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*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
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2076 South Street  
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Competition Phase and Beyond**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR: Major Lynelle S. Lund, United States Marine Corps**

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Assessing the Effectiveness of the CMC’s Force Redesign as a Deterrent in the Competition Phase and Beyond

**Author:** Major Lynelle Lund, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The Commandant’s redesigned Marine Corps could be an effective deterrent to China’s aggressive actions in the “competition phase” in the South China Sea provided the national command authority is willing to more aggressively utilize the redesigned force in that area. However, the force redesign will likely sacrifice III Marine Expeditionary Force’s (III MEF) ability to project power ashore in support of forcible entry operations, most saliently in the defense of Taiwan, and thus will serve neither as a deterrent to China pursuing a forcible reunification with Taiwan, or, as an effective stand-in force in that circumstance.

**Discussion:** The Commandant believes that the current Marine Corps force design is unsuited to defeat the China threat, because the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) construct – which works well when maritime and air superiority is assured – is extremely vulnerable in contested maritime battlespaces such as the South China Sea, where China has a multi-layered missile defense including long-distance precision fires delivered from land, air and sea-based platforms. The solution, expressed in the 2019 Commandant’s Planning Guidance, is a smaller, more lethal Marine force that fights in a highly mobile fashion, both on the sea, and from key pieces of terrain to facilitate sea denial and control operations. The Commandant intends this redesigned force to serve as both a deterrent to further non-kinetic Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, and as a stand-in force, to fight effectively at the outset of hostilities until the joint force can close the fight. An imagined redesign of the 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (31<sup>st</sup> MEU) based on the Commandant’s Planning Guidance reveals that the new force may well be an effective deterrent against China’s current non-kinetic “grayzone” operations seeking to extend China’s influence and reach into the South China Sea; however, it will not be an effective deterrent or stand-in force in the most likely kinetic fight to arise in the east – China’s forcible re-unification with Taiwan.

**Conclusion:** The A2/AD threat in the South China Sea has rendered the MAGTF as it currently exists ineffective in that area of operations. A large force concentrated on but a few large ships cannot withstand or persist against the type of missile threat China presents in the South China Sea. The Commandant’s force redesign does provide something of a solution to this conundrum, by providing the U.S. with a dispersed, agile, lethal force that could serve as deterrent to Chinese aggression in the competition phase, provided the national command authority is willing to use the force in a more aggressive way in preventing China’s violations of sovereignty and international law. However, the cost of redesigning the force away from an amphibious assault focus will likely also render it ineffective as a deterrent to China’s forcible re-unification with Taiwan, or as a stand-force in a kinetic fight to retake or defend Taiwan.

## DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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*War is a mist through which the keenest eye cannot always discern the right path.*

*-Sir William Napier, History of War on the Peninsula, 1840*

## **Vignette**

*In early 202X, following the re-election of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) to power in Taiwan, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rhetoric towards Taiwan increased dramatically; messaging from party media outlets on the Chinese mainland proclaimed that reunification with Taiwan under one system of government, and the solidification of "One China" must occur before the end of the year. Between February and late summer of 202X, the CCP flooded the Taiwan internet with pro-reunification messaging and suppressed dissenting media both on the mainland, and abroad. The CCP also froze Taiwanese financial and economic activity in mainland China, in seeming violation of multiple trade agreements in place between the island city and the mainland. These actions spurred widespread protests among civilians in Taiwan, particularly those with DPP ties. In September of 202X, the Taiwanese President denounced the CCP's messaging and economic interference and called upon the international community to condemn China.*

*Twenty-four hours ago, on 10 October 202X, the CCP conducted cyber-attacks against Taiwan, shutting down Taiwanese financial systems, power grids, and electronic communications. The cyber-attacks were extensive, effective, and completely severed all command and control (C2) capabilities within the Taiwanese military, including its missile defense systems. Without C2, Taiwanese aircraft have been unable to sortie in defense of the island, and ground forces have not been able to establish consolidated defensive positions on several key beachheads. The Taiwanese military is in disarray.*

*Several hours after the initiation of the cyber-attacks, elements of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which had been conducting drills south of Taiwan, moved to form a blockade around Taiwan, shutting off import/export activity. Since then, there has been no communication from the Taiwanese President, and some fear she has been assassinated. Several PLAN ships fired missile salvos over and around the island, but destroyed nothing, in an apparent show-of-force. PLAN amphibious ships have moved into a holding position behind the blockade force. An amphibious assault appears imminent.*

*In the Taiwanese President's absence, the Taiwanese Premier called upon the U.S. government to honor the Taiwanese Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979 and has requested U.S. military assistance.<sup>1</sup> After considering a variety of options, the U.S. President has elected to use military force to repel the attack on Taiwan; he has directed the U.S. Pacific Command commander (USPACOM) to deploy Navy and Marine forces sufficient to repel the PLA elements currently encircling Taiwan, and establish defensive perimeters both at sea and ashore in the event of a PLA counterattack.*

## **Introduction**

On July 16, 2019, the 38<sup>th</sup> Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, issued the Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), a document detailing his vision for the future design of the Marine Corps. General Berger's vision is based on the threats identified in various U.S. national strategy documents, and his belief that the Marine Corps is not organized, trained, equipped or postured to meet and defeat those threats.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the U.S. national strategy documents identify "re-emergent long-term strategic competition" with peer-level adversaries – China in particular – as the primary threat to U.S. sovereignty, and global dominance.<sup>3</sup>

A kinetic competition or war with China will likely be fought largely in the maritime domain, and require the U.S. to overcome China's anti-access/area denial strategy and associated capabilities in the South and East China Seas.<sup>4</sup> This maritime-centric fight requires the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Army to operate in contested maritime spaces, against an enemy with advanced sensors, and long-range precision fires that can attrite U.S. forces from a distance. Persisting and winning inside such a threat environment requires capabilities that will allow the U.S. Navy to operate inside the enemy's weapons engagement zone, while denying Chinese forces the ability to operate freely in the same area. It is this capability which General Berger believes the Marine Corps is not able to execute as currently designed and equipped.

The Commandant's belief that the current Marine Corps force design is unsuited to defeat the China threat is based in the reality that the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) construct – which works well when maritime and air superiority is assured – is extremely vulnerable in contested battlespaces, particularly to large volumes of long-distance precision fires delivered from land, air and sea-based platforms. General Berger's solution, as expressed in his CPG, is a partial departure from the MAGTF construct which has served as the framework for Marine Corps operations since 1963.<sup>5</sup> Per the CPG, the main effort facing the China threat, III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF), will shift from traditional power projection to a more flexible force design that supports the U.S. Navy in "sea control and denial operations."<sup>6</sup> The Commandant postulates that this redesigned Navy-Marine Corps team ". . . will enable the joint force to partner, persist and operate forward despite adversary employment of long-range precision fires."

A detailed task-organization of General Berger's force redesign has not yet been released, but based on the shape of the China threat, and the content of the CPG, it is not hard to imagine

with that new force will look like. It will be free of heavy assets such as tanks and towed artillery. The ground combat element will be primarily composed of small teams of infantry mobilized and resupplied by small surface connector ships. The new force will be heavily reliant on sea and land-based rockets, and unmanned weapons systems, both air and sea-borne. The force will not be the Marine Corps of old, and indeed, its new shape and capabilities will assist the U.S. Navy in operating within a heavily contested maritime environment. There are pros and cons to the CMC's vision; most importantly, the Marine Corps will sacrifice its ability to project power ashore in the III MEF area of operations if required to do so in defense of Taiwan. However, the redesigned III MEF will likely be able to assist the force in deterring Chinese aggression and military expansion in the South China Sea in the non-kinetic competition phase, *if* utilized properly by the national command authorities. These pros and cons are important to consider and address in any force redesign scheme, particularly so given the need to deter CCP activity in the South China Sea, and, the fact that the CCP's by-force reunification with Taiwan, as imagined in the foregoing vignette, is the circumstance most likely to ignite a kinetic conflict between China and the U.S.

This paper will argue that the force redesign proposed in the CPG may permit the redesigned force to enable sea denial and control operations, and potentially support the US Navy's ability to deter CCP aggression and military expansion in the South China Sea in the competition phase, but in doing so, will weaken III MEF to the point where it is not capable of defeating the most significant kinetic threat in that area: a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Part I will discuss the content of the Commandant's recently released planning guidance and the impetus behind the need for change addressed in that document. Part II will apply the Commandant's vision to the 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), and discuss what that MEU

might look like following the redesign. Part III will discuss whether the redesigned MEU will be an effective deterrent to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea in the “competition” or non-kinetic phase of operation. Finally, Part IV will discuss whether the redesigned 31<sup>st</sup> MEU will be effective in an amphibious assault to retake or defend Taiwan from a forcible re-unification with China.

## **Part I. CMC’s Force Redesign Mandate – Why Change?**

### *China – The New Priority Threat*

The Commandant’s force redesign mandate to the Marine Corps is driven by the guidance of the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the subsequent 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), and his view of the specific threats presented by the Chinese military. The NSS and NDS identify China as the nation’s primary threat concern, characterizing the US/China conflict in the Indo-Pacific region as one of “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of the world...”<sup>7</sup> China’s military threat is characterized by an increasingly modernized military in terms of equipment, and an anti-access strategy backed by a strong navy, electronic and cyber warfare capability, and a large volume of long-range precision fires assets. The identification of China as the priority threat is a shift in national policy which had been focused on largely on the Middle East. With this new threat focus, the particulars of the military threat have also shifted; China’s military, a peer-level adversary, requires a much different response than the asymmetric/counter-insurgency environment in which the US has spent the last twenty years fighting.

The NSS and NDS both identify China, rather than terrorism, as the most potent threat facing the nation. The NSS, a document prepared by the White House, details how “China has mounted a rapid military modernization campaign designed to limit U.S. access to the

region...provid[ing] China a freer hand there.” Further, the NSS directs the military to “. . . maintain...a forward presence capable of deterring and, if necessary defeating...” the Chinese adversary.<sup>8</sup> The NSS also reaffirms the U.S. commitment to meet Taiwan’s “legitimate defense needs and deter coercion.”<sup>9</sup> The NDS, prepared by the Secretary of Defense pursuant to federal law and nested within the view of the President’s NSS, translates the aims of the NSS into a wholistic strategic direction for the U.S. military.<sup>10</sup> Withing that framework, the NDS says that “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to re-order the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage.<sup>11</sup> The NDS strategic military response to this threat is “. . . a Joint Force that possesses decisive advantages for any likely conflict, while remaining proficient across the entire spectrum of conflict.” To achieve this, the NDS prioritizes those things that provide the joint force “. . . lethality in contested environments,” including dispersed basing, autonomous systems, and noncommercial and distributed logistics support.<sup>12</sup> Together, these documents dictate the adversary focus for force development, employment and design for not only the Marine Corps, but for the entire U.S. military.

### *China’s A2/AD Strategy and Capabilities*

While the above national strategy documents identify and speak of the China military threat in general terms, General Berger’s desired force re-design is likely based in a more particularized view of the Chinese military threat – its anti-access strategy<sup>13</sup> and supporting capabilities. What are those exactly? And how are they driving the shape of the Commandant’s force re-design?

In the early 1990s, China shifted its military strategy away from homeland defense and focused on territorial disputes on its borders, particularly in the South China Sea, and deterring

(and responding to) any independence action from Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> The new strategy also focused on the need to win wars fought “under high-technology conditions.”<sup>15</sup> Operationally, this translates into China’s reliance on mobile forces, using naval, air and conventional missile forces, and the development of “advanced weapons. . . for subduing the enemy.”<sup>16</sup> Electronic and cyberwarfare also play a predominant part of China’s overall scheme.<sup>17</sup> China will use each of these elements in concert with each other to prevent access to an operational area (e.g. the South China Sea), by an adversary (the U.S. in defense of Taiwan, perhaps) seeking to project power into the area.<sup>18</sup>

Specific military capabilities enabling China’s anti-access strategic approach include land-based ballistic and cruise missiles able to range Okinawa and Guam, and anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles delivered by air, sea and land-based platforms, all of which are able to overcome sea-based missile defense systems.<sup>19</sup> The longest-range anti-ship cruise missile can be launched from the air and can cover between 650 and 800 km of distance.<sup>20</sup> For the close fight, China possesses fighter aircraft and missile and air defense platforms capable of mitigating U.S. air and missile assets.<sup>21</sup> China may also possess anti-satellite weapons able to disrupt U.S. command and control assets.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Chinese A2/AD Capabilities More Than a Match for the Current MAGTF*

China’s strategic focus on preventing power-projection into South China Sea, and associated military capabilities are the driving force behind the Commandant’s force redesign. The Chinese capabilities, when matched against traditional U.S. force projection efforts, would act to overcome the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps capabilities to penetrate the operational area. This is apparent when the capabilities of the MAGTF, specifically the 31<sup>st</sup> MEU<sup>23</sup>, are weighed against the Chinese capabilities resident in the South China Sea.

The MEU operates with a Navy amphibious squadron (PHIBRON), and together these two entities compose an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). Both the PHIBRON and the MEU each bring approximately 2,200 personnel along in support of their forward deployed mission.<sup>24</sup> The PHIBRON consists generally of an Amphibious Assault ship (LHA or LHD), an Amphibious Transport Dock ship (LPD), and a Dock Landing ship (LSD).<sup>25</sup> These three ships support power projection ashore, by providing launching platforms for helicopters, and vertical lift air platforms such as the MV-22 and F-35, and launching platforms for sea-shore connectors.<sup>26</sup> The MEU's Marine complement includes a Battalion Landing Team (infantrymen), an Aircraft Squadron (a mix of fixed and rotary wing: CH-53s, MV-22s, F-35s, etc.), and a combat logistics battalion. The Marine Corps' High Mobility Aerial Rocket System (HIMARS) can be launched from the land or the sea-based platforms, but its maximum range is only about 45 miles.<sup>27</sup> Of note, in terms of missile defense systems, the PHIBRON ships do not offer AEGIS missile defense capability.

In the event of a contingency occurring with China in the South China Sea area, such as the Taiwan scenario above, it is likely the 31<sup>st</sup> MEU aboard its PHIBRON ships, would be afloat in the area and best suited to provide the 'stand-in force' desired by the Commandant. However, without a significant missile defense capability, these ships would be easily scuttled by China's long-range precision fires before ever entering the operational area, thus failing to provide a persistent, survivable 'stand-in force.' Even if the ARG was accompanied by a Carrier Strike Group, or other complement of ships with missile defense capability, these assets alone will not be able to defend against the sheer volume of salvos which can be delivered by Chinese missile defense systems; they would run out of interceptors fairly quickly.<sup>28</sup> Even if the ARG was able to deliver its complement of Marines ashore at any one of the islands in the first island chain of

the South China Sea, any foothold would also be subject to the destruction at the hands of an overwhelming salvo of missile attacks coming from a variety of platforms.

The Chinese developments in the area of long-range precision fires, and their volume of short, mid-range, and long-range projectiles coupled with extensive command and control capabilities have created a defensive system largely impenetrable by the traditional Marine Corps MEU/PHIBRON construct. The Navy/Marine Corps team does not have the defensive capabilities to defeat Chinese missile salvos, and they are not structured to operate in a dispersed, deceptive manner in order to deny the Chinese ease of target acquisition, and naval operability in the South China Sea.

With the reality of the China problem squarely in view, it is easy then, to understand General Berger when he said “. . . the focal point of the future integrated naval force will shift from traditional power projection to meet the new challenges associated with maintaining persistent naval forward presence to enable sea control and denial operations. . . Marines will focus on exploiting positional advantage and defending key maritime terrain that enables persistent sea control and denial operations forward.”<sup>29</sup>

## **Part II. Imagined Force Redesign Result in III MEF – What Will the 31<sup>st</sup> MEU look like?**

If the current MEU structure is not sufficient to serve as a stand-in force facing the China threat, what will enable the Marine Corps to fulfill General Berger’s vision of a lethal force, “able to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations,” like the South China Sea? As mentioned, the Commandant has not yet released the details of his force redesign. But, when matching the current 31<sup>st</sup> MEU/PHIBRON 11 force up against the not-inconsiderable fires threat posed by the Chinese in the South China Sea, and taking into consideration the Commandant’s desire to support Navy sea denial and control operations, some

aspects of this force structure are easy to forecast: less (and more autonomous) infantry forces, less armored vehicles, missile-focused rather than towed artillery, and logistics heavy. The reason for this arrangement is clear: a smaller, more mobile force is less visible to the enemy, and harder to target, although more difficult to logistically support. General Berger validated this as the core of his force redesign effort in a recent speech: “We must distribute the force for two reasons: one is because, in a peer-to-peer fight, what you do not want to do is drive down into the heart of their collection of weapon systems in a narrow funnel; you want to distribute your force so that you pose an adversary a dilemma from multiple axes in multiple domains. The byproduct of dispersing, of distributing, is you also become more survivable, more difficult to detect.”<sup>30</sup>

With the nature of the threat in mind, and considering General Berger’s intent, the likely shape of the MEU’s redesigned Ground Combat Element (GCE) is not hard to imagine: it will look less like a traditional infantry battalion landing team, and be focused on running mobile, low-signature, squad-sized expeditionary advanced bases (EABs) armed with land-based anti-ship and anti-air missile fires systems. Other potential GCE mission sets in support of sea control/denial will likely include reconnaissance, the provision of security for other EABs providing maintenance, and fueling points for both aircraft and small sea-going vessels, and a deception/information operation capability to obfuscate EAB locations and purposes. This redesigned GCE would not require the heavy items with which a BLT is so often reinforced. The towed artillery and heavy tanks that support an amphibious assault are not necessary to support small mobile teams of Marines launching missiles at ships and aircraft from varying points on key maritime terrain; indeed, such heavy equipment would be hard to operate and move in the islands of the South China Sea. Also unnecessary for the new mission set are large numbers of

heavy transport vehicles such as the MTVR. This redesigned GCE will need in place of tanks, artillery, and heavy transport vehicles, a large amount of small surface connectors, for low-signature insert, withdrawal, and maneuver between key pieces of maritime terrain. Surface connectors will also be necessary for the logistics combat element (LCE) to provide the GCE with sustainment over the course of its various mission sets. The GCE will also need multiple HIMARS (or other) missile systems, and equipment that can support its deception/information operations mission. This new GCE model, built to conduct anti-ship warfare from ultra-mobile EABs, and able to shoot and move to different locations within minutes, does much to mitigate China's air and sea-based missile capabilities, while denying the Chinese Navy freedom of movement in the South China Sea (provided these EABs can be sustained). Conversely, the traditional GCE built around a BLT trained to perform amphibious assaults and raids does not contribute to the sea denial mission, and moving the BLT en masse in the type of operation envisioned in the vignette does nothing but create an enticing target for China's missiles.

With the redesigned GCE shifting focus from force projection to mobile EABs in support of sea denial, the other two components of the MEU, the LCE and ACE must also re-organize to support the GCE. The current LCE generally consists of a combat logistics battalion, structured to support the mission essential tasks of the MEU. The existing MEU essential tasks apart from amphibious raids/assaults, include non-combatant evacuations, tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, humanitarian aid/disaster relief efforts, reconnaissance, information operations and vessel search and seizure operations.<sup>31</sup> None of these mission sets currently requires operating in a distributed fashion over long periods of time. Similarly, the ACE is manned and equipped to contribute lift in support of these missions, and is generally a composite squadron reinforced-sized mix of rotary and fixed wings assets such as MV-22s, CH-53s, AH-1Z, UH-1Ys,

sometimes a complement of F-35s, and two KC-130s tethered in support.<sup>32</sup> To support the new mission set of the GCE, and contribute to distributed EAB operations of the type necessary to support sea denial and control, both the LCE and the ACE will undergo significant changes. The scope of these changes may preclude support for much of the existing mission set, particularly amphibious assaults and raids.

First, the LCE must restructure in a way that supports distributed 24/7 EABO operations. That will require more surface connectors than the approximately seven existing in the standard MEU configuration, in order to deliver sustainment to widely dispersed, and continually changing EAB locations. The challenge of delivering fuel, water, food and munitions is magnified when the need for a low-signature operations is considered. Moving missiles, water and fuel requires heavy equipment. Heavy equipment creates a larger signature and increase targetability. Unmanned logistical support over the water will undoubtedly feature prominently in the new LCE model; necessary items include unmanned fueling barges or ships that can link up with personnel in shallow waters to transfer bulk fuel to surface connectors, who can then take those ashore to link up with EAB personnel. In addition, small unmanned surface connectors can move lighter items like chow and small weapons ammunition ashore, without presenting a worthy target to the adversary.

The ACE must also restructure to support distributed operations. This will likely include F-35s, and a large number of small UAV airframes to support low-signature intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts. It will likely include far less, if any, CH-53s and MV-22s, as overt use of such aircraft, while useful for maneuver and logistics, will increase the signature of a given EAB, thus increasing its targetability. The complement of light attack rotary-wing aircraft would be still be useful to address small maritime time threats to the MEU in

highly trafficked waters, such as the South China Sea. Maintenance for the UAVs and aircraft cannot be positioned at static airbases in a contested environment and in the presence of the Chinese missile threat. Rather, the ACE's maintainers will need to be manned and equipped to be able to repair airframes aboard ship, and the Navy must be able to provide the space on ship for those functions. The tethered KC-130s provide a refueling capability, but these airframes are not low signature, and cannot be based inside the first and second island chains, again due to the adversary's weapons capability. They could operate from Guam or further back from China's Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ), however their tanker mission range (1000nm) would limit their utility to the MEU operating largely from the first island chain in the South China Sea, roughly 1,500nm away.<sup>33</sup>

Imagining the MEU redesign in light of the CPG and General Berger's commentary on the subject reveals a new force of highly mobile squad-size elements, transported and sustained by surface connectors, designed to shoot missiles at ships rather than 5.56mm rounds and artillery at ground forces, and able to evade detection by adversary weapons systems by leveraging dispersion, mobility, and embedded deception capabilities. The GCE will no longer have the assets and capabilities of the current BLT, particularly tanks, towed artillery and heavy transport vehicles such as the MTRV. The Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) may have a limited role in EABO. Logistics will shift to delivery of sustainment using manned and unmanned surface connectors to ferry fuel and supplies from ship-to-shore, avoiding high-signature air transport mechanisms. The larger Navy and Marine Corps logistics systems outside the MEU will likely undergo more significant changes as well, particularly to the strategic supply chain and maritime prepositioning force, to support the redesigned MEU, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. The new ACE structure will include far more UAVs, less rotary-wing assets, and

airframe maintenance functions will need to shift from shore-based facilities to aboard-ship repairs. This redesign will indeed render the MEU capable of persisting inside China's weapons engagement zone, and able to contribute to sea denial, but logically, the redesign will preclude other, still relevant mission sets.

### **Part III. Redesigned MEU an Effective Deterrent in the Competition Phase?**

According to the NSS, "a geopolitical *competition* between free and repressive visions of the world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>34</sup> China is driving that competition, expanding their military presence throughout the region, challenging international law and engaging in predatory economic practices.<sup>35</sup> This aggressive, non-kinetic competition, complementary to their A2/AD strategy and short of open war, is characterized by the gradual, but inexorable challenging of established maritime claims under international law with the use of military, non-military, and paramilitary ships and vessels.<sup>36</sup> The purpose of that activity is the rewrite of established international maritime norms to further China's agenda of exclusive regional control.<sup>37</sup> Recent examples of China's behavior include the illegal seizure of reefs within the territorial waters of other nations bordering the South China Sea for military development, the harassment of vessels operating in designated international waters within the South China Sea, and oil drilling activity within the Exclusive Economic Zones of neighboring Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> The Commandant intends his force redesign to be effective not only in a kinetic fight with China, but also in this non-kinetic competition phase, assisting the U.S. Navy in deterring China's aggressive, but non-violent tactics.<sup>39</sup> Will the redesigned force be successful as a deterrent to China in that operational context? It *could* be, if the nation is willing to use it in a way that is effective in the type of non-kinetic competition ongoing in the South China Sea.

Before turning to the question of whether the redesigned force will be an effective deterrent, a definition of deterrence is necessary. Deterrence is, in its most basic form, the discouraging of a state from taking unwanted action, such as attacking the U.S. homeland, or, its partners and allies abroad, by presenting a threat to an aggressor's interests or success of action.<sup>40</sup> Deterrence on behalf of other states, far from home, and close to the territory of an adversary – sometimes called “extended deterrence” – is a logistically and politically difficult thing to accomplish.<sup>41</sup> This “extended deterrence” is the type the U.S. seeks to effect in the South China Sea.<sup>42</sup> In the competition phase, the U.S. aim is to deter China from continued territorial aggression towards other nations bordering the South China Sea (including Taiwan) and ships transiting the South China Sea's international waters. In doing so, the U.S. seeks to protect vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), preserve freedom of navigation in waters where ships carry trillions of dollars in global and U.S. trade, and ensure the continuation of established international law.<sup>43</sup> Whether deterrence is extended or conducted close to home, the force doing the deterring must be credible. The notion of credibility in the context of deterrence is linked to the ability of a force to raise the cost to the adversary of taking a specific action to an undesirable level, and, the will to use that force to raise the adversary's costs.<sup>44</sup> Further, the aggressor, in this case China, must perceive and believe in the U.S.'s determination to use forcible means if need be.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, the responsibility for deterrence does not fall on the U.S. military alone; the other elements of U.S. national power have just as much, if not more, of a role to play in deterring China's aggression. However, the focus here is what the U.S. military, specifically the Marine Corps, brings to that challenge in its redesigned form, as imagined above. In narrowing the focus, we understand then that the military challenge is to assist in dissuading China from its

current non-kinetic aggression strategy by fielding a capable, credible presence in the South China Sea, that the U.S. is willing to successfully employ, in both kinetic and non-kinetic engagements, in furtherance of its interests in that area. The Marine Corps' piece of that challenge is to enhance the U.S. Navy's capabilities, and thus its credibility as a deterrent force forward in the South China Sea.

Turning back to the questions posed at the outset of this section, does the force redesign, as imagined above, enhance the Navy's capabilities in a way that makes it a more credible deterrent in the competition phase? General Berger's force redesign, aimed at making the U.S. Navy as a whole more lethal and survivable in the kinetic A2/AD context, *could* work in the competition phase to deter China from acting as they have been, with aggression below the threshold of open conflict. It is not the revamped capability that is the limiting factor in this regard, but the U.S.'s *will* to use the redesigned force in that context. To date, China has not been deterred from non-kinetic aggression in the South China Sea because the U.S. has not applied a concerted effort across the DIME in order to do so.<sup>46</sup> However, the redesigned force, could, with sufficient support from the spectrum of national power, deter China from further pushing into the South China Sea. The redesigned force, as imagined above, includes a GCE mobilized and resupplied by numerous small surface connectors. While that concept is aimed at supporting EABO during kinetic operations, it could be applied to non-kinetic sea-borne policing actions aimed at curbing China's violations of international law in the South China Sea. Complements of Marines aboard fast-moving, armed surface connectors launched from MEU/ARG ships could move swiftly to intercept, surround, and warn away Chinese vessels harassing, and intimidating other vessels in international waters within that area. Further, these boats could also operate jointly with local nations in numerous patrols of vulnerable island land

assets within the territorial waters of those other nations, such as the Spratly Islands. Other U.S. assets, perhaps even an additional MEU, could train in the area (also with local nation forces), conducting EABO and information operations.

While these are more aggressive tactics than freedom-of-navigation operations, and international condemnation of illegal activity, they are unlikely to spur open war between two great powers. China's entire strategy in the competition phase is to avoid kinetic conflict with a superior power (the U.S.) by operating below the threshold that would demand an armed response, all while expanding their military reach. When confronted with a U.S. force willing and able to aggressively and repeatedly position itself between Chinese ships and their illicit objectives, China will likely begin to curtail their "salami slicing" further into the South China Sea in an effort to avoid open conflict and reevaluate their strategy.<sup>47</sup> This would only work as a deterrent, however, if the U.S. was willing to employ the redesigned force in a more aggressive way than they have previously. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be interest at the national level in using the U.S. military to prevent China from violating the sovereignty of other nations in the South China Sea.<sup>48</sup> It is exactly that reticence to intervene that China has taken advantage of with its bullying of lesser neighbors and military expansion into the South China Sea.

#### **Part IV. Redesigned MEU Combat Effective in an Amphibious Assault to Retake Taiwan?**

*"I do not believe joint forcible entry operations are irrelevant or an operational anachronism; however, we must acknowledge that different approaches are required given the proliferation of anti-access/area denial threat capabilities in mutually contested spaces."<sup>49</sup>* With these words, the Commandant signaled that amphibious assaults into an opposed environment are still a possibility for the future force, despite the inherent difficulty of success in an A2/AD environment. Is his redesigned MEU capable of conducting forcible entry operations in the

mostly likely kinetic scenario to occur in the South China Sea – the defense of Taiwan from a Chinese attempt at forcible re-unification?<sup>50</sup> This is an important question, both to the ability of the U.S. to be successful in defense of an ally and its world image, but also to the question of the redesigned force’s ability to deter China from a forcible re-reunification with Taiwan.

What would China bring to an attempted invasion of Taiwan? If China commits to the use of force for reunification with Taiwan, they will only do so if they believe they are assured of success. That likely means they will strike with a great deal of force, which they believe sufficient to overcome Taiwanese resistance and any attempt by the U.S. to thwart their operation: “we must annihilate our (Taiwanese) enemies in large numbers, then conquer and control the entire island.”<sup>51</sup> If the general rule of an attacking force is followed and a three-to-one advantage over the Taiwanese defending force is maintained, China’s amphibious invasion force will number in the tens of thousands of troops. In addition to this number, a tremendous number of ships and aircraft for blockading, bombardment and transport missions will be employed, in addition to countless missiles for both offensive and defensive purposes as the invasion commences.<sup>52</sup>

How would the redesigned force, specifically the 31<sup>st</sup> MEU, stack up as the stand-in force to repel, defeat or delay the Chinese invasion force pending the arrival of the “blunt” and “surge” forces? Not well, is the short answer. As discussed above, the MEU as it currently stands numbers about 2,200 people, with a GCE making up approximately half of that number. Assuming the redesign kept that number of troops in the GCE – which this paper has argued the redesign will not – distributed across small, sea-mobile teams rather than in larger company-sized maneuver units, it would still be vastly outnumbered by the Chinese force. Even if supplied with a relatively large variety of land and sea-based missiles, the force simply would

not be large enough to conduct anything other than harassing EAB operations from key terrain adjacent to Taiwan, assuming no Chinese forces had previously occupied those positions at the outset of hostilities. These harassing, or delaying type actions will certainly work to inflict damage on Chinese forces within the range of the EAB sites; but without the ability to mass fires and displacing constantly to avoid a return salvo from Chinese A2/AD assets, it is tough to imagine the redesigned MEU putting a dent in the opposing force significant enough to cause a withdrawal or halt an invasion. Of course, if the missiles available to the redesigned force were enhanced in terms of range, that would increase the effectiveness of EABO in this situation.

Although the redesigned MEU could present an effective delaying action in this Taiwan invasion scenario, it will likely not, without more advanced weaponry, be sufficient on its own to prevent or dislodge a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. This makes the redesigned MEU an ineffective deterrent to Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. As discussed in the previous section, a credible deterrent is one that is capable. As a stand-in force, the redesigned MEU alone is not capable of conducting an amphibious assault to retake Taiwan, or to repel a Chinese invasion force without assistance from the joint force. Absent that capability, the redesigned force is not a deterrent, nor does it provide the U.S. Navy with a capability that enhances its deterrent ability in the Taiwan scenario.

## **Conclusion**

The quote at the outset of this paper underscores the uncertainty inherent in selecting the right path to prepare for future conflict. Whether or not the Commandant is correct in his assessment of what the Marine Corps must look like in order to succeed in the future fight with China, the challenges of the Chinese A2/AD threat demand the Marine Corps evolve beyond the current MAGTF construct. The Commandant's new vision for the Corps will enable it to persist

forward despite that A2/AD threat and combat Chinese aggression and military expansion in the South China Sea during the competition phase. However, the most likely event to ignite a kinetic conflict between the US and China – the invasion of Taiwan – will clearly overmatch the redesigned force’s ability to prevent, repel or dislodge the invading force. Thus, the redesigned force will not contribute to the US’s ability to deter China from seeking forcible re-unification with Taiwan. This does not mean the redesign is worthless, but that the rest of the joint force must step into the gap and develop their amphibious capabilities to support the Navy and Marine Corps in maintaining the US’s strategic position in the South China Sea.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, HR 2479, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 28 February, 1979, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/96/hr2479/text>. . . (b) It is the policy of the United States—... (4) to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States; (5) to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and (6) to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan. . ." See also The Asia Reassurance Initiative, Pub. L. 115-409, SR 2736, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, 31 December, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ409/PLAW-115publ409.pdf>. Reaffirms the commitments of the U.S. to Taiwan as expressed in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, July 17, 2019, 1-3, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Publications/MCPEL/Electronic-Library-Display/Article/1907265/38th-commandants-planning-guidance>. General Berger agrees with former CMC General Neller that the Marine Corps is ill-equipped to meet "the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment," and the threats outlined in the National Defense Strategy and Defense Planning Guidance.

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*, January 19, 2018, 1, 4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>. See also, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Description of the National Military Strategy 2018*, and The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 1-45.

<sup>5</sup> Edward H. Simmons, *The United States Marines: A History, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002), 237. Discusses the origins of the MAGTF, and its formalization by MCO 3120.3 in December 1963. "A Marine air-ground task force with separate air ground headquarters is normally formed for combat operations and training exercises in which substantial combat forces of both Marine aviation and Marine ground units are included in the task organization of participating Marine forces."

<sup>6</sup> *Supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>7</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC, 2017), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2017/>, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> The Secretary of Defense, 10 U.S.C. §113 (1947), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/113>. This US statute directs the Secretary of Defense to provide a strategy in support of the President's National Security Strategy, including: ". . . the priority missions of the Department of Defense, and the assumed force planning scenarios and constructs. (ii) The assumed strategic environment, including the most critical and enduring threats to the national security of the United States and its allies posed by state or non-state actors, and the strategies that the Department will employ to counter such threats and provide for the national defense. (iii) A strategic framework prescribed by the Secretary that guides how the Department will prioritize among the threats described in clause (ii) and the missions specified pursuant to clause (i), how the Department will allocate and mitigate the resulting risks, and how the Department will make resource investments.

(iv) The roles and missions of the armed forces to carry out the missions described in clause (i), and the assumed roles and capabilities provided by other United States Government agencies and by allies and international partners.

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(v) The force size and shape, force posture, defense capabilities, force readiness, infrastructure, organization, personnel, technological innovation, and other elements of the defense program necessary to support such strategy.

(vi) The major investments in defense capabilities, force structure, force readiness, force posture, and technological innovation that the Department will make over the following five-year period in accordance with the strategic framework described in clause (iii).”

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 3, at 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Supra* note 3, at 8,7.

<sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 4, at 33. Tangredi defines “anti-access” as “those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area.”

<sup>14</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 183.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>17</sup> Tangredi, 92.

<sup>18</sup> Tangredi, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, “China’s Anti-Access Area Denial,” 2020, <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/china-anti-access-area-denial-coming-soon/>. “China’s anti-ship cruise missiles are fielded by warships, submarines, and aircraft that patrol the waters along the country’s coastline. The air-launched YJ-100 is China’s longest range ASCM with a range between 650 and 800 km. Other advanced anti-ship cruise missiles in the Chinese arsenal are the Yj-12 and YJ-18 supersonic missiles, with ranges close to 500 km. China’s land-attack cruise missiles are air- and ground-launched, with ground-launched variants having a range exceeding 1,500 km.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Norman M. Wade, *MEU2 Smartbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Florida: The Lightning Press, 2010), 1-19 to 1-26. The 31<sup>st</sup> MEU is the only permanently deployed forward MEU, and maintains a presence in the Pacific in support of III Marine Expeditionary Force.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* at 1-4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Military.com, “Equipment and Weapons: HIMARS, 2020.” <https://www.military.com/equipment/m142-himars>

<sup>28</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Chinese Missiles Can Wipe Out U.S. Bases in Japan: AEGIS, THAAD Can Stop ‘Em,” *BreakingDefense.com*, 28 June 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/06/chinese-missiles-can-wipe-out-us-bases-in-japan-aegis-thaad-can-stop-em/>.

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<sup>29</sup> Commandant's Planning Guidance, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Megan Eckstein, "How to Seize Islands, Set Up a Forward Refueling Point: Marine Corps Recipes for Expeditionary Operations," *USNI News*, September 13, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2019/10/03/berger-marine-2030-force-design-is-nearly-complete-concepts-now-being-modeled-tested>.

<sup>31</sup> *Supra* note 23, 3-1 to 3-28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Sherman, "KC-130," *FAS Military Analysis Network*, 8 July 1999, <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ac/kc-130.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC, 2017), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2017/>, 46.

<sup>35</sup> US Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*, January 19, 2018, 1, 4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, Eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 4-16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Mackubin T. Owens, Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "Dangerous Waters: Responding to China's Maritime Provocations in the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, 20 December 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/dangerous-waters-responding-china%E2%80%99s-maritime-provocations-south-china-sea-107746>.

<sup>39</sup> David M. Berger, "Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future," *Warontherocks.com*, 5 December, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/notes-on-designing-the-marine-corps-of-the-future/>. "While the Marine Corps must be prepared to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict, its first priority as a naval service ought to be deterrence, as the cost of competition will always be less than the cost — in both blood and treasure — of armed conflict. To align the Marine Corps with the *National Defense Strategy* in the context of great-power competition, the Marine Corps must be trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness that is prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations."

<sup>40</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Understanding Deterrence, Rand Corporation, page 2, 4. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND\\_PE295.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf) Discusses the concept of direct and extended deterrence, general vis a vis immediate deterrence, and the broad versus narrow definitions, taking into account only military action, and action across the DIME.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, page 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/index.html>. Discusses the importance of the South China Sea to the U.S. national interest. "... 5.3 trillion in global trade ...transits the South China Sea each year, \$1.2 trillion of it touches U.S. ports." The U.S. desire for continue freedom of navigation and the application of UNCLOS in determining territorial claims (which would invalidate many of China's claims to islands in the South China Sea) are all driven by the desire to keep trade flowing in a free and unfettered manner.

<sup>44</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Understanding Deterrence, Rand Corporation, page 10. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND\\_PE295.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf)

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Mackubin T. Owens, Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, “Dangerous Waters: Responding to China’s Maritime Provocations in the South China Sea,” *The National Interest*, 20 December 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/dangerous-waters-responding-china%E2%80%99s-maritime-provocations-south-china-sea-107746>. Discusses U.S. efforts to date to dissuade China from non-kinetic aggression, including insufficient diplomatic efforts with allies in the region, and publicly chastising China for their behavior in the region. *See also* <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/index.html> Discussing U.S. diplomatic position on sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea: “We have a broad interest in China behaving responsibly. But sovereignty . . . is not our dispute. We need to find a way to be engaged without being in the middle.” Kurt Campbell, a former assistant secretary of state with the Obama administration, put it more bluntly: “Maritime territorial disputes are the hardest problem, bar none, that diplomats are currently facing in Asia. On all of these issues, no country has any flexibility. I’ve never seen more white knuckles.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Commandant’s Planning Guidance, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan’s Defense and American Strategy in Asia*, Virginia; The Project 2049 Institute, 2017, at 15-30.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, at 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

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