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14. ABSTRACT

Due to the proliferation of anti-access and area denial networks, the US military will likely be required to seize and secure intermediate base areas to gain access to a theater at the onset of future conflicts. Traditionally, the joint force has relied on forcible entry operations (JFEOs) to seize such lodgments, but the complexities of the future operational environment increases the risk associated with these missions. These challenges require military practitioners to question whether forcible entry operations are still possible, and if so, what adaptations are necessary to make them viable? The Russian Armed Force's JFEO at Hostomel Airport on the opening day of the Russo-Ukrainian War provides us with insight regarding this question. Despite the failure at Hostomel, this case study demonstrates forcible entry operations are still necessary even with the threat posed by A2AD networks, but require adaptations to ensure they remain viable. To enable their future success, the joint force must mitigate risk by dispersing lift assets to enable their ability to mass, enhancing the mobility and precision fires capabilities of the assault echelon, and task organizing flexible follow-on forces that are capable of consolidating gains and facilitating transitions.

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From Sparta to Hostomel and Beyond:

The Enduring Role of Joint Forcible Entry Operations

Introduction

With few exceptions since World War Two (WWII), the US military possessed global access to intermediate staging bases which enabled it to mass combat power in an uncontested manner prior to combat operations. However, its success in recent conflicts enabled strategic competitors such as China and Russia to study the joint force, and led them to conclude that to defeat the American military you must preclude their ability to mass prior to the initiation of hostilities.[1] Their realization led to the advancement of anti-access and area denial (A2AD) networks designed to deny freedom of mobility to the joint force throughout its operational depth.[2]

Due to the capacity of A2AD networks to preclude the joint force's access to a theater, it is likely that the US military will be required to seize and secure intermediate base areas at the onset of future conflicts. Traditionally, the US military has relied on joint forcible entry operations (JFEO) to seize such lodgments, but the complexities of the future operational environment (OE) increases the risk associated with these missions.[3] These challenges require military practitioners to question whether forcible entry operations are still possible, and if so, what adaptations are necessary to make them viable? The Russian Armed Force's JFEO at Hostomel Airport on the opening day of the Russo-Ukrainian War provides us with insight

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[1] Rush Doshi. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2021, 79-80.

[2] Russia and China do not explicitly use the term A2AD, rather they describe the use of a suite of capabilities to create a concentric defense in depth to preclude access to their near-abroad (Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia's A2AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined," Parameters 40, no 1, (2019). Doi: 10.55540/0031-1723.2860). While the terminology may diverge, the concepts described by both Chinese and Russian doctrine match the US military's definition of A2AD networks which is, "actions, activities, and capabilities used to preclude the ability of US forces to shape an environment and mass and sustain combat power." Department of the Army, *Operations,* FM 3-0, Washington DC, HQDA, 2022, 2-9.

[3] A lodgment is a designated area in a hostile operational environment that affords continuous landing of troops and materiel while providing maneuver space for subsequent operations. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations,* JP 3-18, Washington DC, 2017, vii.

regarding this question. Despite the failure at Hostomel, this case study demonstrates forcible entry operations are still necessary even with the threat posed by A2AD networks, but require adaptations to ensure they remain viable. To enable their future success, the joint force must mitigate risk by dispersing lift assets to enable their ability to mass, enhancing the mobility and precision fires capabilities of the assault echelon, and task organizing flexible follow-on forces that are capable of consolidating gains and facilitating transitions. To gain a better appreciation of the impact of the modern OE on these operations, it is helpful to understand their doctrinal framework as well as their conceptual origin.

Forcible Entry Doctrinal Framework and Conceptual Origin

Joint forcible entry operations are defined as an action which seizes and holds lodgments against armed opposition in a manner that affords continuous landing of troops and material while providing maneuver space for follow-on operations.[4] JFEOs can be executed using an amphibious assault, airborne assault, air-assault, or any combination of these methods.[5] While the nomenclature may vary depending on the method of forcible entry, they all use a similar five phased sequencing concept,[6] and organize using an assault, follow-on, and rear echelon. The assault echelon is the initial entry force used to seize and begin to stabilize the lodgment to prepare it for the reception of follow-on forces. The follow-on echelon is composed of the reinforcements required to stabilize and expand the lodgment to enable its transition to subsequent operations. Finally, the rear echelon is elements of the force not required on the objective area such as personnel responsible for administrative and special staff functions.[7]

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[4] Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations,* 1-1.
[5] *Ibid,* vii.
[6] Those phases are: preparation and deployment, assault, stabilization of the lodgment, introduction of follow-on forces, and termination or transition operations (*ibid,* IV-2*).*
[7] Department of the Army, *Airborne and Air Assault Operations,* FM 3-99, Washington DC, HQDA, 2022. 2:2-3.

While this contemporary framework may be new, the intellectual foundation for forcible entry operations is rooted in antiquity.

Military practitioners have not always referred to these actions as JFEOs, but it is clear they recognized the utility of these operations and used them in a manner which is discernable today. In Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War for example, the historian describes numerous occasions where the Athenians exploited exterior lines at sea to execute amphibious raids and assaults on vulnerable Peloponnesian League positions. These operations threatened Spartan base areas and forced them to commit combat power to defend their coast in lieu of concentrating their forces for offensive action.[8] Thucydides' description of how the Athenians leveraged sea control to project power ashore is still at the core of why forcible entries are effective. Instead of slogging it out with enemy ground forces in attritional engagements, commanders since antiquity have sought to exploit the advantages of exterior lines by using surprise and tempo to outmaneuver an adversary in order to seize lodgments at a lower cost than otherwise possible. For most of history the ability to leverage the sea to maneuver was the only way to execute such an action; however technological advancements as well as the gridlock of World War One inspired theorists to conceptualize how aviation could be used to exploit exterior lines in the air domain in a similar manner to how they were traditionally leveraged at sea.

Such theorizing came to fruition during the interwar period when theorists such as Billy Mitchel and Mikhail Tukhachevsky developed the theory of vertical envelopment. This theory posits that airborne infantry can infiltrate an enemy's support area, sever their ground lines of communication, and seize critical base areas along an axis of advance thereby enhancing an

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[8] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler. (New York: Free Press, 1996), 253-254.

offensive's operational endurance while degrading the enemy's ability to resist.[9] Airborne assaults were used by all major belligerents during World War Two, and while the results of these operations were mixed,[10] what was clear was that airmobile forces were capable of out-maneuvering an adversary if they were properly integrated as a part of a combined arms offensive. After the war, the demand for air-mobile forces led to experimentation with rotary wing assets which led to the creation of air-assault doctrine. This doctrine aimed to resolve the issues associated with the erratic nature of airborne assaults by using rotary-wing lift assets to enable the precise insertion of ground forces during an attack.[11] Over the past century, the joint force proved the effectiveness of these operations in numerous conflicts. Whether it was the amphibious assault at Incheon during the Korean War, the airborne assault at Torrijos International Airport during Operation Just Cause, or the air-assault to seize Talil Airbase during the Gulf War, these operations demonstrated their ability to accomplish challenging objectives. Despite their success, the capabilities mismatch between the US military and its adversaries has led to skepticism regarding the future efficacy of JFEOs.[12]

These critiques warrant examination when we compare the capabilities of the Russian and Chinese armed forces to those of past militaries where these operations were used. Upon comparison it is obvious that due to the threats posed by the modern OE, the joint force must examine if these operations are still viable. However, due to the US military's recent

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[9] David Glantz, *The Soviet Airborne Experience,* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1984). 4-17.

[10] During WWII there were ten large and twenty-three small airborne assaults with a success rate of 50% and 61% respectively (the distinction between the sizes of assaults is whether they involved 3,000 or more paratroopers). Marc R. DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, The Army Press, (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: 2015). 25, 27.

[11] Mark L. Holinger, "Conceptual Underpinnings of the Air Assault Concept: The Hogaboom, Rogers, and Howze Boards," The Institute of Land Warfare, (Arlington, VA: 2006). 1-2.

[12] Whether it was GEN Omar Bradley who stated in 1949 that, "large-scale amphibious operations will never occur again," (House Armed Services Committee, 81st Congress, 1949 (Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), or modern historians such as Marc DeVore who claims, "the proliferation of surface-to-air missiles and armored vehicles has rendered airborne operations extremely hazardous," these critiques are timeless and widespread (DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 73).

involvement in low intensity conflicts where its adversaries were unable to contest its control of the sea or air, it is challenging to make an informed assessment. To make such a determination, the joint force must examine modern examples of these operations -such as the Russian airfield seizure at Hostomel- to glean insights.

JFEOs in the Modern OE: the Russian Air-Assault at Hostomel Airport

On February 24th, 2022 the armed forces of the Russian Federation launched a full scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion's main effort was its Kyiv Axis which was task organized into three groups. The first two groups were deployed to the Belarusian city of Gomel,[13] and the final group was an airmobile element located in the Russian city of Pskov.[14] The two Belarusian groups were tasked with isolating Kyiv by maneuvering south in a ground convoy along the Dnieper River to blocking positions on the east and west of the capital.[15] While these groups maneuvered, an infantry battalion would execute an air-assault to seize Hostomel Airport located 35 kilometers from the center of Kyiv.[16] Once the airhead was established, a brigade tactical group from the air-mobile element in Pskov would be airlifted to the lodgment.[17] Upon arrival, the brigade planned to establish an aerial port of debarkation (APOD), seize key terrain in Kyiv,

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[13] These groups were comprised of seven and nine battalion tactical groups (BTGs) respectively. Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al., Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, Royal United Service Institute, (2022), 10.

[14] This group was comprised of six BTGs. Paul Sonne, *et al.* "The Battle for Kyiv: Ukrainian valor, Russian blunders combined to save the capital," the Washington Post, (August 24, 2022). https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/kyiv-battle-ukraine-survival/.

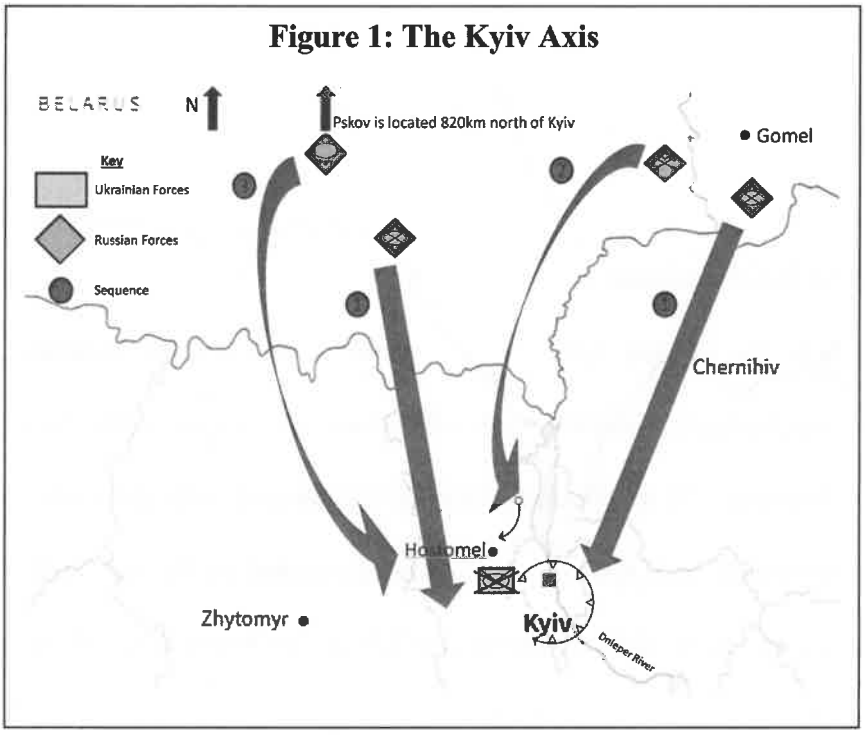
[15] Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al., Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, 10.

[16] Andrew McGregor, "Russian Airborne Disaster at Hostomel Airport," Aberfoyle International Security, (March 8, 2022).

[17] Christo Grozev, Twitter Post. February, 24, 2022, 10:41 a.m. https://twitter.com/christogrozev/status/1496873022229073924?lang=en.

and destroy any remanence of Ukrainian resistance to enable Russian intelligence and special operations forces (SOF) to decapitate the Ukrainian government.[18]

Figure 1: The Kyiv Axis



The invasion began with a large air campaign which prioritized the suppression of enemy air defense artillery systems (SEAD). While the campaign's results were mixed,[19] it destroyed two S-300 air defense systems screening the Dnieper River which enabled freedom of maneuver for Russian air-assault forces to the north.[20] Russian ground forces exploited the local air superiority by synchronizing the initiation of a heliborne assault along its northern axis. As part of this assault, upwards of thirty-five attack helicopters maneuvered to Hostomel Airport to suppress enemy positions on the objective prior to the landing of the assault force.[21] Soon after

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[18] Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al., Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, 10.

[19] Poor Russian collection capabilities limited their ability to execute dynamic targeting. As a result, they only destroyed 10% of the Ukrainian's mobile air defense artillery systems (*Ibid,* 24).

[20] *Ibid,* 25.

[21] Ivan Valiushko, "Occupiers Fail to Secure their Foothold in the Attack on Kyiv," Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression, (September 22, 2022). https://rusaggression.gov.ua/en/russian-occupiers-fail-to-secure-their-foothold-in-the-attack-on-kyiv.

the arrival of the attack aircraft, two sequential lifts each comprised of ten MI-8 helicopters landed three-hundred paratroopers from the assault echelon on the lodgment.[22] After two-hours of fighting the Ukrainian forces eventually withdrew and ceded the airhead to the Russians.[23] However, due to the failure of Russian forces to isolate the objective their tactical success was short-lived.

While the Russian assault echelon accomplished its first objective of neutralizing Ukrainian forces on the airhead, their failure to isolate and expand the lodgment led to their ultimate operational failure. Unbeknownst to the Russians, two days prior to the initiation of hostilities the Ukrainian 72d Mechanized Brigade (augmented with Ukrainian SOF and territorial defense forces) relocated only six kilometers from the airport on the east bank of the Irpin River.[24] Upon confirmation of the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the airport, the 72d Brigade initiated an artillery bombardment on the lodgment. The cumulative effects of the artillery strikes damaged the runway to an extent which prevented the landing of Russian follow-on forces.[25] The failure to land these forces meant that the assault echelon would have to retain the airfield until they were able to link up with the ground convoys maneuvering from Belarus. However, the assault force's limited combat power hindered their ability to secure the lodgment without the support of reinforcements. This time-space-force imbalance enabled the Ukrainians to counterattack and retake the airhead which stifled the Russian momentum north of Kyiv.

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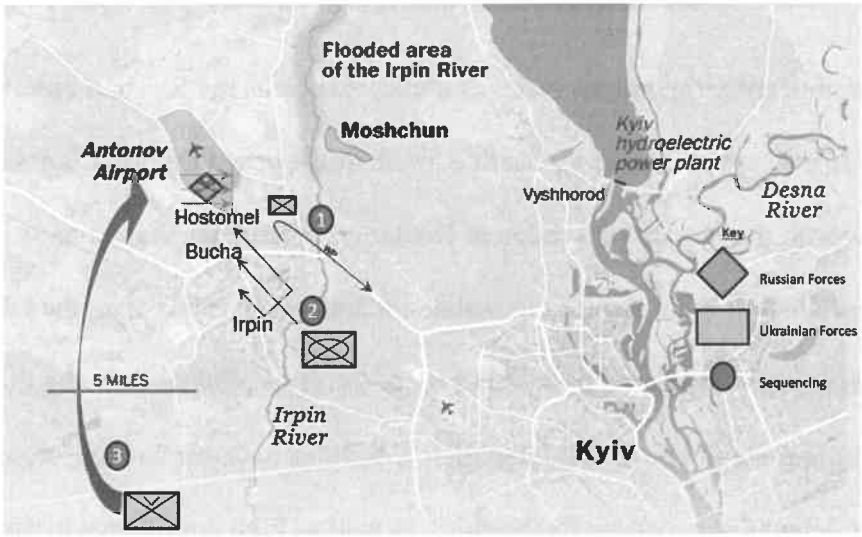
[22] Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al.*, *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, 26.
[23] Operator Starsky, "What Happened in Hostomel," (February 23, 2023), 43:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPfh8sjBQaw.
[24] Paul Sonne, *et al.* "The Battle for Kyiv: Ukrainian valor, Russian blunders combined to save the capital."
[25] Starsky, "What Happened in Hostomel," 1:08.

Figure Two: Ukrainian Counterattack at Hostomel Airport



Over the next month Russian forces along the Kyiv Axis were incapable of overcoming the friction caused by poor planning as well as the unexpectedly capable Ukrainian resistance. As a result, the Russian invasion culminated on the outskirts of the capital. The Kyiv axis is a clear example of an operation where the tempo of maneuver forces outpaced the ability of their logistics units to distribute supplies. To enable effective distribution, ground forces must shorten their lines of communication by establishing intermediate base areas along their axis of advance.[26] While the use of JFEO is not the only method of doing so, it is effective because it leverages the advantages of exterior lines by using operational surprise and maneuver to strike vulnerable positions throughout an adversary's operational depth. These actions assume risk, but if successful they can present a serious dilemma for an adversary who will have to decide between neutralizing the threat in its support area, or concentrating its combat power against

[26] Milan Vego. *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Newport, RI, US Naval War College, 2009, IV-56.

other lines of operation. Despite these benefits, it is worth using Hostomel as a case study to determine if the utility of these actions outweigh their inherent risk.

Are Joint Forcible Entries Still Viable?

Critics of forcible entry operations claim that events such as the Russian failure at Hostomel is evidence that JFEOs are no longer viable due to the threat posed to joint lift assets by A2AD networks.[27] However, the Russian operation at Hostomel invalidates these claims because its failure was a byproduct of their inability to isolate the lodgment, rather than the Ukrainian's ability to deny the assault echelon's freedom of mobility. If the claims made by these critics were correct the Ukrainians should have validated their assertions because they possessed one of the most capable air defense networks in the world,[28] as well as high confidence in the indications and warnings of an imminent Russian invasion.[29] However, rather than confirming these critiques, the Russian SEAD campaign created a gap in Ukrainian air defense coverage which was exploited by air-assault forces. The initial success of the Russian JFEO proves what has always been true about these operations which are that the challenges associated with area denial networks are not insurmountable if a forcible entry is properly sequenced. Unfortunately for the Russians, besides the synchronization of their initial assault, the remainder of the operation violated several forcible entry principles which led to its failure.

Most apparent amongst these principles was the Russian failure to isolate the objective, expand the lodgment, and maintain access for follow-on operations. There were numerous

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[27] James King, "Yes, Mass Airborne Operations are a Thing of the Past," Modern War Institute, (October 12, 2016). https://mwi.usma.edu/yes-mass-airborne-operations-thing-past/.

[28] Dmitiri Alperovitch, "How Ukraine Can Survive the Exhaustion of its Air Defense Stocks," April 17th, 2023, in Geopolitics Decanted, produced by Silverado Policy Accelerator, podcast, 5:45.

[29] Paul Sonne, *et al.* "The Battle for Kyiv: Ukrainian valor, Russian blunders combined to save the capital."

factors which contributed to the violation of these principles, but most pronounced amongst them was their ineffective use of operational maneuver. One of the primary issues with the maneuver plan was that the assault echelon did not possess the requisite capabilities to effect Ukrainian forces outside of the airhead. This may not have been an issue if Russian attack aviation assets neutralized Ukrainian reinforcements in the security zone in lieu of concentrating their firepower on the airhead.[30] However, due to poor integration of these platforms, the Russian JFEO depended on the assault echelon to achieve effects outside of the airhead despite these forces lacking the requisite capabilities to do so. Although Russian and American assault echelons are task organized differently,[31] the Russian experience at Hostomel will be indicative of what US ground forces will likely face during future JFEOs where support from the joint force is contested. In the past, forcible entry operations relied on these effects which were all but guaranteed based on the US military's dominance of the air and sea domains.[32] However, the proliferation of area denial systems will make future domain superiority temporal and localized in nature which will require the assault and follow-on echelons to compensate for the joint force's diminished role. They can do so by leveraging dispersion during their staging and transit to the lodgment, enhancing the organic mobility and precision fires of the assault echelon, and properly task organizing the follow-on echelon to enable rapid transitions.

The Future JFEO Assault and Follow-on Echelons

For the assault echelon to compensate for the diminished role of the joint force, they must arrive at the lodgment with sufficient mass to achieve effects. The importance of mass was

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[30] Starsky, "What Happened in Hostomel," 23:45.

[31] US forcible entry operations place a greater emphasis on inserting combined arms capabilities (such as artillery and engineers) in their assault echelon. This is in contrast to the Russians who prioritize these capabilities in their follow-on echelon. HQ 82d Airborne Division, *Airfield Seizure Standing Operating Procedure,* Ft. Bragg, NC, 2014. 37-42.

[32] Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations,* I:3-5.

demonstrated at Hostomel by the Russian assault echelon which lacked the requisite combat power to seize and defend the airhead prior to the arrival of its follow-on forces. Massing on a lodgment will be particularly challenging during a future JFEO due to the ability of A2AD networks to threaten joint lift assets throughout their operational depth.[33] Whereas in the Hostomel scenario Ukraine had no intention of threatening Russian lift assets mobilizing for the invasion,[34] future conflicts with peer adversaries will involve attempts to preclude the joint force's ability to mass by striking joint lift assets at regional bases.[35] Both the Air Force and Navy are making adaptations to their operational concepts to account for the realities of this future OE. The Navy's *Distributed Maritime Operations* and the Air Force's *Agile Combat Employment* seek to diminish the effectiveness of A2AD networks by using dispersion and decentralized command and control (C2) networks to preserve combat power.[36] Forcible entry operations should leverage these concepts by dispersing their marshalling sites and pickup locations. Once JFEO ground forces are loaded or embarked, lift assets should exploit the use of exterior lines by selecting approach routes which use terrain and dispersion to their advantage, and only concentrate when they are required to converge at the drop or landing zones. By dispersing in this manner the joint force can enhance the survivability of its lift assets which will enable them to mass the combat power necessary for the assault echelon to seize and begin to stabilize the objective. However as Hostomel demonstrated, lift assets assume a high level of risk during their final approach to a lodgment. As a result, the assault echelon may be required to offset from an objective, which will require enhancing their mobility to maintain a high tempo.

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[33] Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia's A2AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined," 23.
[34] Michael Schwirtz, *et al,* "Putin's War," New York Times, December 16, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html
[35] Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia's A2AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined," 23.
[36] Curtis E. Lemay Center, "Agile Combat Employment," USAF Doctrine Note 1-21, August 23, 2022, 2.

While dispersing joint lift assets will improve survivability during transit, the proliferation of tactical area denial capabilities means they will be contested when they eventually converge on the lodgment.[37] This vulnerability was demonstrated at Hostomel where 15% of the Russian MI-8 transport helicopters were destroyed at the airport prior to unloading their personnel by man-portable air defense weapons (MANPADS).[38] To mitigate this risk, lift assets may be required to offset their landing or drop zones outside of the range of enemy area denial capabilities. While offsetting would reduce risk to the lift assets, it would also degrade the assault echelon's tempo which may provide the enemy time to reinforce the lodgment. To prevent this from occurring, future assault echelons should be augmented with lightweight tactical mobility platforms which can be sling loaded, air dropped, or air/sea landed.[39] Motorizing the assault echelon will enable them to rapidly maneuver across offset areas so they can neutralize the enemy on the lodgment prior to the arrival of reinforcements. Upon doing so, these forces can then leverage their mobility to maneuver to secondary assault and reconnaissance objectives with far greater tempo then they are accustomed to. Despite the utility of motorization, this augmentation alone will not provide the assault echelon with the capabilities required to compensate for the joint force's diminished capacity to support these operations. To overcome this shortcoming, the assault echelon must also be augmented with precision fires assets. While these assets could be delivered in many forms, loitering munitions would be the most effective means of doing so for a JFEO due to their portability and capacity to serve as both a scouting and strike asset.

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[37] Dmitiri Alperovitch, "How Ukraine Can Survive the Exhaustion of its Air Defense Stocks," 29:50.
[38] Operator Starsky, "What Happened in Hostomel," 25:25.
[39] The Army has made progress in this realm through the procurement and fielding of its Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) which is an unarmored all-terrain vehicle that can carry nine personnel and 3,200 pounds of equipment. "The Infantry Squad Vehicle," USAASC, (2022), https://asc.army.mil/web/portfolio-item/infantry-squad-vehicle-isv/.

Loitering munitions can compensate for the joint force's diminished role by extending the capacity of the assault echelon to neutralize enemy strike capabilities within the security zone. These assets would have been invaluable during the Hostomel scenario where the assault echelon was unable to effect Ukrainian reinforcements outside of the airhead due to their lack of organic scouting or strike assets.[40] Currently, US loitering munitions come in two variants, the first is a man-portable anti-personnel system with a range of ten kilometers, and the second is a truck-portable armor-penetrating system with a range of forty kilometers. These munitions can out-range towed artillery and mortar systems which are commonly used in the assault echelon during US forcible entry operations. In addition, they also provide live video feeds which can be used as a queuing sensor for artillery and mortars to enhance their ability to deliver effects on enemy forces.[41] The drawback to these systems is they cannot generate the volume of fire which traditional artillery and mortar platforms can produce. Due to this limitation, these assets should not replace the role of tactical fires platforms in the assault echelon, but rather complement them by striking high payoff targets beyond their range. Furthermore, the provision of these assets will not abdicate the joint force from providing operational fires to shape the lodgment in support of a JFEO. Rather, loitering munitions can enable the assault echelon to neutralize high payoff targets in the close area, so the joint force is free to interdict enemy forces in the deep area. Enabling joint fires assets to focus on interdiction in lieu of close air support will hasten the stabilization of the lodgment and facilitate the landing of the follow-on echelon. However, the units which are responsible for forcible entries lack many of the organic combined arms capabilities within their follow-on echelon that are necessary to exploit the initiative of the assault and effectively transition to subsequent operations.

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[40] Operator Starsky, "What Happened in Hostomel," 108:57.

[41] "Tactical Missile Systems," Aerovironment, (2023). https://www.avinc.com/tms

Forcible entries require rapidly deployable and expeditionary units which are not suited to support many of the platforms necessary for follow-on operations such as mobile protective firepower, air defense artillery (ADA) platforms, or bridging assets. However as the Russian example at Hostomel demonstrates, the follow-on echelon must be task organized with the requisite capabilities to facilitate a rapid transition. If Russian follow-on forces were able to land, actions taken by Ukrainian forces in the vicinity of the lodgment would have required them to rapidly employ a variety of combined arms capabilities. For example, bridging assets were necessary to provide freedom of maneuver over the Irpin River, air defense platforms were required to disrupt the Ukrainian counterattack, and finally mechanized maneuver forces were needed to fix the 72d Brigade on the outskirts of Kyiv. The Russian follow-on echelon was task organized to accomplish these tasks,[42] but many US formations responsible for forcible entries do not possess these capabilities. While it may not be necessary to restructure these units based on niche capabilities that may not be required in every contingency, the limitations of these units must be accounted for so that follow-on echelons can task organize correctly. For example, if the Marines are executing an amphibious assault on the island of Taiwan it would behoove them to coordinate with the Army to provide bridging support in the follow-on echelon to enable their maneuver across the dozens of inland waterways on the island. Likewise, if the 82d Airborne Division is executing an airborne assault into a Baltic country, it would be wise to coordinate with the 18th Airborne Corps to provide ADA assets to protect the lodgment once it is secure. Despite these adaptations, some critics would still argue that JFEOs pose a risk vs reward imbalance due to the threat which A2AD networks pose on non-contiguous operations.

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[42] Konrad Muzyka and Rochan Consulting, "Russian Forces in the Western Military District," Center for Naval Analysis, (June, 2021). 28-33.

Anything They Can Do Tanks Can Do Better: A JFEO Counterargument

Individuals that promote this counterargument believe that JFEOs divest combat power and resources from other lines of operation which can accomplish the same mission at a lower risk. These skeptics argue that the forces used to accomplish JFEOs may have been effective in the past, but no longer possess relevance due to the ability of US adversaries to fix these forces with precision fires. These skeptics believe that units which execute these operations remain relevant not based on their capabilities, but rather by leveraging their historical lineage and influence to extract resources which could be better allocated elsewhere.[43] For example, the Marine Corps has not executed an amphibious assault since Incheon, yet the service received funding for eighteen new light amphibious ships as part of its FY23 budget.[44] In addition, the Army's airborne brigades comprise 16% of the service's active duty BCTs despite only executing one brigade sized airborne assault since 2003.[45] These skeptics go on to argue that when these "self-fixing" forces are compared to other formations such as armored units or surface naval groups it is obvious that the latter possesses greater organic mobility and protection which are crucial in the modern OE. Therefore, instead of continuing to resource a capability with limited operational value, the joint force should prioritize the use of mobile and survivable formations to seize lodgments in lieu of those responsible for executing JFEOs. While these criticisms correctly diagnose that the joint force will require a suite of capabilities during conflict, they are naïve to discount the effectiveness of forcible entry operations when used in coordination with other methods of attack.

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[43] Marc R. DeVore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, 2.
[44] Mallory Shellbourne, Marine Corps Requirements Call for 9 Light Amphibious Ships per Regiment," USNI News, (February 14, 2023). https://news.usni.org/2023/02/14/marine-corps-requirements-call-for-9-light-amphibious-ships-per-regiment#.
[45] US Army Public Affairs, "Army announces conversion of two brigade combat teams," Army.mil, September 21, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/211368/army_announces_conversion_of_two_brigade_combat_teams.

By advocating for the divestment of joint forcible entry capabilities, critics are playing into the operational concepts of our adversaries which are predicated on using low cost means to attrite the joint force's most valuable assets. Regardless of where the next conflict takes place, it will be against an adversary who seeks to exploit the cost differential between their means of denial and the US joint force's means of control. They will do so by leveraging their proximity to the conflict and their access to large volumes of low cost munitions to mass effects on exquisite US assets.[46] Due to this conceptual framework, the US military will be required to fight into a theater where it will not possess access to regional sanctuaries thereby forcing it to seize intermediate base areas to enable its operational endurance. Therefore, the question facing the joint force is not whether it will need to access lodgments, but rather what methods will it use to seize and secure these objectives? While pure naval actions or ground assaults can certainly seize and hold a lodgment, doing so will enable an adversary to concentrate its capabilities on the US military's most lethal assets. This is in contrast to executing a forcible entry operation which enables the joint force to exploit its multi-domain advantages by using several lines of operation simultaneously.[47] Doing so presents numerous dilemmas for an adversary who will have to determine where to prioritize its collection and strike assets thereby degrading their ability to deny the joint force's freedom of maneuver. The Kyiv axis provides us with an example of what happens to an offensive when it fails to use multiple lines of operation. After the failure at Hostomel, despite a mismatch in combat power amongst ground forces,[48] the Ukrainians were able to attrite and ultimately defeat the Russian offensive because they were able to leverage their interior lines to mass combat power on a slow, predictable, and increasingly constrained

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[46] Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, 82.
[47] Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*, (Washington, DC: DOD, January 17, 2012), iii. https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf
[48] Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al.*, *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, 1.

enemy.[49] To avoid a similar outcome, the US military should not divest capabilities which inhibit its options by favoring one method of attack over the other. Rather, the joint force should make the necessary adaptations to reduce the vulnerabilities associated with JFEOs so it can maintain its flexibility in future conflicts.

Recommendations

While most adaptations will require a long time horizon to implement, there are a few changes which can be made immediately to set conditions for these operations. The first change would be to execute future JFEO training at geographically dispersed locations in a multi-domain contested environment. The joint force is altering its operational concepts to account for the challenges linked to massing in an A2AD environment; yet it continues to use sanctuary-like conditions that do not replicate the issues associated with operating in a distributed manner. Future forcible entry training should mandate the use of remote marshalling sites where elements of the task force are geographically dispersed. Doing so will present challenges and inefficiencies, but such friction should be welcomed because it will help the joint force adapt to the conditions it will operate within during future JFEOs.

The second change is to experiment with loitering munitions during future exercises to determine the correct distribution of these systems within the assault echelon. While loitering munitions will increase the range and precision strike capabilities of the assault echelon they will do so at the cost of another capability. This may come in the form of a trade-off between traditional indirect fires systems, or possibly a reduction in the size of the assault echelon's maneuver or reconnaissance elements. By experimenting with different task organizations and

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[49] Mykkhaylo Zabrodskyi, *et al., Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022*, 32.

load outs during future exercises, JFEO ground forces can make the correct determinations and ultimately optimize its future task organization.

Finally, the unit's responsible for executing forcible entry operations should train with organizations which will likely be included in future follow-on echelons, but do not possess familiarity with JFEOs. This requirement is most pressing in the Marine Corps due to their divestment of numerous combined arms platforms.[50] These divestments will force them to rely on the Army for capabilities such as mobile protective firepower, tubed artillery, and bridging assets. However, the Army has not executed large scale amphibious operations since Incheon, nor does it possess its own doctrine since it retired FM 31-12: *Army Forces in Amphibious Operations*.[51] Training with units that are not accustomed to forcible entry operations will enable the JFEO task-force to gain a better understanding of its limitations and requirements so that more effective techniques and procedures can be developed. By making these adaptations the joint force can ensure that JFEOs do not become a relic of the past, but remain a viable option in the future.

Conclussion

The US military's last joint forcible entry was executed in Northern Iraq in 2003. Doing so was not the preferred course of action of the Task Force Commander -MG Harry Harrell- but was the one he adopted after Turkey closed its borders to US forces two weeks prior to the

[50] The Marine Corps' modernization plan includes the elimination of tank and bridging companies and a 66% reduction of cannon fired artillery batteries. Headquarters USMC, "Force Design 2030," (March, 2020). 7.
[51] Matthew Graham, "Tanks In the Surf: Maintaining the Joint Combined Arms Landing Team," Association of the United States Army, (July 29, 2022). https://www.ausa.org/publications/tanks-surf-maintaining-joint-combined-arms-landing-team.

invasion.[52] After selecting the COA, MG Harrell exclaimed "ladies and gentlemen, this is high stakes poker, and all the chips are on the table."[53] His expression is more accurate today than it was in 2003. While the threats posed by increasingly capable A2AD networks make forcible entry operations more challenging than ever, as the JFEO in Northern Iraq demonstrated they can also be invaluable. Ultimately, this forcible entry facilitated the landing of thousands of pieces of equipment and tons of supplies which enabled the northern task force to neutralize several Iraqi divisions.[54] Even at Hostomel where poor Russian planning led to the ultimate failure of the operation, it is evident that if it were not for a few tactical mistakes the trajectory of the war would have been altered. The modern OE certainly increases the risks associated with JFEOs, but these risks should not deter the joint force from considering their use in the future. Much like poker, if you are not willing to take calculated risks your actions will become predictable and it is likely you will be defeated by a more audacious opponent. Therefore, instead of dwelling on the challenges associated with these operations, the joint force should recognize their utility, and make the necessary adaptations to enable their future success.

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[52] Michael Marra, "High Risk, High Reward: Reflections on Joint Forcible Entry," US Army War College, (March 23, 2023). https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/joint-forcible-entry/.
[53] *Ibid*
[54] *Ibid*

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