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## **FUTURE WAR PAPER**

*Competing in the Contact Layer:  
How the United States Navy Can Defeat Chinese Gray Zone Operations*

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

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In the mid-1930s, the United States believed that the best strategy to win the war in the Pacific was to sacrifice the Western Pacific with a delaying action. This action would allow a buildup of combat power in the U.S.-controlled Eastern Pacific in anticipation of fighting an offensive westward to defeat Japan, essentially conceding the Western Pacific to the Japanese.<sup>1</sup> The United States adopted this strategy because it was unwilling to devote the precious few available capital ships and resources to deter the growing Japanese offensive capability through competition below armed conflict; the United States deferred conflict with Japan until it possessed the resources to fight a high-end conflict. Today, the United States is failing to compete against China's effort to control the Western Pacific. Instead, it is building a large fleet to fight a high-end conflict. Left unchecked, China will escalate bullying actions against its neighbors to cement itself in the Western Pacific, ultimately requiring a massive force and a costly conflict to reverse China's negative influence in the region. The National Defense Strategy (NDS) has challenged the Department of Defense (DoD) to develop a force "that can compete, deter, and win in [today's] increasing complex security environment," targeting great powers and China specifically.<sup>2</sup> For its part, the United States Navy (USN) focuses heavily on deterring China's high-end capabilities, and struggles with how to organize and equip for this Gray Zone competition while simultaneously operating around the globe and prioritizing limited fiscal resources. The USN is not currently optimized for this competition because of its strategy to build high-end platforms for a massive kinetic response to Chinese aggression, its lack of appreciation for China's competition strategy, and its acceptance of an invalid paradigm regarding the effectiveness of amphibious warfare ships and their ability to compete in the littorals across the range of military operations (ROMO), in all phases of war. To achieve success against Chinese Gray Zone Operations, the USN must recognize the versatility and

asymmetrical capability of amphibious warfare ships, integrate the Navy and Marine Corps team to develop a lethal, survivable, networked, and unpredictable Littoral Combat Force (LCF), and deploy this LCF to the littorals of the Western Pacific in a competition below armed conflict to deter further Chinese aggression.

Today's situation is not a mirror image of the mid-1930s; nevertheless, the USN's current strategy of deterring and winning through overwhelming firepower will not achieve the NDS intent of competition. The USN's current strategy to build a 355-ship fleet with priority given to submarines, large Carrier Strike Groups (CSG), and Surface Action Groups (SAG) is predicated on the idea that the USN must have more powerful and numerous ships to deter and overpower the adversary upon the commencement of armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> This strategy cedes the initiative to China by "emphasizing efficiency [to cover global challenges] over effectiveness [in addressing specific regional threats]."<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging China as the pacing threat, the USN envisages a powerful battle fleet capable of maintaining a global presence in peacetime while simultaneously ensuring the Navy can fight and win future sea battles; this is not the competition the NDS espouses. The USN underappreciates the role of competition in the "contact layer" that the NDS posits as the first arena where competition begins.<sup>5</sup> The future operating environment is characterized as "competition below armed conflict," which the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning defines as "when two or more actors in the international system have incompatible interests but neither seeks to escalate to armed conflict."<sup>6</sup> The USN's conception of competition currently consists of conducting Freedom of Navigation (FON) patrols in contested waters and the littorals of the South China Sea (SCS), East China Sea (ECS), and Taiwan Strait in order to show China and the region that the United States does not recognize Chinese territorial claims in international waters. According to international law and regional security experts, "the current

U.S. policy of conducting [Freedom of Navigation Operations]<sup>i</sup> (FONOP)...is not succeeding in deterring Chinese expansionism, much less roll[ing] back existing Chinese gains, in the South China Sea.”<sup>7</sup> A strategy that does not involve maintaining a persistent force to compete leaves our allies in the region to operate alone in the long-term against China.

In addition to the shortcoming of its current strategy, the USN is not optimized for competition below armed conflict because it fails to prioritize the Chinese Gray Zone competition.<sup>ii</sup> China is not developing its naval force to achieve global dominance, but rather to conduct coercive actions short of armed conflict to advance its interests.<sup>8</sup> The USN’s development of a great fleet to fight against newly developed Chinese aircraft carrier fleets or the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) surface fleet in a Mahanian fleet-on-fleet action is misguided.<sup>9</sup> China continues to expand its influence both regionally and globally for political and economic gain. The Chinese are attempting to create regional hegemony by using the military in the Western Pacific to push the limits of competition just short of armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> China will continue to compete short of armed conflict by bullying neighbors in open defiance of international law.<sup>11</sup> By continually ignoring international law and pushing the limits of operations in the contact layer against the United States and her allies, China will expand the

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<sup>i</sup> Freedom of Navigation Operations are operations by U.S. naval and air forces that reinforce internationally-recognized rights and freedoms by challenging excessive maritime claims. The particulars of each operation are determined by the excessive maritime claim that is being protested. Eleanor Freund, “Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/freedom-navigation-south-china-sea-practical-guide>.

<sup>ii</sup> “Gray zone [competition] is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war. Gray zone approaches are mostly the province of revisionist powers—those actors that seek to modify some aspect of the existing international environment—and the goal is to reap gains, whether territorial or otherwise, that are normally associated with victory in war. Yet gray zone approaches are meant to achieve those gains without escalating to overt warfare, without crossing established red-lines, and thus without exposing the practitioner to the penalties and risks that such escalation might bring. Gray zone challenges are thus inherently ambiguous in nature. . . . They represent that coercion that is, to varying degrees, disguised; they eat away at the status quo one nibble at a time.” - Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-Notes, last modified February 5, 2016, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

threshold of acceptance for its operations, thereby securing the political and economic hegemony it desires. China is currently expanding this threshold through Gray Zone Operations in the littorals, claiming territorial waters that are in fact international waters. The Chinese employ a Maritime Militia and Coast Guard to control the littorals and coerce neighbors, steadily encroaching upon and increasing its influence astride the sea lines of communication upon which international trade relies.<sup>12</sup> These operations in the littorals—the contact layer—consummate China’s strategy to win the Great Power Competition. The NDS correctly realizes this threat and establishes the objective of, “defending allies from military aggression and bolstering partners against coercion.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the USN’s new Distributed Maritime Operations strategy focuses primarily on how to win against China once competition has elevated to armed conflict, vice on the competition to deter coercion. In recognition of this disparity, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) stated on February 6, 2019 that the USN must get more creative in order to operate in this Gray Zone competition.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to Japan in the mid-1930s, the Chinese have developed significant warfighting capability to operate in the littorals of the Western Pacific. The USN’s current paradigm highlights the Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBN) and CSGs as the primary warfighting organizations for conducting sea control and power projection, but neither platform is ideally designed for operations in the littorals.<sup>15</sup> In his article, *On Littoral Warfare*, Milan Vego states, “the risk of operating highly capable but also very expensive platforms—[carriers and SSBNs, in the littorals]—outweigh potential benefits.”<sup>16</sup> The paradigm embraced by the carrier, surface combatant, and submarine communities perceive amphibious warfare ships (AWS) as merely trucks for hauling Marines.<sup>17</sup> This false perception incorrectly shapes how the Navy organizes, mans, trains, and equips the Naval Expeditionary Forces for the future operating environment.

The littoral environment requires maneuverability, flexibility, and the ability to deter adversaries through an asymmetrical threat of force. According to a recent Heritage Foundation Report on Navy Force Structure, the Navy's current strategy of retaliation puts the U.S. dangerously behind the power curve because our "adversaries will have the ability to achieve their objectives swiftly without resistance and the level of force required to reverse those gains would be considerable."<sup>18</sup> As China operates in the littorals—developing and expanding its influence over the region through competition below armed conflict—the USN will ultimately find that its desired force structure will be put at a disadvantage. By appreciating the Chinese strategy in the littorals of conducting Gray Zone operations, and by adopting a new paradigm for AWS and Naval Expeditionary Forces, the USN will produce a different and more potent force to effectively compete in the littorals.

The USN needs a different type of force that can persistently compete against China's Gray Zone Operations to deter further aggression, uphold international law, support regional partners and allies, and retain the capability to transition to armed conflict if necessary. The Navy can achieve these objectives by manning and resourcing a Littoral Combat Force (LCF) that competes below the level of armed conflict to achieve the strategic ends laid out in the NDS.

For the LCF to be successful, the unique composition of the force can be task organized from specific existing Navy force structure to effectively compete against China's Gray Zone Operations. In order to achieve this composition, the new AWS paradigm must be understood in terms of the AWS's capability to serve as the backbone of the LCF—integral to success against Gray Zone Operations. Second, the LCF organization and composition provides a realistic and scalable option for asymmetrical operations in the contact layer. Finally, the LCF is capable of operating below the level of armed conflict to defeat Gray Zone Operations, while also providing

an inside force capable of operating as a blunt layer force—integrating into a larger Naval or Joint Surge Layer Force if competition escalates to armed conflict.

### Versatility of the Amphibious Warfare Ship

Amphibious Warfare Ships are uniquely capable platforms, exceptionally suited for competition in the contact layer due to their ability to integrate a wide array of assets and technology to present an asymmetric threat. This integration is enabled by increased space, weight, power, and cooling (SWaP-C) capability. The AWS inherently has the greatest advantage with these margins due to its large logistical carrying capacity, flight deck, well deck, and large power plant. In 2013, the CNO released a Memorandum that specifically addressed how to develop SWaP-C requirements to ensure ships are capable of “accomodat[ing] new payloads or other systems needed to remain relevant as new threats and opportunities emerge over the platform’s life.”<sup>19</sup> The importance of SWaP-C margins to the implementation of future technology is adequately recognized by the USN and should therefore drive an appreciation for what the Navy currently owns in order to save money and make sound future appropriation decisions.

The flexibility to accommodate new technology on AWSs was demonstrated in 2014 when the new Laser Weapon System (LaWS) was installed on the *USS Ponce* (LPD-15). While the *Ponce* was decommissioned in 2017, another LPD, *USS Portland* (LPD-27), was selected over a surface combatant “because it had the [SWaP-C] margins to support the laser gun that a destroyer simply didn’t.”<sup>20</sup> This appreciation of SWaP-C has recently taken hold in the surface warfare community with the development of a new large surface combatant with the flexibility to house current or future weapons systems.<sup>21</sup> The lack of required SWaP-C margins in the Arleigh Burke Flight III DDG (yet to be commissioned) and DDG-1000 (commissioned in 2016)

platforms helped to drive requirements for a new large surface combatant that “will be bigger and more expensive than the Arleigh Burke Flight III design and will have more room to grow into for decades to come.”<sup>22</sup> But, the Navy does not need to go back to the drawing board. It currently owns an asset, the AWS, that possesses many of these attributes. All that is required is a different, more flexible, mindset as to its potential employment in the future operating environment.

Such an approach will certainly save money. The Navy has spent significant time and resources in research and development to build multiple different surface combatants—Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), Guided Missile Destroyer (DDG) Flight III, Cruiser (CG), Frigate (x), DDG-1000, and a new large surface combatant. This reactive approach of developing new hulls whenever a new weapon system is developed is an inefficient and costly way to achieve an advantage on the battlefield, and it will eventually prove to be unsustainable. With the space to house future weapons and technology, the AWS—such as the LPD Flight II—has a unique advantage of additional power and cooling to integrate technologies such as the Railgun or the Vertical Launch System (VLS).<sup>23</sup> Newer sensors, radars, offensive and defensive weapons currently in use, or to be developed, can be integrated into the AWS platforms efficiently. Developing a new hull or power plant to accommodate new weapons is not only costly, but risks being obsolete when a newer weapons system or technology becomes available. It makes far more sense to take advantage of the significant SWaP-C margins on AWSs that will enable employment options 20 to 30 years down the road regardless of new technology that is developed during that period.

The space available on the AWS also enables the employment of a wide variety of autonomous technologies. Whether it is an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) launched from the

flight deck, or an unmanned surface or undersea vehicle launched from the well deck, the AWS can serve as the mother ship to many different types of autonomous systems. Whether employed in swarms for offensive purposes or used as a deterrent force against the Chinese Maritime Militia inside the contact layer, these systems will greatly expand the effectiveness and lethality of naval expeditionary forces working to contest Chinese Gray Zone operations. What is more, the AWS can recover or resupply these systems when the LCF is disconnected from available ports or resupply vessels. The AWS platform can quickly and efficiently embark these technologies from a Sea Port of Embarkation/Debarcation (SPOD), creating options for the commander of the LCF to keep the adversary off balance.

The SWaP-C margin advantages inherent to the AWS present the USN with the best cost/benefit value proposition through increased flexibility to support a wide variety of kinetic or non-kinetic missions in a contested environment. This is not to imply that such flexibility does not involve trade-offs and hard decisions. For instance, if an AWS is fitted with ship-killing missiles on its flight deck or has its well deck packed with autonomous stealth small boats, its capability to quickly and efficiently land a Marine amphibious force will be impeded. However, these tradeoffs can be mitigated by an LCF Command Element that prioritizes threats and task organizes the force to accomplish specific missions. Multiple AWSs loaded for a variety of mission profiles also mitigates the risk of being caught flat-footed. Commander Bryan McGrath, USN (Ret), a former DDG commanding officer and current naval consultant, asserts that “while great strides have been made in increasing surface force lethality on traditional Navy combatants (frigates and destroyers), the continuing inattention paid to the ships of the amphibious force is not only illogical, but operationally unwise.”<sup>24</sup> It is necessary for the DoD and the USN to fully appreciate the capability provided by AWSs, specifically the LHA/D and the LPD-17/LPD

Flight II, vice developing new hulls to house the same capabilities across many different surface combatants. Appreciating the versatility of the AWS platform creates a new operational paradigm that can save the USN money and increase current warfighting capability.

### The Littoral Combat Force

The LCF, operating from AWSs as described above, provides the nation its best option to compete below the level of armed conflict and to effectively counter Chinese Gray Zone Operations. Operating in the contact layer as an inside force, the LCF provides an asymmetrical threat to the Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia through flexibility, lethality, survivability, networkability, and unpredictability.

Development of the LCF would be incremental and would expand over time into a persistent, forward deployed, naval expeditionary force. The initial creation of the LCF can be accomplished without a significant change in budgeting by leveraging existing force structure. The Navy can task organize the LCF by repurposing its existing Expeditionary Strike Groups, led by a one-star flag officer, to form the command element of the LCF. This staff can grow and evolve to form an LCF Staff that is fully capable of operating in a Composite Warfare Doctrine construct,<sup>iii</sup> integrating into a Joint Force, or operating with allies. Successfully competing in the contact layer requires an LCF that can operate unconventionally, “conducting a broad array of

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<sup>iii</sup> “USN tactical commanders typically exercise decentralized control over assigned forces through use of composite warfare doctrine. This doctrine establishes a composite warfare organization within the task organization by assigning the commander’s warfare command functions to subordinates. The composite warfare construct allows the officer in tactical command (OTC) to assign some or all of the command functions associated with mission areas to warfare commanders, functional group commanders, and coordinators, thus supporting decentralized execution. The composite warfare organization enables offensive and defensive combat operations against multiple targets and threats simultaneously.” Kevin Scott: Joint Publication 3-32 Command and Control of Joint Maritime Operations, June 8, 2018, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=812852>.

activities: establishing access to critical areas, forward positioning units, establishing appropriate and timely presence, organizing exercises, sharing intelligence, employing unconventional measures, and conducting information operations to include efforts to counter and undermine the competitor's narrative."<sup>25</sup> An LCF staff composed of Marines and Sailors with amphibious, surface warfare, submarine, cyber, and aviation backgrounds will enable the LCF to employ a flexible composite of units to create a truly asymmetrical threat.

Initially, the forces that make up the LCF can come from standing Amphibious Ready Groups/Marine Expeditionary Units (ARG/MEU), SAGs, and forward deployed Fast Attack Submarines (SSN) while a more permanent force structure is developed. This will require the Navy and Marine Corps team to initially stop its traditional West Coast ARG/MEU deployments to the Middle East in order to provide experienced Navy and Marine Corps forces to the LCF. Due to their location in the Western Pacific, the 31st MEU and Amphibious Squadron 11—augmented with other naval warfare communities—are ideally suited to make up the first LCF persistently operating in the contact layer.

The LCF can draw on Naval Expeditionary Warfare Assets, specifically from the Amphibious Warfare, Naval Special Warfare (NSW), Mine Warfare, and Navy Expeditionary Combat branches, to form a task organized unit that poses an asymmetrical threat. The additional integration of surface and undersea warfare forces provides an all-domain threat capability to deter aggression, defend the force, and serve as an introductory blunt force if the competition were to escalate. The LCF CE can integrate the MEU's capabilities to conduct bilateral exercises and training ashore, or embark smaller Marine Air Ground Task Forces like the

Marine Warbot Companies to demonstrate a versatile and lethal ground force.<sup>iv</sup> These assets are scalable and flexible, enabling the embarked LCF CE to integrate the different capabilities to employ the composite warfare doctrine construct. Task organizing Marine Corps, Naval Expeditionary, Surface, and Undersea Warfare assets into a single formation enables the LCF to compete in the littorals below the level of armed conflict and effectively counter Chinese Gray Zone Operations.

Paramount in this competition is possessing the lethality for the LCF to deter further Chinese aggression in the contact layer, persuading the Chinese to respect the rights of other countries, and assuring the defense of regional allies in the event of escalation. Through the integration of lethal, autonomous, or stealth platforms—air, surface, and undersea—the LCF can become a force with a variety of options to deter and compel adversaries and assure allies. The AWS as the backbone of the LCF is capable today of serving as the mothership to deploy autonomous vehicles. These autonomous small surface craft can be launched from a well deck, travel hundreds of miles, and then deploy swarming UAVs to deter or attack an adversary. Similarly, an AWS flight deck is capable of launching UAVs to collect intelligence, provide a show of force, or employ missiles in a strike mission. The LCF would use this capability initially in the contact layer to compete with and deter Chinese Gray Zone operations. If the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) were to escalate, the LCF is capable with this same lethality and flexibility to serve as the blunt layer force. As the blunt layer force, the LCF

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<sup>iv</sup> Marine Warbot Companies are “capable of providing distributed sensing and precision fires leveraging and exploiting tactical swarming behaviors, in addition to its bedrock of maneuver, fire-power, and tempo. These companies would function as micro-MAGTFs coming from the sea with their own aviation combat element of artificial intelligence-enabled autonomous weapons, [lethal miniature aerial munition systems] (LMAMs) and small unmanned aircraft systems.” Jeff Cummings, Scott Cuomo, Olivia Garad, Noah Spataro, “Marine Warbot Companies: Where Naval Warfare, The U.S. National Defense Strategy, And Close Combat Lethality Task Force Intersect,” War On The Rocks, June 28, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/marine-warbot-companies-where-naval-warfare-the-u-s-national-defense-strategy-and-close-combat-lethality-task-force-intersect/>.

would shape the operating environment through “delaying, degrading, or denying” actions.<sup>26</sup> By using autonomous vehicles, the LCF is capable of covering a large area through smaller, less-targetable vehicles. The seemingly endless options of autonomous technology provide significant lethal versatility that the LCF can employ far into the future.

The integration of existing or newer systems aboard the AWS, such as surface-to-surface missiles, VLS, LaWS, and the Railgun, would further increase the lethality of the LCF. The Navy has already purchased the Kongsberg’s Naval Strike Missile (NSM), which is “a sub-sonic, sea-skimming cruise missile with a range of around 100 miles primarily geared toward taking out enemy ships.”<sup>27</sup> Tested on the flight deck of the *Independence*-class LCS *USS Coronado* in 2014, the NSM can be bolted onto the LCS or AWS—as part of an LCF formation—to increase lethality.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, the incorporation of NSW, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), Coastal Riverine Force, and offensive/defensive mine warfare units could provide the LCF with an array of options to place the adversary off-balance against different possible dilemmas. They can be used to present an asymmetric threat, build partner capacity through bilateral training exercises, or conduct “delaying, degrading or denying” operations that enable the LCF to be a blunt layer force. As the blunt layer force, the LCF will shape the operational environment for the integration of a larger joint force acting as the surge layer. The combination of these different lethal capabilities employed by the LCF—autonomous technology, the NSM, or ground forces—provides the Joint Force with versatility to deter aggression in the contact layer or initially respond to aggression in the blunt layer.

To be a credible force operating in the littorals that are saturated with Chinese offensive capability, survivability must be a key characteristic of the LCF. Though the goal should remain

to compete below armed conflict, the LCF must prove to regional allies that the USN will stand by them and fight if competition escalates to armed conflict. The LCF can best achieve survivability by reducing its susceptibility and vulnerability. At the outset of armed conflict, the LCF will need to distribute its forces and use archipelago terrain masking to decrease its susceptibility. Through the use of technologies such as the naval tactical grid or naval integrated fire control systems, and through conducting electromagnetic maneuver warfare (EMW), the LCF can decrease its vulnerability to Chinese offensive capabilities. An underappreciated and positive aspect of survivability is the LCF's capacity to remain on station in the adversary's threat ring for a sustained period of time. With its AWS backbone, the LCF has a larger logistical capability than smaller surface combatants, which enables resupply to smaller ships and Expeditionary Advanced Bases (EAB). The LCF also enables employment of offensive or defensive weapons in support of a larger Joint Force's transition as the surge force. The incorporation of larger, less maneuverable AWSs would appear to increase the vulnerability of the LCF in an anti-access/area denial environment. However, the risk of Chinese anti-ship cruise missile employment—causing unwanted escalation—is worth the asymmetrical advantage gained through employment of the ASW to defeat Gray Zone Operations. Thus, the LCF is survivable through AWS advantages in SWaP-C margins to incorporate new technologies and employ multi-domain offensive and defensive capabilities to operate as an inside force.

In the competition below armed conflict, China will attempt to degrade communications and the LCF's network. Chinese capability to prevent satellite communication and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) will require the LCF to establish an internal network that enables the LCF to conduct coordinated offensive and defensive actions.<sup>29</sup> By incorporating the Navy's Battle Force Tactical Networked-Enhanced System, the LCF will be able to establish ad-hoc

networks even in a degraded communications environment involving interference with GPS and satellite systems.<sup>30</sup> Such a networked LCF would retain the capability to coordinate mass offensive or defensive fires while operating in a denied or degraded environment caused by Chinese offensive actions against U.S. satellites or fleet communications.<sup>31</sup>

For all of its strengths, the quintessential characteristic of the LCF will be its unpredictability. What makes the LCF better at unpredictability over a SAG or CSG is the presence of the AWS. With increased lethality and an ability to conduct operations ranging from humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) to deploying autonomous swarming small boats, the LCF will be able to seamlessly transition from conducting a bilateral training exercise to establishing an EAB. It is this operational unpredictability through the incorporation of new technology that enables the LCF to “demonstrate [its] commitment to deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.”<sup>32</sup>

#### How the Littoral Combat Force Competes

The LCF is not just a newer, shinny, Swiss Army Knife. The Chinese will be challenged by an LCF capable of deploying a multi-mission, multi-domain force that possesses a new type of threat superior to the conventional, overwhelming naval force to which China is accustomed. The following three LCF Lines of Effort are key to the U.S. strategy of competing in the contact layer to defeat Gray Zone Operations: defeat Chinese Gray Zone competition through persistent presence to enforce the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), deter Chinese military influence in the region through asymmetrical threat of force, and increase regional allies’ capabilities through training and combined operations.

Persistent presence of the LCF is crucial to achieving strategic success in the contact layer competition against China’s Maritime Militia and Coast Guard challenges to UNCLOS.

This presence can be achieved by either of two models. The first model is the Forward Deployed Naval Force—Japan approach—where a Japan-based LCF deploys into the littorals. The second model is similar to the Marine Corps’ Darwin Rotational Force, wherein the LCF would project from bases within the borders of regional allies. This could include operating from a Philippine-owned Spratly Island to conduct FONOPs or executing a bi-lateral exercise in the contact layer. From this presence posture, the LCF can focus operations on “countering exploitation and contestation of rules and norms, and countering the exploitation and contestation of physical control” in the littorals.<sup>33</sup> Utilizing the immense capabilities of the Naval Expeditionary Warfare community and the AWS’ SWaP-C advantages, the LCF can integrate LCS, U.S. Coast Guard, and law enforcement detachments. With such integration, the LCF can employ forces trained to operate in a variety of ways to deter the aggressive behavior of the Chinese Maritime Militia and Coast Guard, which today go unchallenged. These operations would begin benignly and then gradually escalate to establish a new standard of acceptable behavior in the contested littorals--one which rolls back longstanding Chinese attempts to subvert international law.

It is the unpredictable and flexible LCF that can maintain this forward presence to deter aggression and ultimately compel a cessation of aggressive Chinese military influence and behavior. The coercive maritime actions and continued military buildup on artificial islands will only be deterred by an asymmetrical threat of force. In this competition below armed conflict, the LCF has the capability to conduct operations across the ROMO. For instance, the LCF can conduct a HA/DR exercise with regional allies while it simultaneously generates ambiguity in the minds of Chinese leaders regarding the full capabilities of the AWS. The presence of an aircraft carrier or surface combatant does not create the same ambiguity since those formations are inherently offensive and predictable. Through this competition below armed conflict, the

LCF will challenge the Chinese *fait accompli* and place China in a political dilemma where the “burden of escalation is back on China.”<sup>34</sup> Cognizant that escalation will draw the ire of the international community, China is unlikely to escalate hostility against U.S. and regional allies over internationally recognized maritime boundaries. This competition places China in a situation where it will be forced to significantly scale back or cease Gray Zone Operations and respect the rights of its neighbors. However, if China chooses to escalate, the LCF is uniquely suited to conduct shaping operations as the blunt layer force. In the blunt layer, the LCF can integrate EAB Operations and Distributed Maritime Operations strategies to facilitate the Operation Plans for a Joint Force Maritime Component Command. Additionally, boasting increased lethality, the LCF can contribute enhanced combat power to the Distributed Lethality initiative used to punish the adversary with overwhelming firepower in the surge layer.

Despite its lethality and flexibility, the LCF cannot operate unilaterally in the littorals; it must operate with regional allies to develop interoperability, expand capability, and enforce allies’ lawful boundaries. To build partner capacity, the LCF can conduct air, land, and sea exercises in or near contested waterways with regional allies. Overtly conducting bilateral Maritime Interception Operations exercises or testing autonomous swarming technologies in contested waters will elucidate the United States’ resolve to prevent intimidation of regional allies. Operating with regional allies also reduces the credibility of potential Chinese claims that the United States is trying to bully China. The diverse LCF units partnering with regional allies in multiple domains to conduct a wide array of missions enables the LCF to compete effectively below the level of armed conflict. Through these partnerships, the United States will build stronger alliances in the region, severing the region’s reliance on China and boosting America’s image as an enforcer of peace.

This new and dynamic LCF is the most effective solution to the challenge posed by the National Defense Strategy Commission: “The unconventional approaches such as gray-zone aggression (coercion in the space between peace and war), demand equally creative responses. In other words, maintaining or reestablishing America’s competitive edge is not simply a matter of generating more resources and capabilities; it is a matter of using those resources and capabilities creatively and focusing them on the right things.”<sup>35</sup> Leveraging the inherently strong SWaP-C capacity margins of the AWS will enable the LCF’s unpredictability and flexibility, compelling a reduction of Chinese Gray Zone Operations and violations of international law. The LCF will be lethal enough to deter future aggression against regional allies yet flexible, survivable, and networked enough to apply effective combat power during escalation to armed conflict. “China has used asymmetry, ambiguity, and incrementalism to revise the status quo in maritime Asia while avoiding a war with regional neighbors or the United States,” but the USN can reverse this negative trend.<sup>36</sup> Through the Littoral Combat Force’s unpredictable and flexible projection of power, the United States Navy can achieve strategic objectives and successfully compete with China to control the contact layer.

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<sup>5</sup> Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 7.

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