

MARITIME PRE-POSITIONING FORCE-FUTURE: BILL PAYER OR SEA BASING ENABLER?

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**MARITIME PRE-POSITIONING FORCE-FUTURE: BILL PAYER OR SEA BASING
ENABLER?**

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ABSTRACT

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Actions at sea no longer suffice to influence world events; actions from the sea must impact events ashore. The U.S. Navy has been slow to embrace this paradigm shift because of resource implications, inter and intra-service rivalry, and a service culture which favors large blue water ships. The sea basing concept must be re-examined by all services to actualize the concept's true potential. The Maritime Pre-positioning Force-Future (MPF-F) program, envisioned as a key enabler of sea basing, may be funded through further cuts in amphibious ships or fall victim to an untenable Navy ship building plan. Premature consideration of cost issues hindered MPF-F program development. Although existing Maritime Pre-positioning Force (MPF) ships provide a robust and essential capability, MPF-F ships will enable the rapid constitution of forces at sea and provide logistic support to forces ashore. Neither MPF nor MPF-F can conduct independent forcible entry operations. Given the demonstrated capability and success of the current Maritime Pre-Positioning Squadron (MPS) program, a wide disparity in definitions of sea basing, and a disputed programmatic link between amphibious ships and MPF-F, acquisition of MPF-F should be delayed.

MARITIME PRE-POSITIONING FORCE-FUTURE: BILL PAYER OR SEA BASING ENABLER?

The oceans are a global commons -- the circulatory system of globalization. Ninety percent of global exports and two-thirds of petroleum exports are carried by the world's commercial fleets comprised of over 46,000 commercial ships.¹ A "stoppage of commerce" would negatively impact the entire global community and compel a swift and forceful response by the global community. Globalization, more so than anything else, is forcing the U.S. Navy (USN) to grow beyond its blue water heritage into the green and brown waters of the littorals. Actions at sea no longer suffice to influence world events; actions from the sea must impact events ashore. This is a major paradigm shift for the Navy -- which was founded initially for the sole purpose of protecting U.S. commerce abroad.² Increasingly, the Navy's success will depend on its ability to work with sister services, the United States Coast Guard (USCG), and foreign navies.³ This is why the Department of the Navy (DON) has to get the sea basing concept right. As Mr. Robert Work has opined, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Joint Staff, and the DON should reexamine sea basing -- ensuring concepts and definitions are more fully developed -- prior to funding construction of MPF-F ships.⁴ Even though billed as transformational, an ill-defined sea basing concept (and its enabler, MPF-F) will die on the vine because of a cutthroat and competitive Pentagon fiscal environment and an illusory Navy ship building plan. Given the demonstrated capability and success of the current Maritime Pre-positioning Squadron (MPS) Program, a wide disparity in definitions of sea basing, and a disputed programmatic link between amphibious

combatants and Maritime Pre-positioning Forces Future (MPF-F), acquisition of MPF-F should be delayed.

Maritime Pre-positioning Force

The utility of the current Maritime Pre-positioning Force (MPF) has been unquestionably established. After the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) approved creation of the program in 1979, three Maritime Pre-positioning Squadrons (MPS) came online from 1984 to 1986. The three MPS provide rapidly deployable Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) size Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTF) with global reach in support of the National Defense Strategy. Initially, 13 MPF ships, divided among the 3 squadrons, carried Marine Corps equipment and supplies. At the end of the 90's, another three ships were added to the MPF under the Maritime Pre-positioning Force (Enhanced) (MPF-E) program. MPF-E satisfied a USMC requirement for additional cargo capacity -- including an expeditionary airfield, a Navy Mobile Construction Battalion, and a fleet hospital. According to the Marine Corp's Pre-positioning Handbook, "Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm validated the MPF concept when the MPF supported the establishment of the first self-sustaining, operationally capable force in northern Saudi Arabia." Soon after Operation Desert Storm, in June 1991, MPF was again used; this time to provide assistance to the Republic of the Philippines following the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. Since Operation Fiery Vigil, MPF has also been employed in support of Operation Restore Hope (Somalia), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) I, and OIF II.⁵ Of MPF performance during OIF I, BG Robert Neller testified to the House Armed Service Committee Subcommittee on Readiness:

Our MPF program figured prominently during operations in Iraq last year as 11 of our 16 ships offloaded their equipment and supplies in support of OIF. All 11 ships were completely offloaded in a total of 18 days... [T]wo expeditionary airfields and equipment and supplies for the Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (NMCB) were offloaded. In total, over 7,000 vehicles and nearly 6,000 twenty-foot equivalent unit containers were offloaded during this process...equipment and supplies were distributed to two reinforced regimental combat teams and associated aviation and combat service support elements, enabling rapid force closure...⁶

MPF performs as intended, enabling swift response to contingencies and war by maintaining USN and USMC equipment and supplies in theatre.

The current MPF relies on intermediate shore bases. MPF ships possess limited ability to offload off shore, requiring special lighterage and mild sea states. Converted commercial ships, sometimes referred to as black hulls, MPF ships were not constructed to rigorous USN combatant ship, or “gray hull,” standards. From the programs inception, MPF limitations were recognized vis-à-vis capability and survivability. Limitations which from program inception DON stated would preclude MPF from substituting for amphibious ships.⁷

Maritime Pre-Positioning Force (Future)

According to the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), “The Maritime Pre-positioning Force (Future) family of ships will advance the capability of sea basing to support a wide spectrum of joint force operations.”⁸ The big differences between MPF and MPF-F are MPF-F’s ability to rapidly constitute forces at sea and the ability to provide logistic support to forces ashore from the sea. MPF-F is envisioned as a key enabler of sea basing -- eliminating the need for the “iron pile” and facilitating operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS).⁹ Based on the Sea Basing Joint Integrating Concept (JIC) threshold requirements, a MEB-size force would be able close

and assemble to conduct Major Combat Operations (MCO) within ten to fourteen days. The MEB would stage on board MPF-F. However, MPF-F, like the current MPF, is not capable of independent forcible entry operations. MPF-F would have to operate with an Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) which would provide the Assault Echelon (AE) and most likely with a Carrier Strike Group (CSG) to ensure maritime superiority. Forces would operate over-the-horizon, that is, at least 25 nautical miles (NM) from the shore. The sea based force would be capable of sustaining two brigades ashore indefinitely with the nearest secure advance base 2000 NM away.¹⁰

The 2006 QDR calls on DON to fund the first eight MPF-F ships.¹¹ As currently configured, MPF-F is one squadron of fourteen ships of six different types. The fourteen ships include two LHA(R), one LHD, two current MPF ships, three Mobile Landing Platform ships (MLP), three T-AKE, and three Large Medium Speed Roll-On/Roll-Off ships (LMSR). The three big deck ships will be built to military standard, the rest to commercial standards.¹² The MLP is the only new design ship in MPF-F. The rest of ships are based on existing designs or modifications of existing designs. Best described as a “floating beach,” the MLP will enable the transfer of cargo between transport ships and connectors. These three new construction MLP will be able to carry and operate landing craft and transfer vehicles from other ships to landing craft. Of the three aviation big deck ships, only the LHD will have a well deck. The LHD will likely be drawn from one of the eight LHD in the existing amphibious force. The two LHA(R) or LHA-6 class are more closely akin to the old LPH design vice an LHA design. The squadron's two legacy MPF hulls will be T-AK (break bulk) ships. Three Lewis and Clark class ships (T-AKE) will be required to carry sufficient dry cargo and ammunition to support up to

two brigade and shuttle between the MPF-F force and a secure advance base in order to sustain the force. Three new construction medium speed roll-on/roll-off ships will be required to carry vehicles and provide berthing for ground forces. Existing LMSR designs will have to be modified to provide berthing for up to eight hundred personnel.¹³ The heavy reliance on existing designs reduces the risk of program cost growth or delay.

Sea Basing

Only a programmer can find solace in the vast and varied definitions of sea basing -- ambiguity leaves plenty of room for future program cuts. The Sea Basing JIC provides a more narrow definition of sea basing as

the rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and reemployment of joint combat power from the sea, while providing continuous support, sustainment, and force protection to select expeditionary joint forces without reliance on land bases within the [joint operating area].¹⁴

The Office of Transformation at OSD offers a much broader and conceptual definition of sea basing: “The notion of sea basing has to be thought of, not as a base at sea, but rather operational maneuver from the sea. Being able to use the sea as a joint maneuver space, not just a naval maneuver space.” VADM Cebrowski, former head of the Office of Transformation at OSD, touts sea basing as a verb describing the “...dynamics of operational maneuver exploiting the exterior advantage.” The Office of Transformation continues to espouse Cebrowski’s view that sea basing should break down the land-sea barrier.¹⁵ In Sea Power 21, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), ADM Vern Clark, defines sea bases as “...consist[ing] of numerous platforms, including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, multi-mission destroyers, submarines with special

forces, and maritime pre-positioned ships, providing greatly expanded power to joint operations.” -- taking a more platform-centric viewpoint.¹⁶ The Defense Science Board definition of sea basing recognizes that “a sea base is not just a ship, not just pre-positioned materiel, not just a helicopter assault -- it represents a complex capability. One must think of a sea base as a hybrid system of systems consisting of concepts and operations, ships, forces, offensive and defensive weapons, aircraft, communications, and logistics, all of which require careful planning, coordinating, and exercising to operate smoothly.”¹⁷ ADM Mike Mullen during his tenure as CNO cited disaster relief, in New Orleans (Katrina) and Indonesia, and military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as examples of Navy sea basing successes.¹⁸ In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), ADM Mullen testified that “the future Navy will remain sea based with global speed and persistent presence provided by forward deployed and surge-ready forces through the Fleet Response Plan (FRP). Mullen continued on sea basing later in his testimony stating “sea basing provides operational maneuver and assured access to the Joint/Multinational forces while significantly reducing our footprint ashore, thereby minimizing the need to obtain host nation permission and/or support.”¹⁹ ADM Mullen’s views on sea basing bring in to focus the humanitarian and disaster relief potential of sea basing. ADM Mullen’s choice of words with respect to “reducing” vice eliminating “our footprint ashore” is also telling. Eliminating the footprint ashore carries with it a requirement for more ships and more money. MG Gordon Nash offered a different take on sea basing:

Sea basing is not an entirely new concept, particularly for conducting amphibious operations. It was conceived during World War II to support naval forces fighting in the Pacific Theater that were located thousands of miles from any established logistics infrastructure. Today’s evolving sea

basing concept is much more than logistics support. It's about using the sea as maneuver space, being unencumbered by reliance on air or seaports of debarkation. It provides an immediate and protected environment for forward deployed naval forces to assemble and initiate the correct response, without operational pause...It provides the means to support and sustain these forces, both at sea and on land, while engaging the enemy.²⁰

MG Nash's definition takes maritime superiority as a foregone conclusion when he states that sea basing "...provides an immediate and protected environment..." -- this assumption highlights the need for a robust naval force. MG Nash also makes clear the Marine Corps desire to eliminate the need for shore-based support. The Secretary of the Navy's (SECNAV) comments at the 2007 Expeditionary Warfare (EXWAR) Conference get to the crux of the matter -- "the decision-making process regarding...MPF-F...and other key programs is now entering a critical phase. We are at the critical point where we need to decide what we really want to buy in the first place."²¹ Without widely accepted sea basing concepts and a shared understanding of MPF-F's role enabling the concept, MPF-F is ripe to be used as an offset or further delayed during Program Objective Memorandum (POM) development.

Navy Shipbuilding

The precarious state of U.S. Navy shipbuilding significantly hampers meaningful debate about sea basing and MPF-F's envisioned role as a sea basing enabler. The magnitude of the shipbuilding problem has caused the premature interjection of budget concerns into concept development -- to pernicious effect. Rather than debating what is required to support the sea basing concept (not to mention what the sea basing concept means) and whether the capability provided supports the investment, the debate has

become whether the capability provided by the MPF-F the Navy can afford justifies the investment.

Shipbuilding costs continue to spiral out of control. While CNO, ADM Clark candidly testified to Congress about his concern over rising ship construction costs. “[He] pointed to cost growth that exceeded inflation by more than 100 percent (doubling) for aircraft carriers, destroyers, and amphibious ships from 1967 to today. For submarines, the growth is cited as 400 percent.”²² In 2007, ADM Mullen was closely questioned by Congress on cost growth in the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) program testifying that “we are further evaluating lessons from the recently identified LCS cost overruns.”²³ The LPD-17 program is the “poster child” for Navy shipbuilding programs. The SCN cost of the last LPD-17 is estimated at \$1.8 billion. Initial estimates for the LPD-17 were \$750 million per ship. Secretary of the Navy Winter recently took Northrop Grumman Ship Systems to task in a letter that was released to the media: “I am equally concerned about Northrop Grumman Ship Systems’ (NGSS) ability to construct and deliver ships that conform to the quality standards maintained by the Navy and that adhere to the cost and schedule commitments agreed upon at the outset by both NCSS and the Navy.”²⁴

The Navy’s ship building plan, based on faulty and hopeful assumptions, cannot be executed. To grow to 313 ships, the Navy estimates it must increase its shipbuilding (SCN) account from \$10.5 billion a year (in FY07 dollars) to \$14.4 billion a year (in FY07 dollars). Four fundamental assumptions underpin the Navy’s ability to execute its SCN Plan: Operations and Maintenance (OMN) funding must remain flat; Navy Military Personnel funding must remain flat; Navy Research and Development (RDTE) must be

decreased and remain at the decremented funding level; and finally new construction ships must be built at current Navy estimates. According to CBO estimates, the Navy requires \$19.5 billion a year (in FY07 dollars) in the SCN account to execute the shipbuilding plan.²⁵ Historically, Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates are closer to actual ship costs. The Navy's other three fundamental assumptions on OMN, MPN, and RDTE are as questionable as the one on SCN costs. OMN costs include ship steaming hours and flight hours. Given the unrelenting growth in global demand for fuel, both those programs will see pronounced cost growth. Reducing end strength provides the only means to ensure manpower costs remain flat. Otherwise rising healthcare costs and seemingly ever increasing benefits will ensure continued growth in MPN accounts. RDTE cuts may be sustainable -- at the organization's peril. Not surprisingly, some analysts lay Navy shipbuilding problems squarely at the Navy's feet,

Finally, no amount of cooperation can compensate for the corrosive consequences of a naval shipbuilding program that is dead in the water. You can't sustain global maritime supremacy by buying one submarine a year and one aircraft carrier every five years. And you can't fix a fouled up shipbuilding sector by launching a political jihad against the handful of shipyards that have survived a generation of Navy mismanagement.²⁶

Given the U.S. Navy's predisposition to protecting large blue water platforms, MPF-F, LCS, and amphibious ships will serve as the canaries indicating when the SCN plan turns toxic.

Particularly because of the SCN challenges, the funding tail associated with MPF-F must be assessed. The USMC, in USMC Concepts and Programs for 2007, state the need for high speed connectors like Joint High Speed Sealift (JHSS) and Joint High Speed Vessel (JHSV) to support the flow of forces and material to forces basing at sea.²⁷ A next generation Landing Craft Air Cushioned (LCAC) will be required to serve

as a ship to shore connector. A recent Congressional Budget Office Study pointed to the potential requirement for two additional tankers to supply fuel to sea basing ships operating in support of ground units ashore.²⁸ If LCAC detachments are attached to MPF-F, how many Assault Craft Unit personnel and how much equipment will have to be forward deployed to support the LCAC? Will additional shore infrastructure be required to support the MPF-F landing craft detachments? Manning of MPF-F will be critical from a fiscal perspective. MPF-F was envisioned to be manned predominantly by civilian mariners. The three MPF-F big decks will require certified flight deck crews and aircraft control tower personnel. At a minimum, the LHD will require well deck personnel. How will these personnel be trained? How much will it cost? The three MLP will also likely require well deck personnel. The same questions remain germane. An augmented Tactical Air Squadron will likely be required to coordinate flight operations for the MPF-F. Security detachments will be required for the ships while underway. Certainly some of these requirements exist for today's MPS which requires Naval Support Element, ACU, Naval Cargo Handling Battalion, and Beach Master Unit (BMU) personnel.²⁹ However, MPF-F will cause a marked increase in OMN and MPN costs for Military Sealift Command (MSC). A large funding tail will either erode Navy support for MPF-F or negatively impact the Navy's Expeditionary Warfare Program, which will almost certainly have to provide the funding at the expense of other ongoing programs.

Inter-Service Rivalry

Inter-Service and intra-Service rivalry detracts from open dialogue on sea basing and, ultimately, concept development. The President of the Naval War College wrote "future military operations will be conducted by composite forces that effectively bring

into concert the capabilities of the land, air, space, and sea services of this nation and of its friends and allies.”³⁰ Bringing “capabilities together in concert” requires coordination and cooperation between services as those capabilities are developed. Unfortunately, the services’ ability to coordinate and cooperate often fall victim to parochialism and stove pipes. True transformation is not welcome because it may mean a shift in traditional budget resource distribution. Of Congressman Skelton’s recent call to reexamine service roles and missions, a writer wryly predicted the “...new roles and missions exercise will end up being a similar self justification of what the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps are already doing rather than anything approaching a bold blueprint for restructuring.”³¹ The historical split of funds between the services has gone largely unchanged since the advent of the Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS) under SECDEF Robert McNamara in the 1960s. In their book, *How Much is Enough*, authors Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, comment on the problem:

The services actively compete with each other in fulfilling many of the major mission of Department of Defense (DoD)...like any bureaucracy, each service naturally advocates reliance on its own chosen instruments...In addition, a service tends bureaucratically to neglect or undervalue programs that support other services or new or unconventional missions...³²

Ironically, one of the examples given by Enthoven and Smith to support their argument was the Navy’s failure to support Fast Logistics Support Ships since they would be used to support Army missions. A more recent example is the controversy over the modification of the LHA(R) design to remove the well deck. Of the move, MGEN (Ret) Bill Whitlow, a former director of the Naval Expeditionary Warfare Division, commented “an aviation-only capable ship would be very short sighted...”³³ Of the closing of the well deck, VADM Joseph Sestak testified to Congress “What a monumental decision. What

a cultural change. We brought the [Marine air combat element] increasingly back to sea.”³⁴ The Marine Corps and Surface Warfare (with an amphibious background) point view may well be that VADM Sestak’s “monumental decision” and “culture change” amounted to no more than turning LHA(R) into an LPH. A programmer would see a calculated move accepting decreased ship capability to generate \$300 million in short term SCN savings and some long term savings through decreased OMN and MPN costs. Navy and Marine Corps positions on sea basing also diverge widely. Mr. Robert Work, a senior defense analyst for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, writes “...current sea basing plans and programs are unduly skewed toward a Navy desire to replace amphibious ships with maritime pre-positioning ships.”³⁵ In 2004, MGEN (Ret) Whitlow had pointedly commented on the issue saying “the Navy is building less and the Marines are sitting by...”³⁶ Testimony by ADM Mullen to the SASC in early 2007 lends additional credence to Work’s position. According to Mullen, “Pre-positioned assets must be included in the overall force availability equation – ignoring MPF-F as the lift component of an additional MEB would be incongruous with today’s fiscal environment. The capabilities provided by the MPF-F mitigate concerns regarding the operational availability of the assault echelon force required to deliver 2.0 MEB lift...” Mullen also testified that 30 amphibious ships coupled with MPF-F would suffice to meet lift requirements.³⁷ Interestingly enough, ADM Mullen’s testimony contradicts public statements by the Amphibious Warfare Branch Head in the Expeditionary Warfare Directorate.

“If we had to fight today...we’d have to take all our amphibious ships,” said CAPT Edward Barfield, head of the Navy’s amphibious warfare branch. “I think we’re going in the wrong direction in amphibious ships. We need to be going the other way – we need to be going up instead of down...”³⁸

Unlike the Marine Corps, the Navy staff does not speak with one voice. Given the disparate Navy staff positions, questions regarding Navy's intent vis-à-vis amphibious force structure cuts and the funding of MPF-F are inevitable. Enthoven and Smith description from the 1960's remains accurate today -- "each service is itself a coalition of strong and competitive viewpoints. For example, the Navy is really three Navies -- the Surface Navy, the Air Navy, and the Submarine Navy, not to mention the Marine Corps -- and each group competes vigorously for money and missions."³⁹ Anyone who has sat in on staff level meetings regarding the Blue-Green split of Department of the Navy Total Obligation Authority (TOA) can attest to the rancor those meetings can sometimes generate.

All the services employ think tanks to facilitate concept development, conduct assessments of alternatives, conduct capability studies, and perform other vital analytical work in support of decision makers. Enthoven and Smith provide interesting comments about the analysis provided by think tanks like RAND and the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA):

Nor can one realistically expect the analytical groups working for each of the services -- such as the Rand Corporation, Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), and the Research Analysis Corporation -- to be completely objective in their studies...[They] tend to take the philosophical coloration of their sponsoring organization.⁴⁰

Robert Work, in his paper MPF-F: All Ahead Slow, essentially accuses ADM Clark of using MPF-F to "play" the Marine Corps. According to Work, ADM Clark's goal was to ultimately replace the existing amphibious force with MPF-F.⁴¹ Work is looking at the issue through the Marine Corps lens. During his tenure as Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Clark attempted to generate additional funds for SCN through a host of business efficiencies (Sea Enterprise). ADM Clark lauded MSC because of their low operating

costs and reduced personnel requirements. Minimal manning and reduced operating costs were force-wide goals. With programs like LCS and DD(X), Navy was moving to provide enhanced capability at reduced cost. These ship classes were designed specifically for minimal manning. MPN would be the Navy bill payer, not SCN. Small crews of civilian mariners augmented by Navy personnel manning MPF-F fit the model perfectly. The “transformational” capability could ultimately be provided at an overall savings to Navy. Whether ADM Clark’s vision was to ultimately replace amphibious ships with MPF-F would just be conjecture. What is not conjecture is that the Navy staff is inclined to assume increased risk on forcible entry; the Marine Corps staff is not.

The Expeditionary Warfare Directorate of the Navy staff is headed by a Marine Corps two star general. Commodore Michael Clapp provided a description of the circumstances of Amphibious Warfare officers in the Royal Navy in the 1980’s which aptly describes circumstances today in the U.S. Navy:

As the Royal Navy’s capability for amphibious operations reduced, it tended to be treated by Naval officers with a somewhat cavalier degree of disdain. It was seen in some quarters as not really of naval interest and so involvement would probably be bad for promotion and should be avoided.⁴²

The Marine Corps understands this and uses it to their advantage when they can; in particular to be the driving force behind concept development. Critical Mine Warfare and Amphibious Warfare programs lack high placed advocates in the Navy hierarchy. Substantial near term risk has been accepted in both programs (2.0 MEB lift vice 2.5 fiscally constrained MEB lift requirement and early decommissioning of the Navy’s Coastal Mine hunter (MHC) class) based on the promise of far term capability (MPF-F, LHA(R), and LCS). The existing arrangement works to the detriment of both the Navy and Marine Corps.

Untapped MPF-F Potential

Surprisingly absent from the discussion regarding MPF-F is consideration of potential pre-positioning of Navy resources such as mission modules for Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) or Mine Warfare (MIW) Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV) for harbor clearance or possible naval missions for MPF-F beyond support of the Marines. During preliminary MPF-F discussions in 2001/2002, MPF-F was considered for a variety of roles and missions -- most of which were discarded due to cost. Still, there may be utility in pre-positioning Navy equipment on MPF-F. The Navy intends to commission 55 LCS. Mission modules will enable the ships to be configured for either anti-submarine warfare (ASW), mine warfare (MIW), or surface warfare (SUW). The ability to quickly reconfigure deployed LCS at sea merits consideration and analysis. The 2005 National Maritime Strategy highlights the importance of 30 “super” ports to global commerce. Pre-positioning Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) harbor clearance assets could help mitigate the risk of a lengthy port closure hindering global commerce. The National Maritime Strategy states the United States will “[offer] maritime port security assistance, training, and consultation.”⁴³ MPF-F ships as currently envisioned would contribute significantly to Navy capability with no concomitant increase in costs. A big deck MPF-F ship, which will be built to grey hull standards, could be used as an MIW Command and Control ship or an Afloat Forward Staging Base (AFSB) for Special Operations Forces if events so dictated. Big deck amphibious ships have served successfully as MIW Command and Control ships in the past. The MPF-F T-AKE will undoubtedly be used to support assets assigned to the Maritime Component Commanders above and beyond MPF-F. The following passage from A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power highlights the potential utility of MPF-F and associated connectors.

Marines will continue to be employed as air ground task forces operating from amphibious ships to conduct a variety of missions such as power projection, but they will also be employed as detachments aboard a wider variety of ships and cutters for maritime security missions. Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen, teamed in various combinations of security forces, mobile training teams, construction battalions, health services, law enforcement, and civil affairs units to conduct security cooperation and humanitarian assistance missions illustrate adaptive force packaging.⁴⁴

Sea based MPF-F ships could easily support multiple simultaneous humanitarian, training, and security missions while effectively minimizing the footprint ashore by providing logistics support from the sea.

The ability to conduct intermediate level maintenance on either the big deck MPF-F ships or one of the MPF-F classes may be worthy of additional investment. Contractors for other services could also use these facilities. During OIF, the Army had difficulty providing secure locations for contractors to conduct repair work. Intermediate level maintenance capability already resides within Carrier Strike Groups and Expeditionary Strike Groups. However, if MPF-F ships operate frequently with surface escorts only or operate in support of Army forces, the cost-benefit analysis may warrant the investment in intermediate level maintenance facilities on the big deck MPF-F ships.

Employment of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) by MPF-F should be considered from the outset. In particular modifications, if required, to the MPF-F LHA(R) design to support UAV operations should be considered. The 2006 QDR called for assessing the potential to fly UCAV off of aircraft carriers. MPF-F and big deck amphibious ships belong in the mix. Although the full potential of UAV programs remains unknown, UAV will change the way the services operate. True to form, the services are all pursuing their own UAV programs. The Navy, Marine Corps, and Army are pushing back against Air Force efforts to become the Executive Agent for all UAV

programs operating above 3500 feet. UAV offer the potential for persistent Information Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and unprecedented maritime domain awareness. Already the utility and promise of UAV have been clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan. Drones in Iraq log 14,000 flying hours a month. “The RQ-1 Predator has already employed weapons in direct support of troops on the ground.”⁴⁵ Persistent Armed UAV (PA-UAV) could remain on station for up to twenty hours. The Air Force has been able to control drones operating in Iraq and Afghanistan from the continental United States.

It is doubtful whether the services are looking at the compatibility of future UAV programs with future Navy ship programs. A big part of sea basing and breaking down the land sea barrier may well include operating UAV ranging from micro-UAV to Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles (UCAV) from ships including MPF-F. UAV will be able to provide Close Air Support (CAS) in the future. MPF-F could host Air Force or Joint UAV controllers. Equipment requirements must be identified. Universal controls and procedures for UAV systems ranging from Fire Scout Vertical Takeoff UAV (VTUAV) to Hunter to Shadow to Global Hawk must be identified. The footprint of UAV and support equipment must be assessed. At this point, UAV are not seen as supplanting manned aircraft, but supplementing them. The ability of MPF-F to conduct concurrent rotary wing and UAV operations needs to be assessed to determine if further design modifications for the ships are prudent.⁴⁶

Relationships Matter

Sea basing will rely on relationships more than on technology. Herein lie some of the biggest challenges associated with sea basing. Civilian mariners, Sailors, Marines,

Airmen, and Soldiers will be called upon to work together with little group training. Transit used to afford diverse units and commands requisite training and planning time prior to responding to a contingency. Commodore Clapp wrote of the journey to the Falklands with his Amphibious Task Force, “we would need the sea time to shake down our drills, which included Nuclear, Biological, Chemical, and Damage Control (NBCD) training, flying, deck landings (especially at night), and the ground attack role for the Fleet Air Arm’s Sea Harriers.”⁴⁷ Commodore Clapp goes on to write “...the importance of the relationship and trust that has to be built up between Landing Force and Amphibious Task Force Commanders and which must be seen to exist by the forces under their command.”⁴⁸ Today, the relationship between an Amphibious Squadron Commander (PHIBRON) and Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) Commander still sets the tone for the quality of working relationship between staffs and overall deployment success. Before the Fleet Response Plan (FRP), when three ship Amphibious Ready Groups (ARG) deployed with MEUs, there were typically either three or four Major Command 0-6s. So, there were really only three or four personalities that could matter. With 14 MPF-F ships captained by civilian masters, MAGTF staff, Maritime Preposition Squadron (MPSRON) staff, PHIBRON staff with an associated ESG (Assault Echelon), and any other stray cats and dogs, there will be a cornucopia of personalities. If you are curious about why this is important, ask any three masters or captains the difference between sea state three and sea state four. In all likelihood, three different answers will be provided. Under marginal conditions, some masters may continue to operate, others may not. How will this be dealt with if it impacts transfer of critical supplies ashore? Compounding the problem, U.S. Army conventional Army forces rarely work or train

with the Navy. Marine Corps amphibious skills are atrophying. Said the Commandant of the Marine Corps, GEN James Conway, “We now have a generation of men and women who do not have a complete understanding of what ‘expeditionary’ is.”⁴⁹ The ability to conduct amphibious operations is a highly perishable skill.

Of Military Sealift Command (MSC) support provided during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VADM David Brewer commented on the need “...to anticipate possible changes in strategy and operational level focus in order to ensure that we were ready for changes in sealift tasking.”⁵⁰ Sea basing will provide even greater challenges. MSC will have to anticipate changes in strategy, operational, and tactical focus. MPF-F ships will be called upon to receive incoming stores, equipment, and personnel and push required stores, equipment, and personnel to forces operating ashore. Ship’s masters will be forced to contend with weather challenges and potentially urgent need for resources ashore. Coordinating ship movements, connector movements, and flight operations will be absolutely crucial. Sea basing ships may have to coordinate the movement of large numbers of casualties and prisoners of war while maintaining the flow of logistics and personnel ashore.

Even when the technology is fully developed to support MPF-F, as currently envisioned, the relationships, training, and standard operating procedures must be in place to make the concept successful. Since responsibility for this goes across resource sponsors and services, seamless implementation should not be taken for granted. The emphasis on rapid assembly of disaggregated forces to respond quickly sacrifices relationships and cohesion.

Is the Fiscally Constrained MPF-F Worth the Cost?

MPF-F will be capable of supporting a range of operations, most of which can be done by amphibious combatants. Given the capability of amphibious combatants and the proven performance of existing MPS squadrons which has already been discussed, the question arises whether the capabilities of MPF-F justify the cost. As Work writes, "...current sea basing plans are rather narrowly focused on two key capabilities – landing a single brigade on a hostile shore in 11 to 17 days, and thereafter providing sea based logistical support for two early entry brigades..."⁵¹ The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review lauds the performance and capability of existing forces in Afghanistan saying the war "...demonstrated the ability of the U.S. military to project power rapidly at global distances; to conduct operations far inland...and to sustain operations with minimal local basing support."⁵² A recent study conducted by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) at the request of the Subcommittee on Sea Power and Expeditionary Warfare concluded that "the planned MPF-F would provide a capability similar to today's amphibious force -- but with improved responsiveness -- a MEB size force could be ready one to two weeks earlier...with a much smaller logistics presence required ashore." One alternative to MPF-F proposed in the CBO study was simply adding sea based logistics to existing amphibious forces -- reducing cost by 80 percent! The report also concluded that "achieving greater capability than those envisioned for the MPF-F would probably require significantly higher investment..."⁵³ Reducing the scope and role of MPF-F diminished the potential for unique contributions to sea basing and joint force capabilities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered as a road ahead. First, the U.S. Navy needs a four-star Admiral with an amphibious/expeditionary warfare background. Although much has been written about the U.S. Navy moving more from blue water to brown and green water, resources have not flowed as easily as the hyperbole. Only a four star flag officer will have the stature and sway to act as an honest broker between the Navy and Marine Corps. Second, either MPF-F construction should be delayed until the sea basing concept has been reassessed by all the services or MPF-F construction should begin with the T-AKE and the sea basing concept should still be reassessed by all the services. To break down the land sea barrier, the barriers between and within services must be broken down. Traditionally the requirement for amphibious ships has been based on MEB lift in support of forcible entry. Given the focus on irregular warfare, homeland security, and humanitarian operations inside and outside the continental U.S., the third recommendation is that the metrics for determining amphibious lift requirements be reassessed. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review clearly states "...the Department is shifting its portfolio of capabilities to address irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive challenges while sustaining capabilities to address traditional challenges."⁵⁴ Is lift sufficient to meet irregular warfare requirements? What about Homeland Defense Requirements? Will a big deck amphibious ship always be available during hurricane season? Should one be? Amphibious ships and MPF-F ships are well suited to support soft power maritime strategies like the "security cooperation MAGTF" and the Navy's global fleet station. Fourth, use of amphibious lift by the other services and Special Operations Forces must be encouraged and facilitated. Finally,

the Navy must quit buying more program than its top line can support. If the underlying assumptions are wrong, then subsequent analysis will be wrong.

Conclusions

In order to shape events ashore, from the sea, the U.S. Navy must control the seas. In today's fast-changing global environment, to execute the National Maritime Strategy, the U.S. Navy-Marine Corps Team must be able to operate from the sea to shape events ashore. Control of the seas by itself is no longer enough. Inter-Service and intra-Service rivalries hamper meaningful discussion whether resource allocations within DOD and DON reflect this paradigm shift. Meaningful discussion is further hindered by an untenable shipbuilding plan based on faulty assumptions. The concept of sea basing needs to be further developed by all Services, if the land sea barrier is going to be broken. This development will likely not occur since it may result in a significant shift in resources between services. MPF-F based UAV/UCAV, controlled by the Air Force, one day could easily provide persistent ISR and sea control. Army contractors could repair small arms, night vision equipment, and communications equipment on an MPF-F platform one hundred miles off the coast, safely away from the combat zone. Relief aid could be gathered, staged, and shipped directly to affected sites avoiding theft and loss of humanitarian supplies at an ISB. The narrow capabilities being advertised for MPF-F will make it difficult for the program to compete for funding – unless it does so at the expense of amphibious shipping. Any drop in service TOA coupled with the inherent SCN problems will bring this problem to a head sooner vice later.

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