Across an Angry Divide

The myths of power projection

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As the United States surveys the strategic landscape ahead, our eyes are cast across the Pacific divide once again amid stronger geopolitical challenges and increasing uncertainty. The rise of strong anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems will require the country to refine the role a forcible entry capability serves the national strategy. The purpose of this article is to highlight the vision, commitment, and leadership inherent in the sustainment of a robust power projection capability based on the tenets of *Operation Maneuver From the Sea*, (OMFTS [Washington, DC: HQMC, 1996], and *Ship To Objective Maneuver*, (STOM [Washington, DC: HQMC, 2011]), able to challenge a true peer-competitor.

The approach used here reviews some of the myths from the Second World War to baseline the historical level of effort needed to bring power projection concepts into fruition. An assessment of the origins of OMFTS follows to explore the underlying concepts and requirements inherent in this warfighting approach. The current A2/AD threat is then contrasted with this concept to better understand the obstacles that this approach will have to overcome. Next, the current and planned maritime lift structure is evaluated to see the extent to which our capital investment strategy aligns with our operational concepts. Finally, the demands of this path ahead are detailed as we explore how this operational paradigm can be championed going forward.

Perhaps one of the more enduring myths from the Second World War is that America was an unengaged observer of world events until the "day of infamy" brought the struggle to Pearl Harbor. Then the United States opened the valves of industry and ships, planes, and the tools of war rolled triumphantly down the lunch ramps of ships yards and production plants. This view does not align with the events of the 1930s or the capital and labor intensive nature of shipbuilding.

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It is ironic that because President Franklin D. Roosevelt is best remembered for his New Deal and the social engineering side of his agenda, this understates his strategic vision. Having served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, the President knew the emerging Japanese threat and issued an executive order in 1933 to use public works funds to add 32 ships to the Navy in the next 3 years. His leadership was instrumental in rallying support for the Vinson-Trammel Naval Act of 1934, which added an additional 102 warships over the next 8 years and codified this naval expansion.[1] In fact, the keel for every major capital ship that would decide the issue up to the turning point at the Battle of Midway was laid before the first bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. America's war in the Pacific began almost a full decade before the first blows were exchanged. It is a cornerstone of this dialog that the capital defense investment decisions we make today will have far reaching ramifications well into the middle of this century and, as such, must be approached within an overarching operational concept.

This prewar period of seaborne expansion was not limited to the Navy's ships of the line. The Merchant Marine Act of 1936 sought to support the shipping industry, which was suffering the effects of worldwide economic depression and stiff foreign competition. The act provided construction and operating subsidies for vessels carrying cargos on essential trade routes. This bill established the foundation in terms of ship yards, merchant seamen, and operational knowledge that would allow for expansion of the cargo fleet by 5,777 vessels, half of them "Liberty Ships," during the Second World War.[2] This was the strategic lift that would carry three generations of American fighting men across the Pacific during conflicts against Japan, North Korea, and North Vietnam. In the Cold War, these ships provided the means to carry the goods required to rebuild a worldwide economy under the charter of the Marshall Plan. So, as we prepare to explore our operational concepts the issue is: Does the Nation have the resident lift to carry relevant forces?

From 29 November to 4 December 1992, the Marine Corps Combat Development Command conducted a war game to explore the concepts of OMFTS. The players for this event were drawn from Fleet Marine Forces and Navy commands. This effort led to the development of the following key operational capabilities demanded to support this new warfighting approach: command, control, and surveillance; battlespace dominance; power projection; and force sustainment. This article focuses on the implications of the middle two and how the threat has evolved since the inception of this approach.

Battlespace dominance was seen as retaining friendly freedom of action while simultaneously denying it to the enemy. The battlespace was divided into space, air, land, surface, subsurface, and the electromagnetic spectrum. Space, air, and electromagnetic spectrum superiority were assumed as achievable and important prerequisites to the development of the concept. On the surface, only anti-ship missiles were viewed as a serious threat to contesting that arena. In a similar vein, only mines were considered to have the capability to challenge the subsurface domain. Only on land did the game identify an area that friendly forces would begin with numerical inferiority. It was recognized that sophisticated command and control, coupled with superior fire support assets, could readdress lack of troops ashore. It was shown that dominance in the other key areas of the battlespace could off-set this shortfall, establish local superiority at selected points, and gain sufficient advantage to enable power projection. Once local battlespace dominance was achieved, the stage would be set for power projection.

During the game, power projection was seen as the heart of the OMFTS concept. The strengths and weakness of launching the initial wave from over-the-horizon (OTH) were explored in detail. Strengths of the OTH approach included: tactical surprise, maneuver room, and increased survivability against anti-ship missiles. On the negative side, increased time needed to build-up combat power, greater exposure of landing assets to enemy action, and challenges to coordinated action were all highlighted as areas that demanded additional capability development. The ability to exploit OTH allowed the task force to use dispersion and deception as vehicles to secure tactical surprise.

An operational analysis of OMFTS, published in the December 1994 edition of *Phalanx* magazine, further explored the key operational capabilities of this emerging concept. Through the use of combat modeling and historical analogy, it was shown how a smaller landing force could exploit partitioning of the defender to win out-numbered even given technology parity between the two forces. This approach demanded the force ashore have superior tactical mobility over their opponents in order to retain and exploit initial strategic advantages gained by selecting the point of entry. Finally, it oriented this maneuver ashore within a threat focused approach in lieu of a more inward orientation on the force beach-head line.[3] The use of partitioning as a ground campaign construct allowed the land component commander to present his opponent with an expanding array of tactical threats beyond the defender's ability to respond.

The anti-ship missile threat during this period drove the task force to the survivability advantages of an OTH approach. A survey of these systems at the time indicated that while the average range of threat systems was over 80 nautical miles, well in access of the horizon, they all required radar targeting at some point in the engagement chain.[4] During the game, avoiding radar detection placed the radar horizon at around twenty nautical miles. STOM concepts published in 2011 placed the standoff distance needed to execute the concept at twelve nautical miles. It can be shown that predicted radar range, based on line-of-sight requirements, in nautical miles is the square-root of twice the height of the target plus the same for the radiating system.[5] Given a traditional amphibious ship with approximately 40 feet of freeboard closing on radar with a sensor height of 35 feet, the theatrical detection range would be over 17 nautical miles, which seems to validate the assumption underlying the OMFTS war game. How has the threat evolved since these concepts were first discussed on the banks of the Potomac River?

In March 2010, ADM Robert Willard, the head of U.S. Pacific Command, noted that China was testing a conventional anti-ship ballistic missile capable of targeting aircraft carriers. This effort demonstrated the ability of the Chinese industrial complex to bring an advanced military system from concept to design in less than a decade. Strongly motivated by the intervention of U.S. carrier strike groups in the Taiwan Straits in 1995, the Middle Kingdom has led the world in the development of A2/AD capabilities. The Dong-Feng 21 (DF-21), or "East Wind," has the ability to reach out 1,700 kilometers, use GPS guidance, and execute precision-strike missions against ships underway and over the horizon.[6] The question now becomes where is OTH? The advent of increased range, precision guidance, smart end-game targeting, coupled with real-time mid-course updates, means twenty nautical miles does not buy you the stand-off defeat mechanisms once inherent in the OMFTS concept. Before you can penetrate a robust A2/AD system, you have to achieve the level battlespace dominance detailed in the original OMFTS war game.

Recall dominance of space, air, and the electromagnetic spectrum were assumed during the OMFTS war game. The required level of superiority within these areas demanded as power projection prerequisites is beyond the capabilities of the Navy-Marine Corps Team to unilaterally achieve when facing a peer military antagonist. No longer can the amphibious task force commander establish an amphibious operating area within a joint battlespace and operate within an independent maneuver construct. Power projection demands local surface superiority to set the conditions and tempo of the engagement both afloat and ashore. Blinding enemy acquisition systems requires control of the ultimate "high ground" in the upper atmosphere and space. Dominating the electromagnetic spectrum can isolate his sensor array from the launch platforms they support. When this level of dominance coupled with local command of the air is achieved, a joint task force (JTF) can select landward penetration points that optimize maneuver ashore and further erode the continuity of opposing A2/AD structure. Only through the close combination of all JTF assets can power projection reach its full potential since "shaping the battlefield" ashore will largely fall to fighting forces beyond the land component commander's domain.

It is important to note that the best chance to reach favorable conflict resolution is not likely to occur until ground forces can operate in a manner that allows the JTF commander to impose his

will on the enemy. This requires the landing force to exploit the strategic advantage gained by selecting a penetration point that places the enemy in a dilemma on how to respond. If he remains in place, he can avoid detection and indirect fires but is now subject to piecemeal engagement by the landing force and defeat through partitioning. Conversely, if he aggressively closes on the landing site, he places his forces on road networks subject to combined interdiction and strong landward defenses. However, getting the landing force ashore to execute these defeat mechanisms requires sufficient lift for both combat forces and sustainment.

In the decade before the OMFTS war game, the average amount of the Navy's ship building budget dedicated to amphibious shipping was eight percent. In the twenty years since this event, this amount almost doubled to an average of fifteen percent. In the decade ahead, the planned path forward calls for a reduction of this investment to five percent. The 30-year ship building budget estimate calls for increased investment in submarines and the refueling of nuclear ships. The Navy does not plan to expand its commitment to amphibious shipping, and it is incumbent on Marine Corps planners to fully account for this capital investment strategy as we refine and develop our operational concepts and warfighting techniques.[7] For the Marine Corps, it may well be time to fade from gray to black.

The use of "black bottom" merchant shipping to support power projection is not without historical president. During the Falkland War, the British augmented their limited amphibious lift with various private ship types including liner, roll-on/roll-off, and container ships. The task force that sailed into the South Atlantic was composed of 41 percent sea control ships, 22 percent troop lift, and 37 percent axillary and supply ships. Fifty-nine percent of the ships transporting the ground forces were from the merchant marine.[8] These supporting commercial ships accounted for one third of the vessels lost during the campaign.[9] This effort represents the scale and distances that would be required to push across the Pacific Ocean and as such provides insights into the path forward.

The USS* Wisconsin *(BB-64) morred next to the USS* Oklahoma *(BB-37), 11 November 1944.
(U.S. Navy photo.)

One unique advantage the Marine Corps brings to the table is its on-going partnership with the maritime prepositioned ship program and the inherent operational familiarity this provides in working with merchant shipping. Whether augmenting exercise lift under the Freedom Banner series or conducting off-loading and concurrent equipment maintenance, operational forces are renewing their merchantmen embarkation and planning skills. From this baseline of knowledge will spring the potential new and innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures needed to secure the lift demanded to project sufficient combat power to reassure a far-flung maritime alliance along the Pacific Rim. These ships represent the tip of the spear of a merchant fleet that will be needed to span the open oceans in any peer-competitor power projection scenario oriented on the east side of the Golden Meridian.

As of February 2013, the National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF) stood at 132 ships of various types. This government owned fleet is operated under the Department of Transportation by the Maritime Administration in concurrence with memorandums of agreement signed by the DOD. The Fleet is organized into a Ready Reserve Fleet (RRF) and the balance of the NDRF. The RRF represents 46 ships that are available on short notice ranging from 5 to 10 days. The majority of these are roll-on/roll-off ships able to carry impressive amounts of rolling stock and supplies needed to sustain maneuver ashore. The balance of the NDRF is broken down into ships planned for retention and those slated for disposal.[10] This fleet has proved its value in a logistics role. As recently as the Persian Gulf War, 95 percent of the cargo for Allied forces went by sea in U.S.-flag ships crewed by American seafarers.[11] The future of power projection demands the Marine Corps lead the way in developing techniques to transition these lift assets into forward areas where in-stream off-loading can facilitate the maneuver demands envisioned by OMFTS.

In addition to the government owned fleet, the President has the authority to requisition any American-Flag or American-owned ships even when the latter is flying a foreign flag.[12] For U.S. flag shipping, that means access to 191 additional ships of various types, the majority of which are containerized. Of these, 93 receive operating subsidies under the provisions of the Jones Act, which tie them even closer to government control and use when

demanded.[13] While additional shipping is out there under foreign flag, crewing these ships may prove problematic given potential divided loyalties of those embarked. Tapping into this lift as a power projection resource will require additional work in the area of logistics over the shore and improved seabasing concepts. Imaginative use of containers for multiple roles ranging for troop transport to prepackaged resupply are first steps in expanding the reach of ground combat power as it seeks to extend its range under a free flowing OMFTS construct.

Finally, the Marine Corps should seek to take a more active role in shaping the Maritime policies that impact power projection lift. In previous government talks, the Departments of Commerce, State, and Treasury were instrumental in formulating many of the provisions that shape our U.S. Flag fleet. Absent from these talks was the DOD despite the fact that many of the qualifying provisions for government subsidies compel commercial carriers to meet the needs of military necessity in the ship design and operation.[14] Without strong representation from military members fully attuned to the subtleties of seaborne power projection, it is unlikely that the full potential of this program to support the needs of national defense will be realized.

Moving forward, it is time to reengage and expand the scope of the next OMFTS war game. Rather than limit this event to members of the naval Services, it must include all Services and members from the Maritime Administration. Gaining battlespace dominance, a key under pinning of any power projection scenario, must move from the realm of assumption within the game to an active outcome from this event. Controlling space and the cyber gateways are two approaches that must be explored to sharpen the spear and provide an effective counter to an improving A2/AD shield. Finally, the game must be realistic in the scale and scope of the threat. Planning to defeat technologically inferior opponents with the penny packet employment of scattered company teams dependent on communications systems to tap into the firepower needed to readdress organic combat power shortfalls on the ground will not provide a realistic backdrop for force planning or concept development.

Next, it will take top-level leadership to engage in difficult debate on the policies linked to the strategic lift needed for power projection. Historically, the greatest strides in this area have been linked to Presidential direction supported by the defense establishment and the legislative branch. The Marine Corps has the intuitional knowledge to define the parameters and capabilities needed both within the Navy and Merchant Marine to move this discussion in a direction favorable to national interest. It is incumbent on a new generation of staff officers to reconnect to the founding roots of the Corps and become "so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve for and during the present war."[15] Without an understanding of lift requirements, maritime law as it relates to operating and construction subsidies, and the accessibility of U.S. and foreign flag shipping, it will be difficult to provide the executive branch with meaningful recommendations on power projection-related strategy. Given the long lead times associated with ship construction, the limited scope of our shipyards, and the dwindling pool of merchant seamen, it is time to address the renaissance of this fundamental strategic capability.

Finally, greater experimentation in the employment of all forms of lift is demanded. The Marine Corps is a leader in using Merchant Marine capabilities in its normal exercise and deployment cycle. Expanding the use of RRF shipping in annual training events will validate this important capability, increase understanding of its potential and limitations, and provide the operational bedrock on which creative ideas can mature and develop. These events have the potential to refine the connectors required to link non-traditional lift into the OMFTS concept and provide the relevant power combat power ashore, with superior mobility, to ensure the land component commander can bring any future contest to favorable resolution. These are solid steps on the path ahead to ensure we retain our unique operational capabilities as "Soldiers of the Sea."

Notes

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15. Quote from http://en.wikippedia.org.