said, the current standing SPMAGTFs share common capabilities across the ROMO short of war. They are foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA), theater security cooperation (TSC), and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO).

FHA is defined as DoD activities conducted outside the US and its territories to "relieve or reduce the results of natural or manmade disasters that might present a serious threat to life or result in extensive damage to or loss of property."³⁴ In terms of population, the Indo-Pacific region remains the most prone and most affected by disasters. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters' Annual Disaster Statistical Review provides substantial insight on trends and effects of natural disasters. According to its 2016 report, seven of the top ten countries affected by natural disasters are located in Asia.³⁵ These seven countries accounted for 31 percent

of all reported disasters, while the three remaining countries located outside Asia accounted for only 11.7 percent of all disasters.³⁶ Most of the Asian countries in the top ten, namely, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Vietnam are lower-middle income economies.³⁷ While the PACOM Commander stated that FHA is not a primary focus of PACOM, it is a key element of the GCC's TSC Plan.³⁸ In FHA, not only are lives saved, but also alliances are strengthened.

Employing disaggregated methods in response to simultaneous operations or contingencies can spread even a large crisis response force as the 31st MEU, USMC's only permanently forward deployed MAGTF, too thin. The disproportionate number of shocks and stresses that occur in the Indo-Pacific – typhoons, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and droughts – create a demand for the relief capabilities inherent to a MAGTF-like element in-theater, but not necessarily an entire MEU. As demonstrated by the USMC's response to Haiyan, a category five super typhoon in the Philippines in 2013, even the deadliest natural disasters do not necessitate a full MEU response. During this relief effort, less than half of the 31st MEU's 2,200 Marines and Sailors was sufficient in assisting the coalition effort in executing FHA, delivering more than 79,000 pounds of rice and food high-energy biscuits, providing medical assistance, and assisting with potable water production and power generation to affected areas unreachable by ground transportation and conventional fixed-wing aircraft.³⁹ More importantly, case studies on four major DoD disaster relief efforts in the Asia-Pacific Region reveal some noteworthy insights: FHA is not limited to developing countries, as illustrated in Operation Tomodachi, intervention can result in a favorability rating from the host nation populace, and lessons learned from FHA should directly inform future exercises, training events, and military-to-military activities, which are the focus of TSC.⁴⁰ Thus, planning and preparing for the eventuality of FHA is essential as humanitarian relief

is a “core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct with proficiency equivalent to combat operations.”⁴¹

Although FHA may be one of the most prominent MOOTW conducted by the US armed forces, it is normally episodic in nature. If FHA opens the door to the host nation, it is TSC that keeps the door open. Commensurate with its expansive AOR, PACOM manages a robust Joint Exercise Program, executing the most number of annual exercises and engagements among all the GCCs. To illustrate, 3rd Marine Division, III Marine Expeditionary Force’s (MEF) ground component, is scheduled to participate in 70 major exercises and mission rehearsals in 2018 alone, and the size and sophistication of the exercises are only expected to increase.⁴² As a key enabler of PACOM’s TSC Plan, the Marine Corps must continue to build on alliances and partnerships in the region’s 36 countries that the US can draw upon when a major crisis arises. As the US military shifts its emphasis from almost seventeen years of prosecuting terrorism in the Middle East to great power competition with Russia and China, the combined ability to execute peacetime operations and deftness to defeat aggression in the gray zone will enable CCDRs to engage in theater shaping.⁴³

NEO refers to the evacuation of individuals from another country, typically due to an actual or potential security threat. Under the direction of the Department of State, the DoD evacuates US citizens, host nation citizens, or nationals of other foreign countries friendly to the US. On account of the rapid response requirement to effect an evacuation, NEOs have historically been Navy-Marine Corps missions. Of note, the most prominent and complex NEOs occurred in Asia. In April 1975, the US Navy’s Amphibious Task Force 76, composed of twelve warships and five naval auxiliary ships, and the USMC’s 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, consisting of a regimental landing team and seven aviation squadrons, evacuated over 7,000 US citizens and foreign nationals

from Saigon during Operation Frequent Wind.⁴⁴ In June 1991, Joint Task Force Fiery Vigil consisting of MAGTF 4-90's 3,000 Marines and 28 Navy ships evacuated some 17,000 US servicemembers and dependents by sea from Naval Base Subic to Cebu Island.⁴⁵ With over 70,000 US personnel based in Japan and South Korea, not including military dependents and US citizens not affiliated with the DoD, PACOM requires an additional MEU-like force to be able to conduct a NEO whether at the rear area of a campaign or at an intermediate staging base to egress noncombatants out of the region. While the 31st MEU is capable and certified to conduct NEO, disaggregating one of PACOM's major combat units during a campaign may prove to be counterproductive, if not irresponsible. Given 31st MEU's headquarters is in Okinawa, it may behoove PACOM to assign primary focus areas within the Western Pacific, with the south of Taiwan as the latitudinal boundary. Accordingly, 31st MEU would be primarily oriented to the defense of Japan and South Korea, a land-based SPMAGTF could assume a greater role in crisis response and theater shaping activities in the Southwestern Pacific. This geographic framework does not restrict the MEU from performing TSC in Southeast Asia or South Asia. On the contrary, the MEU benefits from the greater capacity generated by a forward-stationed SPMAGTF in the theater. Since the Guidance for Employment of the Force (GEF) already requires that PACOM be augmented by additional ARG/MEUs originating from the Continental US (CONUS) as they transit to CENTCOM, an SPMAGTF forward-deployed in the Indo-Pacific not only overcomes the tyranny of distance to send additional forces to the region, but also supports the Navy and Marine Corps by redirecting deployment-ready amphibious ships to train Marines for the high-end fight.⁴⁶

WHY HAVEN'T WE DONE THIS ALREADY?

The absence of a standing SPMAGTF PACOM may be attributable to several factors. First, the austere fiscal environment has led to allocation decisions that are budget-driven instead of

strategy-driven. The Budget Control Act of 2011, intended to reinstate budget caps of roughly \$1 trillion over a ten-year period, constrained the Marine Corps to reduce its end strength from wartime levels of 202,000 Marines in Fiscal Year 2012 to roughly 184,000 in Fiscal Year 2016.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding, General Amos, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, included a caveat to the capacity cuts, stating that the Marine Corps “will still be able to deter or defeat aggression in one region, however with significant strain on the force and increased risk to mission accomplishment.”⁴⁸ In view of 9/11 and violent Islamic extremism, which has been more prevalent in the past two decades, Southwest Asia has dominated the demand for Marine Corps combat forces.

Another casualty of the fiscally constrained environment is Marine Aviation. Although Marine Corps aviation deployment tempo operational requirements have remained high, fewer aircraft are available for tasking or home station readiness.⁴⁹ MV-22s have not been delivered in sufficient quantities to offset the retirement of CH-46s, while unexpected redesigns have delayed the testing and production of CH-53K heavy-lift transport helicopters.⁵⁰ The aircraft shortage and its impact on building up aviation readiness at home were highlighted when SPMAGTF AFRICOM’s air contingent was cut in half in 2017.⁵¹ Any further reduction in funding Marine aviation capability adversely affects overall USMC combat capability, especially envisioned SPMAGTFs that will heavily rely on vertical lift capacity.

As CCDR demands continue to outpace ARG/MEU availability, the Marine Corps has turned to flexible, responsive methods to meet multiple GCC requirements. An example of this is 22d MEU and Amphibious Squadron SIX executing disaggregated operations in the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and Africa during their 2016 deployment. Although demonstrating the ability to conduct simultaneous missions and across several theaters, separating

the ARG/MEU into independent elements among different GCCs eroded operational, training and maintenance readiness, as well as unity of command over time.⁵² Essentially, the ARG/MEU served as a platform for sourcing requirements in multiple GCCs, leaving each disaggregated unit with a diminished capability and no GCC retaining a full ARG/MEU. An ARG/MEU is best leveraged as a single entity, which is why a deployed, self-sustaining MAGTF must remain intact.

The DoD has been considering a plan to deploy an additional ARG/MEU to the PACOM AOR.⁵³ The drawdown of deployments in the Middle East following the substantial progress made by coalition forces against ISIS presents the Marine Corps an opportunity to reposition forces and strengthen the United States' military posture and force projection in Asia. Nevertheless, the additional force, as proposed, is ineffective, inefficient, and currently unfeasible. The demand for USMC forces around the globe stems from the GEF, a foundational DoD document that directs CCDRs to develop campaign plans and define steady-state force requirements to support the specific theater strategies. In support of national strategic objectives, the GEF requires PACOM to have one MEU deployed in its AOR at all times. This is generally referred to as the 1.0 presence.⁵⁴ Additionally, the GEF's intent is to shift GCC campaign planning from episodic engagement to comprehensive, integrated, and persistent engagement that is designed to bolster partnership capacity. At present, the 1.0 MEU requirement is being fulfilled by III MEF's 31st MEU. Since MEUs normally embark on amphibious ships when in a deployed status, I MEF's 11th, 13th, and 15th MEUs based out of Camp Pendleton maintain the 1.0 presence when they deploy or transit through the Western Pacific whenever 31st MEU's ships require ship maintenance. The plan to create an additional presence is to divide the Western Pacific into half, wherein the additional ARG/MEU will patrol the southern region at two 90-day increments while the 31st MEU covers East Asia.⁵⁵ This means that the Southern Pacific, the intended area of operations for the additional

force, will not have a MEU presence for half the year; it does not meet the GEF's intent. Likewise, while a significant resource shortfall in the Indo-Pacific is recognized, deploying a three-ship ARG/MEU to patrol the southern Pacific is an excessive commitment of force. Marine Rotational Force – Darwin (MRF-D), a rotational MAGTF forward stationed in Australia's Northern Territory, retains enablers to ensure that operational capabilities are in place to respond to crises,^[1]_{SEP} execute operational plans/concept plans, and perform TSC.⁵⁶ If the sole purpose of a southern Pacific MEU is theater engagement, then MRF-D embarked on warships can perform this mission. Lastly, the current shortage of amphibious warfare ships renders this plan unfeasible. Ideally, the Marines Corps' desired amphibious lift capacity is 50 ships. Given the budget reality, both Navy and Marine Corps leadership determined in 2009 that they could only fund up to 38 amphibious warfare ships to meet the warfighting requirement of transporting two Marine Expeditionary Brigade assault echelons in a national emergency.⁵⁷ Factoring in ten percent of ships is always down for maintenance, the projected number of amphibious ships available to support a major campaign is 34 ships. As it stands, the maritime services will not attain the 34-ship goal until Fiscal Year 2021, with an end goal of 38 by Fiscal Year 2033. In light of the Navy not being able to fulfill 293 out of 314, or 93 percent, of San Diego-based I MEF's requests for amphibious training, the lack of L-class ships in the inventory places more uncertainty on the sealift portion of this course of action.⁵⁸

SPMAGTF-PACOM RECOMMENDATIONS

The ability of the US military to supporting the attainment of stability within a region is determined by the characteristics of that region, the forces available, and the time required to deploy and respond to an incident. Therefore, the size and location of the SPMAGTF should be addressed. As with a standard MAGTF, the proposed unit will have a CE, Ground Combat Element (GCE), Logistics Combat Element (LCE) and the Aviation Combat Element (ACE). Ideally, the

Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, Operations Officer of the headquarters element should be rotating in on assignment from one of the proximate Defense Attaché Offices for retention of cultural knowledge, language expertise and civilian and military contacts in the region. In addition to the administrative, operational, and intelligence support, the CE must include key staff billets, namely, a Public Affairs Officer, Foreign Area Officer, Civil Affairs Officer, Medical Officer, Intelligence Officer, Communications Officer with cyber warfare and information warfare expertise, as well as advisors from the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group. The GCE will be composed of a company of Marine infantry with combat engineers, light armored vehicles, and other ground combat assets. The LCE should have an organic capability to self-sustain for fifteen days. The sourcing of SPMAGTF personnel should come from CONUS, not III MEF, to ensure that the USMC's forward-deployed force in readiness in the Pacific Theater remains robust. All together, SPMAGTF PACOM will be composed of approximately 500 Marines and Sailors.

To overcome the large bodies of water that separate the Indo-Pacific nations, the ACE will consist of six MV-22 Ospreys for medium lift assault support and two KC-130 Hercules transport/tanker support, ensuring self-deployability, and an unmanned aircraft systems detachment for small unit intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability.

Aside from crisis response limited-contingency operations and TSC capabilities, the unit's Mission Essential Task List will include interoperability with Joint and special operations forces. SPMAGTF will undergo intensive pre-deployment training, including Integrated Training Exercise and Certification Exercise being used by existing SPMAGTFs. Once in theater, this force would then "island hop" from one exercise to another using organic aviation assets. SPMAGTF PACOM will retain the required operational capabilities of a MEU with the exception of amphibious operations, thereby reducing the logistics footprint.

Establishing SPMAGTF PACOM should not be a cumbersome process, as the Marine Corps team is already budgeted for this mission, has sufficient Marines with the requisite training, the appropriate equipment, and incorporated future funding into already approved program objective memorandum. For all practical purposes, MRF-D is already performing as PACOM's SPMAGTF. Since MRF-D is currently programmed and budgeted, and is a MEU-size force, converting it into SPMAGTF PACOM will maintain the same operational tempo with fewer Marines required per iteration. Nevertheless, for SPMAGTF PACOM to be leveraged more effectively, it needs to be relocated.

The forward stationing of an SPMAGTF is one of the most critical decisions for the CCDR. Its location would depend mainly on a particular area that the CCDR plans to influence by conducting shaping activities, otherwise known as Phase Zero operations. Another consideration is to have a more distributed lay down, that is, having forces dispersed in various locations but still within the proximity of potential contingencies as well as maintaining a stable presence with partners and allies. For these reasons, the Philippines' geography and existing basing agreements with the US offer distinct military advantages. In terms of US collective defense arrangements in the region, the Philippines is the geographic center.⁵⁹ Similar to a hub and spoke model, forward basing in the middle of Southeast Asia would significantly reduce the amount of distance and time for an SPMAGTF to reach every regional partner in a TSC execution cycle. In addition, an SPMAGTF is best stationed in the Philippines in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief requirements. A sampling of 26 FHA operations involving significant USMC participation from 1970 to 2007 reveals that fourteen of these activities were conducted in the Indo-Pacific, with half of it in the Philippines.⁶⁰

If the presence of Maritime Prepositioning Ships and auxiliary ships were taken into account, the Philippines would still be the ideal location. Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Two is based out of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Three is located in the Guam-Saipan area of the Western Pacific Ocean, and PACOM's forward-deployed expeditionary fast transport ship to PACOM is homeported in Singapore. Acting as air connectors, an SPMAGTF's V-22s can enable the aforementioned vessels to posture with the presence/lift needed to conduct Phase Zero operations in the PACOM AOR. Large scale exercises utilizing a realistic mix of Maritime Prepositioning vessels, amphibious warships, auxiliary platforms and the MAGTF enhance Navy and the Marine Corps interoperability, as well as with partner nations.

With the introduction of alternative shipping to the fleet, particularly, the Expeditionary Sea Base class ships, SPMAGTF PACOM can be later reconfigured and scaled for sea-based operations, giving it more operational reach and freedom of action. The Expeditionary Sea Base class ships are designed to primarily support mine countermeasures operations, special operations forces, and move land-based SPMAGTF that can supplement an ARG/MEU operating in the area. In the future, when the Navy assigns a forward-deployed Expeditionary Sea Base ship in the Western Pacific, the option exists for an SPMAGTF to embark and transition to an increased littoral role, as warranted by PACOM and Marine Forces Pacific (MARFORPAC). On board expeditionary ships, a sea-based SPMAGTF presents additional advantages such as increased mobility and operational reach, while at the same time minimizing a long-term military footprint within a partner nation's territory. Whether embarked on amphibious ships or deployed using other means, an SPMAGTF recapitalizes the United States' maritime presence in the region that may have been perceived as diminished over the past few years.

With regards to the actual stationing of troops, the US and the Philippines have a robust bilateral defense relationship which has been strengthened by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of 2015, granting the US military access to five Philippine military bases on a rotational basis. Despite President Duterte's contentious statements on Philippines-US relations, construction of the first EDCA facility in Basa Air Base in Northern Luzon has begun, with the groundbreaking ceremony attended by the Philippine Defense Secretary and the US Ambassador to the Philippines.⁶¹ Forward stationing of forces in the Philippines addresses the threats to air and sea lines of communications and bases in Guam, Japan, and South Korea posed by China's massive construction efforts in the South China Sea. PACOM is exploring the implementation of Multi-Domain Battle, a twenty-first century concept that calls for the US military, allies and partners to outmaneuver and defeat adversaries across the five domains (land, maritime, air, space, and the information environment) with the intended goal of joint interdependency.⁶² As an option for future SPMAGTF rotations, the Ground Combat Elements could be equipped with High Mobility Artillery Rocket System and M777 155mm mobile howitzers. If stationed in the Western Philippines, an SPMAGTF can help preserve collective defense internally by deterring violent extremist organizations from further attacks against local population and security forces, and externally by complicating Chinese defense planning in the South China Sea.⁶³

The Philippines would also be a convenient rotational base for an SPMAGTF to perform search and rescue in case of any incident occurring in the South China Sea. With US military vessels and aircraft transiting between Guam and the rest of Asia on a more frequent basis, an SPMAGTF in Philippines would be well positioned to conduct assault support. In light of the recent USMC V-22 mishap off the east coast of Australia and the Navy C-2 Greyhound transport

aircraft that crashed about 500 nautical miles southeast of Okinawa, an SPMAGTF stationed in the Philippines can launch airborne search and rescue assets to locate downed aircraft.

Finally, the DoD recently announced Operation Pacific Eagle, a comprehensive counterterrorism campaign supporting the Philippine government and security forces in their efforts to isolate, degrade, and defeat ISIS affiliates and other terrorist organizations in the country.⁶⁴ With an SPMAGTF located nearby would be able to support USMC and other DoD personnel serving in an advisory role to host nation security forces. On short notice, an SPMAGTF can provide assault support to both US and Philippine forces, such as tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel or aeromedical evacuation of wounded personnel from remote areas, air logistical support, and aerial delivery to name a few.

CONCLUSION

In the post-9/11 era, the competition for access and military-to-military partnership in the Indo-Pacific has increased. As America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness, the Marine Corps will continually be relied upon as the ready, forward-deployed, and forward-engaged global force. The Marine Corps must focus on continually evolving and sustaining the SPMAGTF capability that can be harnessed to conduct TSC and limited contingency operations on relatively short notice in areas of vital American strategic interest such as the Indo-Pacific. What the Marine Corps must develop is modernized, tailored, expeditionary combat power, manned, trained, and equipped in a range of missions for integrated, Joint operations. Equally important, the USMC's deployed combat forces must be equipped for self-sustainability and self-deployability with which to harness combat power in an expedient manner. In all future operations, the Marine Corps' MAGTF, its combat forces-in-being, must be linked to PACOM's larger Joint Force within a rotational framework to yield both cost savings and a more predictable deployment-to-dwell schedule.

As a tangible demonstration of US commitment to Indo-Pacific region's security and stability, SPMAGTF PACOM will prove to be an agile, responsive and relevant force in the CCDR's toolkit. With its inherent capabilities, an SPMAGTF can be employed across a wide range of contingency events and security cooperation activities in support of the CCDR's requirements. In the Indo-Pacific setting, an SPMAGTF will be a fleet force multiplier that PACOM and MARFORPAC must establish to augment the current 1.0 MEU presence in the Western Pacific, as well as provide mutual support to Joint operations.

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