

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**SEABASING: A CRITICAL ENABLER
OF THE JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

by

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ABSTRACT

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Sea basing is an operational concept that will enable naval and joint forces to meet future challenges posed by adaptive, asymmetric adversaries, maturing technologies and anti-access strategies. At the heart of the concept are “afloat bases,” where forces, their logistics and other support reside in a secure, networked and flexible environment, supported by improved sealift capability for the joint force. Sea basing has attracted increased attention recently: for instance, the Defense Science Board Task Force on Sea Basing called the Joint Sea Base a “critical future joint military capability” for the United States, highlighted the importance of sea basing as a force projection means, and recommended applying new resources towards achievement. Does this operational concept truly have strategic significance or is it merely the next logical extension of expeditionary maneuver warfare? While the concepts underlying sea basing are becoming clearer, its political-military influence on the National Security Strategy and potential ramifications for U.S. diplomacy are not as evident. This paper will analyze and evaluate whether this concept will have relevance in supporting the national security strategy.

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SEABASING: A CRITICAL ENABLER OF THE JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

A Military, Naval, Littoral, when wisely prepared and discretely conducted, is a terrible Sort of War. Happy for the People who are Sovereigns enough of the Sea to put it into Execution! For it comes like Thunder and Lightning to some unprepared Part of the World.

—Thomas More Molyneaux, 1759

ISSUE

Sea basing is an operational concept that will enable naval and joint forces to meet future challenges posed by adaptive, asymmetric adversaries, maturing technologies and anti-access strategies. At the heart of the concept are “afloat bases,” where forces, their logistics and other support reside in a secure, networked and flexible environment, supported by improved sealift capability for the joint force.¹ Sea basing has attracted increased attention recently: for instance, the Defense Science Board Task Force on Sea Basing called the Joint Sea Base a “critical future joint military capability” for the United States, highlighted the importance of sea basing as a force projection means, and recommended applying new resources towards achievement.² Does this operational concept truly have strategic significance or is it merely the next logical extension of expeditionary maneuver warfare? Does it possess the capability to influence non-state actors once deterrence, diplomacy and coercion have failed?

While the concepts underlying sea basing are evolving, its political-military influence on the National Security Strategy and potential ramifications for U.S. diplomacy are not as evident. This paper will analyze and evaluate whether this concept will have relevance in supporting our national security strategy and the political-military implications that must be addressed if it is to be successful.

U.S. SECURITY POSTURE; POST 9/11

The post-Cold War era has provided the U.S. a glimpse of the future political and security challenges. Our adversaries, which can be nation-states or non-state actors, have become increasingly creative, adaptive and lethal and we can expect them to employ anti-access strategies. Second, more and more often our interests do not seem to match those of our friends and allies. Many of our allies are now less dependent on us for security, although we seem to be more dependent on them for intelligence and cooperation in the global war on terrorism. As a result, there seems to be a dramatic increase in anti-Americanism, anti-globalization, and anti-U.S. presence throughout the world and particularly in the third world.

Consequently, we must be concerned that allies and friends will not grant the U.S. rights to access its territory when needed.

For example, during Operation Allied Force in 1998, Greece denied the Marine Corps use of a port for a Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) operation because the facility was responsible for one third of Greek international trade. Similarly, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. was denied permission by NATO ally Turkey for transit rights into Iraq. Turkey refused to grant one-time, short-duration access through its territory, despite the offer of \$6 billion and loan guarantees worth even more from the U.S. government.³ This is about the same amount that the Marine Corps will pay for all three of its Maritime Prepositioning Force Future (MFP(F)) squadrons, essential to the future of sea basing⁴ and highlights the need for a capability to overcome anti-access scenarios.

The United States depends on its military to provide forward presence, project power when needed and defeat an adversary when necessary. America is less likely to face nation-states on the battlefield with armies or fleets and more likely to be menaced by embittered failed states or non-state actors who possess weapons of mass destruction or catastrophic technologies, and are less susceptible to traditional means of deterrence.⁵ This changing world environment requires the armed forces to innovate and experiment with new approaches to warfare that will ultimately provide the President with a wider range of military options to discourage aggression or any form of coercion against the United States, our allies, and our friends.⁶ For this reason, the military must possess the capability to ensure U.S. access to distant theaters when needed, to do so quickly, and to provide a robust deterrence mechanism that can remain postured until the crisis is resolved or until its military capability is required.

ARC OF INSTABILITY

Of particular concern is the “arc of instability,” extending from the Western Hemisphere, through Africa and the Middle East to Asia, which serves as breeding grounds for threats to U.S. interests.⁷ Non-state actors within this area, who are politically unconstrained and have the will and means to disrupt national order, are less susceptible to traditional means of deterrence and also more likely to seek to counter U.S. power projection capabilities by creating anti-access environments in these areas.⁸ These same adversaries are also more likely to target large civilian populations, economic centers and symbolic locations, most of which are located along the world’s littorals.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LITTORALS

A more complex and distributed battlespace will also be part of the future security environment. Figuring prominently into this new environment will be the littorals, which are defined as the shore and coastal area, its adjacent waterways, and the land area extending inland, generally from 50 to 250 miles.

The strategic significance of access from the sea and the littorals to U.S. national interests is readily apparent when considering the following:

- A majority of the world's population and major cities are located within 100 miles of the coast.
- Four out of five world capitals are less than 300 miles from the coast.
- 70 percent of the world's population lives within 200 miles of the coast.
- 99% of U.S. foreign trade travels by sea.
- The littoral is home to nearly all of the primary marketplaces for international trade.⁹

Any analysis of the relevance of sea basing should begin by validating the significance of the littorals. The IRIS Independent Research firm developed a database that identified 2243 data points from 147 countries representing "nodes" of varying strategic importance in key regions around the globe. These nodes are cities and capitals with a population of 100,000 or more that also possessed some item of significance such as a natural resource or significant infrastructure. The results of their study seem to support the idea that littorals will indeed be significant in supporting U.S. national interests. First, the average distance of each node from the sea is 202 miles with a median mode of 75 miles. Second, 24% of the nodes are on the coastline with over 53% being less than 100 miles from the coast, and, if one extends the littorals 225 miles inland, a remarkable 70% of the nodes fall within this distance.¹⁰

BARNETT'S NEW PENTAGON MAP

Not surprisingly, U.S. economic interests are closely tied to the littorals. Thomas Barnett, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College and the author of the book "The Pentagon's New Map," seems to confirm the significance of the littorals in this regard. Barnett divides the world into the "Functioning Core which has embraced globalization and is thick with connectivity, and the Non-Integrating Gap where globalization is thinning or just plain absent" (figure 1).¹¹



Source: Reproduced by permission of Thomas Barnett

FIGURE 1. THOMAS BARNETT'S "NEW PENTAGON MAP"

Barnett's states that "the overwhelming majority of U.S. military crisis response activity over the past 20 years was concentrated inside the Gap" as shown in figure 2.¹² If one compares the locations of this crisis response activity with Barnett's map of the non-integrating gap, three observations emerge:

- The vast majority, almost 95%, of U.S. military crisis interventions occurred within the Non-Integrating Gap.¹³
- Most of the interventions occurred within the littorals.
- Barring any significant economic shifts within the Gap, future crises will most likely continue to occur within the littorals of the non-integrating gap.

Barnett contends that the U.S. must consider the entire Gap as a strategic threat environment. He argues that from a security standpoint, the keys to future U.S. security are "shrinking the Gap and stopping terrorist networks from accessing the Core via 'seam states' that lie along the Gap's boundaries." Barnett identifies the classic seam states as Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Greece, Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, all accessible via the littorals.¹⁴ He also points out there are vulnerable waterways that are of continuing economic, strategic and grand strategic interest to

the United States, such as the Malacca Straits, where 30 percent of world trade passes through its waters annually.¹⁵



Source: Reproduced by permission of Thomas Barnett

FIGURE 2. U.S. MILITARY CRISIS ACTIVITY: 1990-2002

The late Admiral Jeremy Boorda, Chief of Naval Operations, once said the littoral is "where our national interests and potential foes most often collide."¹⁶ Looking out to the year 2050, it becomes apparent that the littorals indeed have the potential to contain numerous future hotspots around the globe.

SEA BASING: AN EVOLVING CONSTRUCT

Since Operation Enduring Freedom, the senior leadership in the Department of Defense and the other services (Army and Air Force) have indicated an interest in developing a more robust sea basing capability.¹⁷ While the concept does have tremendous implications for the naval services, its future lies in its ability to integrate the power of all the services. The Defense Science Board Task Force on Sea Basing concluded that future sea basing needs are "well beyond today's Navy and Marine Corps operating capabilities."¹⁸ Therefore, where practical, all references to sea basing in this paper will refer to sea basing concepts and capabilities as they relate to the joint force.

The Defense Science Board simply defines sea basing as "the capacity and/or capability to project rapidly sustainable military power ashore from the sea."¹⁹ The official Navy/Marine

Corps definition is more in depth: "Sea basing, a national capability, is the overarching transformational operating concept for projecting and sustaining naval power and joint forces, which assures joint access by leveraging the operational maneuver of sovereign, distributed, and networked forces operating globally from the sea."²⁰ Framed within the evolving security environment, an alternative working definition is proposed: Sea basing is a joint integrating concept for rapidly projecting an adaptive, expeditionary, self-sustaining and networked joint force from the sea in order to decisively influence operations within the battlespace. This proposed definition considers how the future joint force will operate within the next 15 years, the security environment they will operate in, and how they will operate. The definition includes important considerations such as the ability to rapidly deploy all or part of the force to austere environments, operating across a varied battlespace that includes distributed air, land or sea operations, being able to sustain itself for extended periods, and conducting what essentially is full spectrum dominance in an interagency and multinational context if necessary, all from the sea.

Sea basing operations originate from a sea base, which is defined as:

An inherently maneuverable, scalable aggregation of distributed, networked platforms that enable the global power projection of offensive and defensive forces from the sea, and includes the ability to assemble, equip, project, support and sustain those forces without reliance on land bases within the Joint Operations Area (JOA).²¹

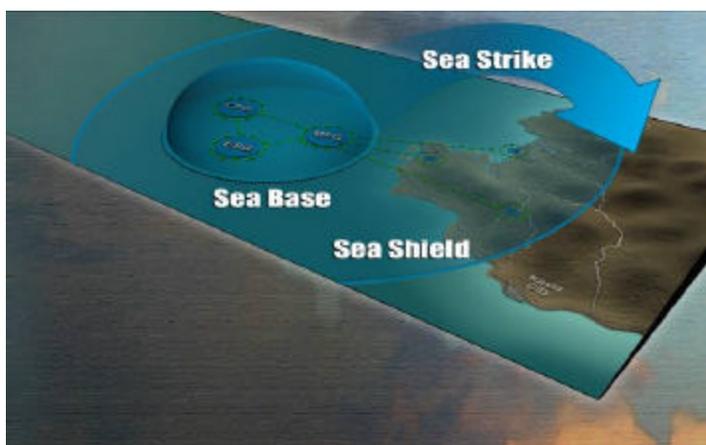
Sea basing is not a particular type of ship or ships, or a place, but rather a set of integrated capabilities that function as a system of systems. The intent is to exploit the sea as a maneuver space, which provides strategic and operational freedom of action and reduces dependence on vulnerable land bases; thereby, contributing towards more economical forward presence and a reduced requirement for force protection. It helps to solve two significant military problems. First, it enables the projection and sustainment of national military power without the requirement for fixed facilities ashore and second, contributes substantially to the prevention or early resolution of conflict.²² It will also allow the U.S. to leverage its control of the sea and is "vital to this nation's ability to fully exploit its unprecedented and unequalled military strength in support of an over-arching national security strategy".²³

Sea basing is not a new concept. The Navy and Marine Corps were at the forefront of its development to support their future vision of expeditionary maneuver warfare. Some will argue that sea basing in its simplest form occurred the first time Marines embarked on naval vessels with their own sustainment. Sea basing, as it is referred to in this paper, traces its origins to the

Navy and Marine Corps' *"From the Sea"* strategy which shifted the focus of naval warfare away from the open seas to the littorals. The follow on strategy, *"Forward...From the Sea,"* expanded the concept further and provided policymakers even more options for employment across the spectrum of military operations. It signaled a change in focus and, therefore, in priorities for the Naval Services away from operations on the sea toward power projection and the employment of naval forces from the sea to influence events in the littoral regions of the world.

The strategic landscape, however, has dramatically changed in the past 20 years. A wider range of capabilities are required to be properly positioned and forward-based to support U.S. interests and deter potential aggressors. This is why sea basing possesses great potential to support the national security strategy, particularly within the world's politically and economically important yet volatile littoral regions.

Sea basing seeks to change the outlook for naval power projection by organizing, deploying, employing and sustaining forces using the constructs of Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare, Sea Strike, Sea Shield, and Sea Basing, all enabled by FORCEnet.²⁴ The Navy and Marine Corps are the pioneers of the sea basing concept which was developed to support their vision for the future of naval power projection and expeditionary maneuver warfare; however, it has relevance for the joint community. The concepts are interdependent, complementary, and best thought of as three legs of a triad, where each relies on the other to accomplish the mission. Figure 3 provides the conceptual framework.



Source: Reproduced with permission of Marine Corps Combat Development Command

FIGURE 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SEA BASING

The offensive component, Sea Strike, represents the offensive maritime operations capability and concept for power projection that employs networked sensors and all combat systems. The defensive component, Sea Shield, describes those capabilities for sea control, protection for all forces afloat, assured access to the littorals and projecting defense deep inland. Sea Basing “describes the projection, sustainment and operational maneuver of sovereign forces operating globally from the sea.”²⁵ It is the sea base that serves as the foundation to support the offensive and defensive aspects of Sea Strike and Sea Shield. Sea basing can accelerate expeditionary deployment and employment timelines through the use of prepositioning programs, allowing the U.S. to take swift and decisive action during a crisis. As the sea basing concept evolves to fill joint requirements, the conceptual names may change, but the offensive, defensive, and support legs of the triad will remain.

The Navy’s Global Concept of Operations calls for a flexible force structure that will provide the building blocks of the sea base. It includes Carrier Strike Groups (CSG), Expeditionary Strike Groups (ESG), Missile-defense Surface Action Groups (SAG), an enhanced-capability Combat Logistics Force (CLF) and a Maritime Pre-Positioning Group (MPG) as necessary to sustain the widely dispersed fleet. These groups will operate independently around the globe as a forward presence and will join together to form Expeditionary Strike Forces (ESF) to engage in regional conflict²⁶ and complementing other available joint assets to meet the mission needs of the Joint Force Commander (JFC).

ENABLING SUCCESS IN THE JOINT ENVIRONMENT

It remains to be seen whether sea basing will meet the Joint Vision for the Future, however, its construct of concepts supports the intent of the Joint Operations Concepts (JOpsC). The JOpsC describes eight core capabilities of the Future Joint Force that broadly explain how it will organize, plan, prepare and conduct operations. Sea basing broadly supports all of these capabilities and extensively supports two. They are:

- Rapidly deploy selected portions of the Joint Force that can immediately transition to execution, even in the absence of developed infrastructure.
- Create and sustain continuous pressure throughout the battlespace for as little or as long as it takes to accomplish strategic or operational aims.²⁷

Sea basing’s most significant capabilities include rapid force closure, phased at-sea arrival and assembly, integrated power projection, persistence and sustainment and the ability to reconstitute at sea. These capabilities, combined with its ability to maneuver at will, make it uniquely suited to commit to an operation while remaining ready to shift to another operation,

reconstitute while remaining forward deployed for subsequent tasking, all without reliance on host-nation or overseas infrastructure. Sea basing supports or enables success in the joint environment through its capabilities and characteristics that include being maneuverable, scalable, tailorable, netted, responsive and interoperable. Its primary contribution to joint force operations is that it enables joint forcible entry operations. An ESF comprised of a CSG, ESG, MPG and a Marine Expeditionary Brigade provide scalable, forcible entry capability to the joint force. The integration of its components provides a rapidly employable and credible force that is capable across the range of military operations. Its expeditionary capabilities, coordinated with other instruments of national power, can shape the battlespace, provide assured access and set the conditions to achieve strategic objectives.²⁸ Additionally, it possesses the capability to engage in and support protracted operations if a crisis cannot be resolved quickly.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense is conducting an Operational Availability Study which seeks to answer the question of “how much of the nation’s combat capability do we want to be able to deliver anywhere in the world, and in what time.”²⁹ Specifically, it is attempting to determine what capabilities are needed to deploy and influence in 10 days, swiftly defeat the efforts in 30 days and be ready to redeploy to another operational area in 30 days. The study, known for its “10-30-30 concept,” overlays the “1-4-2-1” force planning construct by getting forces to the fight faster in order to more quickly influence actions, whether they be to assure, dissuade, deter or defeat. General Pace, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, states, “It boils down to basics, access and deployment speed.”³⁰ Robert Work, of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, states, “what’s driving Sea Basing is the 10-30-30 requirement,” and that while the concept may seem to be a stretch goal, “the only way you can get forces anywhere in the world within 10 days is with a thing like sea basing.”³¹ Such statements seem to support the premise that sea basing will be a capability that will figure prominently into future joint capabilities requirements.

While sea basing appears to be inherently naval in nature and will rely on naval competencies during execution, the Army and Air Force must be fully integrated and their roles clarified for the concept to be an effective joint capability. The Army of the future will rely on speed and an intermediate staging base to support the joint team in a major regional contingency. It appears that the Army’s concept of modular brigades, particularly light brigades, will be well suited for conducting operational maneuver and distributed operations from a sea base across the JOA. The sea base provides them a framework for projecting a variety of their units ashore.

The future of sea basing looks promising when considering its emerging capabilities and how they support many of the operating, functional and enabling concepts as outlined in the JOpsC, yet its true potential will emerge from its role as a joint force enabler. Basing joint forces and their support on the sea will provide an unprecedented degree of mobility, operational versatility and a level of independence heretofore unavailable when operating in anti-access/area-denial scenarios.³²

Success in the joint environment will require Joint Sea Basing Office planners to coordinate capability requirements from a joint perspective and integrate them with the doctrinal aspects of sea based operations and the latest technology from disparate functional areas.³³ Only then will the joint force be fully capable of exploiting the advantages and opportunities offered by sea based expeditionary forces.

SUPPORTING A NATIONAL “FORWARD” STRATEGY

Sea basing is primarily military in nature, yet its employment has political implications. It can potentially be employed as the military element of national power to support strategic objectives in support of the National Security “Forward” Strategy. Sea basing is also in full compliance with the Defense Planning Guidance goal to provide “greater combat power forward with minimal reinforcement.”³⁴ Its use, however, may have substantial military, political, and strategic impacts which must be considered during planning.

MILITARY

The capabilities of sea basing have utility across the range of military operations, from humanitarian relief and non-combatant operations to employment in large, full-war scenarios.³⁵ Other significant characteristics include assured access, rapid force projection, global responsiveness and an increased ability to support, all from the sea. The unique aspect of sea basing is that it represents a “sovereign, maneuverable capability for rapidly projecting U.S. offensive and defensive power” and the ability to conduct and sustain scalable joint forcible-entry operations without land bases, something that was not possible with historical amphibious operations.³⁶ It will provide the JFC the ability to mix and match modular service capabilities and then project them ashore from the air or sea using heavy lift vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, rotary wing aircraft, amphibious assault vehicles, landing craft or high speed sealift.

Mid and long-term enhancements will only further increase those capabilities. Future sea base platforms will provide for selective offload of equipment and supplies and new generation Maritime Prepositioning ships will combine to increase operational tempo, enhance sustainment packages and increase the speed and effectiveness of expeditionary maneuver warfare.³⁷

Eventually, the more capable sea bases will provide the means to project power while simultaneously reducing vulnerability to attack, all at less political cost than if the same forces were based ashore. Technological advances in several areas will be the enablers that provide the advanced capabilities necessary for sea basing to become reality.

Admiral Vern Clark, Chief of Naval Operations, states that future sea based operations will be able to deliver sufficient combat power to provide forward deterrence in four theaters and swiftly defeat two aggressors at the same time. Further, he envisions sea based forces that project both offensive and defensive power across a unified battlespace as a central component of all future battle plans.³⁸ Sea basing also appears to meet the emerging threat to overcome anti-access and area denial strategies as stated in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the Defense Planning Guidance. The QDR Report identified the anti-access challenge as one of six critical “emerging strategic and operational challenges” that will drive transformation of the U.S. military.³⁹ There are no official Department of Defense definitions for area denial and anti-access, however, anti-access generally refers to increasingly vulnerable targets such as forward bases and embarkation points whereas area denial refers to theater access denial. Sea basing will include the capability to overcome anti-access problems and provide forcible-entry operations to secure needed ashore facilities.

Employment issues associated with sea basing, which, while not “show stoppers,” must be addressed. For instance, what is the distance that sea based forces can be employed inland? Is it the distance that forces can be supported by air power, naval firepower, or is it limited by the sea bases ability to provide sustainment inland? The value of sea basing as a tool for countering threats within the littorals is considerable, however, the situation will change somewhat when the adversary is not located within striking range of the littorals, such as Niger or Chad. Questions regarding the effectiveness of sea basing will arise in terms of its range and scope if U.S. crisis response is required in locations such as central Africa or the landlocked countries of Southwest Asia.

DIPLOMATIC/POLITICAL

There are political benefits and implications associated with sea basing. It can increase the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts by providing a large force at sea to demonstrate U.S. commitment. Sea basing also eliminates the need to permanently base forces in a region, achieving cost savings and, more importantly, eliminating the inevitable cultural clashes that occur when U.S. forces are permanently stationed on foreign soil. This is particularly true where an everyday presence of U.S. forces would only exacerbate tensions and frictions of

globalization, such as the Middle East or Africa.⁴⁰ This is likely to be a long-term concern. Williamson Murray, professor emeritus at Ohio State University, states the anger of those in the Islamic World towards the U.S. is “a harsh reality that will remain part of the strategic landscape for the remainder of this and perhaps the next century.”⁴¹ Additionally, U.S. forces will be less vulnerable to attack, terrorist or otherwise, increasing the likelihood of achieving U.S. mission success while not lending credibility to opposing forces.

An economic argument can also be made for sea basing when considering the “opportunity” cost of not gaining access or transit rights when needed. While sea basing is not necessarily a more efficient or less costly alternative than land basing, it is more likely to prove politically and operationally useful in the emerging strategic environment than land bases.⁴²

The significance of littorals from both a military and political perspective reinforces the idea that future U.S. military interventions will be in highly populated areas located within the littorals. It will be vital for the U.S. to be prepared to deal both diplomatically and militarily in such areas, particularly regarding issues of sovereignty. While each element of national power—diplomatic, information, military, and economic—is important, they are all interrelated when it comes to securing and protecting the national interests of the U.S.

Unfortunately, political disadvantage may arise from sea basing. For instance, there could be negative aspects associated with the sea basing of forces. It could create uneasiness amongst allies and friends who would prefer a land-based U.S. presence and consequently feel vulnerable or even abandoned if this were not the case, particularly if they have come to rely on the U.S. for regional security (e.g., Japan and South Korea). Lastly, if the U.S. were to rely predominantly on sea basing for forward presence, it could potentially be seen as America becoming somewhat isolationist and subsequently reinforcing anti-American bias in many parts of the world. A perception of a “go it alone” America could exacerbate or contribute to anti-American sentiment. Conversely, it could serve as a coalition enabler, since it is conceivable that allied or friendly nations may consider it more politically feasible to contribute sea-based forces than to commit land forces.⁴³

STRATEGIC

The events of September 11, 2001, changed the direction of U.S. foreign policy for the foreseeable future. The Bush Preemptive Doctrine, contained in with the 2002 National Security Strategy, officially declared that the U.S. would seek international coalition support to defuse regional conflicts and deal with terrorism, but would act unilaterally if necessary. The first successful test of this doctrine occurred in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the success of the

coalition there may not be representative of future scenarios. The Bush administration hinted that unilateralism will remain a viable option when his national security team remarked that “we must be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibilities require.”⁴⁴

The aforementioned arc of instability is likely to lead to a zone of chaos, an area lacking orderly relationships and capable of erupting into violence and conflict at any time. In an era of globalization, such threats not only endanger our interests overseas, but eventually may lead to threats against U.S. citizens within our borders. The 2001 QDR Report made it clear that future defense planning will require capabilities for handling a wide spectrum of operations which necessitates highly capable forces that are flexible, versatile, agile and adaptable, the same characteristics provided by a sea based joint force. The report also identifies strategic tenets that must accompany the future defense strategy; U.S. forces must have the capability to swiftly project strong forces abroad, must train and operate with forces of allies and friends in order to build strengthened alliances and partnerships capable of performing new security operations, and play a central role so that allies are protected and adversaries are dissuaded and deterred.⁴⁵ These three tenets, clearly linked to objectives in both the National Security and National Defense Strategies, underscore the strategic need for sea based joint forces that are forward-based and always prepared. Sea based joint forces seem distinctively suited to play a pivotal role in U.S. security strategy and joint operations because of the wide breadth of capabilities it can provide national security planners as well as the JFC.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Achieving the vision of sea basing requires capabilities well beyond what is currently available. The previous systems of the amphibious ready groups, carrier battle groups and MPF systems are not structured sufficiently or flexible enough to provide for at sea arrival and assembly, selective offload or sustainment of a brigade-sized force.⁴⁶ Long-term capabilities such as the proposed mobile offshore bases (MOB) or afloat forward staging bases (AFSB) with essential features like a runway, heavy lift vertical take-off and landing aircraft, and high speed sealift platforms are a few of the supporting concepts necessary to ensure key capabilities of the sea basing concept, such as at-sea arrival and assembly and selective offload, can be realized.⁴⁷ While sea basing does not require capabilities such as the MOB or AFSB in the short or mid-term to be successful, all capabilities must be carefully identified early in the requirements development process to maximize effectiveness and develop integrated acquisition strategies.

Sea basing is one of several modernization programs competing for a role in the future force. Its capabilities are impressive and they will contribute significantly towards meeting future threats. Unfortunately, there are issues that bring into question the effectiveness of sea basing, particularly when considering its anticipated cost in a resource constrained environment.

The Navy, as the centerpiece of future successful sea based operations, must structure itself to meet a variety of future threats. Its Global Concept of Operations force structure includes CSGs, ESGs, SAGs, MPGs and a CLF to sustain the widely dispersed fleet. It will still need its power projection fleet, yet require newer ships with greater capability to meet a greater range of threats, all while staying within a limited shipbuilding construction budget. The Navy has recognized this and has a 30-year plan to modernize the amphibious and Maritime Prepositioning Forces to support the sea basing vision. The plan includes:

- Completing 12 LPD-17 San Antonio amphibious transport dock ships.
- Buying 10 LHA(R) amphibious assault ships with more aviation capability than existing assault ships.
- Building 12 dock landing ships of a new class known as LDS(X), not expected to enter service until after 2020.
- Buying up to 21 new MPF(F)s, 16 with capabilities far beyond those of today's maritime prepositioning ships.⁴⁸

It is not clear, however, if each of these programs can be supported since they will be competing with other modernization programs within the Navy. The Navy's plan for full modernization, however, will require between \$16 billion and \$20 billion per year while their shipbuilding budget is expected to remain between \$11 billion and \$12 billion per year.⁴⁹ This is validated by a Congressional Budget Office study released in November 2004 which stated that Sea Basing is too costly and noted that if sea basing "is considered crucial," the Navy could have it by "sharply cutting the number of amphibious ships" or developing cheaper alternatives, all of which would result in smaller forces than those currently on hand.⁵⁰

The same report stated that the most important vessels in supporting the sea base and crucial to success of the concept are the MPF(F) ships which are considered "the linchpin of the Sea Base."⁵¹ The Joint Sea Basing Office, in conjunction with the Navy and Marine Corps, must clarify the roles and mission of the sea base and the desired capabilities of the MPF(F) ships in particular, if the sea basing vision is to be achieved.

Analysts expect the Navy to lose funding in the 2006 budget battle to support Army expansion and ongoing operations in Iraq. This will force the Navy to consider lower cost alternatives, a smaller fleet, or to deemphasize sea basing in favor of forward presence.⁵²

There are other related long-term issues that face defense planners with regard to prepositioning and sea basing. First, there needs to be a coordinated effort to determine the role of prepositioning in light of other efforts to transform. While MPF(F) may be considered the “linchpin” for sea basing as far as the Navy and Marine Corps are concerned, there are issues related to the Army’s Preposition Program that must be resolved to best determine how these stocks fit into future operational plans.⁵³ This is important because a key capability of sea basing is to project decisive power ashore to support major combat operations. Failure to establish sound prepositioning requirements that support joint expeditionary forces⁵⁴ and integrating those requirements into the sea basing construct could negatively impact its potential for success. It is critical to ensure both programs, although separate but mutually supportive, receive appropriate priority as they compete for scarce resources during defense transformation.

Issues facing the services’ Prepositioning Programs are by no means the only hurdles the Joint Sea Basing Office face in making sea basing a reality. Its ability to project only a Marine Corps Expeditionary Brigade-sized unit ashore, its reliance on thin-skinned, vulnerable MPF ships for equipment and limited capability to project power inland are some examples offered by its detractors as to why sea basing does not meet the vision of the future force. Such observations fail to realize the synergy that can be created by netted and dispersed sea bases that will be able to deliver unprecedented offensive power, defensive assurance and operational independence to JFCs.

OPTIONS

With no challenger to U.S. superpower status in the foreseeable future, a global war is unlikely, as is conventional warfare against the U.S. or any developed state.⁵⁵ Instead, the U.S. security strategy should focus on exporting security to the volatile regions of the world where its national interests are threatened. This is the beginning of a long-term effort to integrate the Gap into the Core that will rival the Cold War effort as espoused by Barnett.⁵⁶ The U.S. must have a military capability that can meet the threats posed by nation-states as well as transnational actors who will seek to challenge U.S. interests asymmetrically.⁵⁷ Sea basing is uniquely positioned to support such a strategy. It also seems prudent to conclude that sea basing can be justified from both the strategic and operational perspectives since it directly or indirectly supports the four objectives outlined in the National Defense Strategy:

- Secure the U.S. from direct attack.

- Secure strategic access to key regions, lines of communication and the “global commons” of international waters, airspace, space and cyberspace.
- Establish security conditions conducive to a favorable international order.
- Strengthen alliances and partnerships to contend with common challenges.⁵⁸

It could also be argued that if it does support these objectives, then it also directly or indirectly supports the following two objectives from the National Security Strategy:

- Defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends; and
- Prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction.

If the above objectives are considered the “ends,” or stated objectives of national security, then sea basing is a legitimate concept that will provide a “way” to achieve those ends, and the employment of its unique capabilities that will provide the necessary “means.”

While it also appears that sea basing will meet the requirement to overcome anti-access and area denial strategies as stated in the *Defense Planning Guidance*, the vision of the optimal sea base may never be realized or may be scaled back because of political and/or fiscal constraints. Fortunately, it does not have to be an all or nothing pursuit. Similarly, sea basing should not be considered as the sole means by which the U.S. military pursues basing options or supports strategic and operational forces for initial crisis resolution. Three potential options for sea basing are recommended along with caveats for implementation.

1. Pursue Joint Sea basing as a national security requirement. Implement in phases using a spiral development approach to allow for technology insertion as needed. It should be the nation’s “first responder” for crisis response scenarios requiring forward presence, deterrence, or forcible-entry capability.
2. Do not pursue sea basing as a joint concept but instead continue to incrementally refine current naval strategies and capabilities as outlined in the sea services capstone documents. The strategies and capabilities should be such that they are better adapted for employment against anticipated 21st century threats. In today’s resource-constrained environment, it does not make sense to pursue an unproven and untested concept such as that envisioned by sea basing, which may later prove to have minimal influence as a military component of national power.
3. Do not pursue sea basing as a viable means of forward presence and force projection until all other transformational concepts have been assessed by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council for their ability to cost effectively support the national security and national military strategies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As the picture of the future strategic landscape emerges, it will be difficult to predict whether the U.S. military will have to focus on humanitarian efforts in the future like Somalia, peacekeeping in Europe, fighting a regional hegemon or deterring a country from becoming a nuclear power in our uncertain global security environment. U.S. security strategists cannot foresee the future and determine who will strike U.S. interests, where they will occur or where the U.S. *may* have to intervene militarily. The term *may* is significant because if diplomacy fails, the presence of substantial U.S. military power located within striking distance, and its threatened use, may be sufficient in averting a crisis.

Threats to U.S. security will almost certainly emanate from non-state actors or rogue regimes located within the Gap, and most likely, they will be located within the littorals. The U.S. will need to respond quickly if deterrence and diplomacy fail, and if the threat is grave enough, preemption may be necessary. Additionally, as economic globalization continues, there will be those countries that feel they are not getting their fair share of the world's wealth. Any or all of these scenarios will require a force that can arrive "on scene" within days if not hours, provide forcible-entry capability, defend itself, and remain a visible forward presence of U.S. national interests. Sea basing can provide the solutions for all of these diverse scenarios, proving its value in both the political and military realms. While other military employment options are always available to the JFC, none provide the range of military options or quick response offered by a sea based force.

Sea basing is the most promising option available to national security planners, both civilian and military, because it can achieve political purpose in a manner which most other joint capabilities cannot match. It can provide a forcible-entry capability that can arrive on location, within days in most cases, providing virtual immediate crisis response, and remain on site if necessary. Sea basing provides a new course for U.S. national security strategy by offering flexibility, mobility, sovereignty and decisive combat power packaged in a world where bases and access cannot be guaranteed.⁵⁹ It is an evolutionary concept that fully supports the security requirements as set forth in the National Security Strategy. The U.S. should pursue Sea Basing as a capability with strategic relevance and place it at the core of its National Military Strategy.

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ENDNOTES

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