

MEF Command Element Employment Constructs

Leveraging operational naval concepts

by LtCol Robert A. Fairley

“We must adapt our training in a manner consistent with the threat and anticipated operational challenges.”¹

—38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance

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ity to contribute to sea control activities and operations from both a sea and landbased posture. The II MEF CE exercises C2 of the nearly 45,000 Marines, Sailors, and civilians of the MAGTF, is outwardly focused, and is positioned to generate effects on behalf of the Combined Joint Forces Maritime

Component Command. II MEF leadership provided II MSB with necessary authorities and responsibilities to enable the MEF CE to conduct the C2 of all assigned forces.

While traditionally considered an administrative headquarters or even a force provider to support the endur-

The II MEF Command Element (CE) is charged with maintaining readiness of all assigned forces, organizing forces for employment, and exercising MAGTF command and control (C2) as part of the Combined Joint Forces Maritime Component Command, integrated with allies and partner forces. II MEF’s mission for their MEF Support Battalion (MSB) was remarkably clear: fight the MEF CE. This article will outline II MSB’s approach to MEF-level warfighting against a peer adversary, describe the operational concepts which enable this warfighting capability, and provide an overview of critical components required to best support the MEF CE.

Fighting the MEF

The MEF is representative of the largest and most capable MAGTF and retains unquestionable capabil-



LCpl Elvis Agosto-Santiago, a transmissions system operator with 2nd Landing Support Battalion, 2nd MLG, exchanges radio transmissions during a training event on Camp Lejeune, NC, 16 June 2021. (Photo by LCpl Jacqueline Parsons.)

ing requirements of the MEF CE, 2d MEB, and II MEF Information Group (MIG), II MSB has recently been fully operationalized to enable the CE to persist and operate forward as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness. The Marines and Sailors of II MSB are now increasingly woven into the fabric of the II MEF CE and vice versa. II MEF requires their MSB to be an all-domain unit with a unique mission set critical to the success of the MEF.

Leveraging Naval Concepts to Inform Employment Options

According to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*,

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps do not seek to merely “discern the future operating environment,” but are determined to define the future character of maritime conflict, so that naval forces will deter or fight from a position of enduring advantage.²

Given the uncertainties of MEF-level warfighting against a peer adversary, II MEF recently completed a series of unique, large-scale exercises designed to enhance staff proficiency across all warfighting functions. The II MEF employment options remain consistent with the tenets of Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO), Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, and the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons.

As an example, between October and November 2020, II MSB supported the MEF CE during MEF Exercise (MEFEX) 21.1. MEFEX 21.1 was a constructive, model-driven, script-supported exercise featuring live II MEF and Major Subordinate Command headquarters supported by higher, adjacent, and subordinate units participating from live command posts across the Eastern United States. The exercise design called for the deployment and employment of the MEF CE, under canvas in a singular location. This proved to be the largest MEF-level exercise conducted by II MEF in recent years.

Additionally, building upon the momentum from MEFEX 21.1, II MEF conducted a subsequent exercise be-

tween April and May 2021 designed to evaluate a unique C2 employment model while simultaneously enhancing CE readiness and staff proficiency. This exercise, Dynamic Cape 21.1, validated II MEF CE Echelons of Command from distributed, expeditionary C2 locations to exercise II MEF's warfighting construct for blunt to surge layer activities. II MSB supported the MEF CE from distributed II MEF Forward, MAIN, and Tactical C2 cells in the Camp Lejeune, NC, area. Ultimately, II MSB enabled the II MEF CE to inte-

sequently jumped part of one to create a fourth

A third MEF-level employment option to C2 assigned forces is arguably less-strenuous to exercise but requires further analysis. With the prevalence of reliable communications available world-wide, and especially throughout Camp Lejeune, II MEF leaders and planners have explored the feasibility of providing C2 of all assigned forces without deploying as a collective headquarters to theater. Having the II MEF CE, at least in part, remain at home

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grate the seven warfighting functions as a MAGTF in a fictitious United States European Command scenario.

Recognizing the character of DMO and EABO on a widely dispersed formation, the II MEF CE broke the traditional mold from operating within a singular location and distributed the principal and special staff across several geographically separated locations. This provided an alternative to the MEF CE's traditional employment model and afforded a unique opportunity to explore efforts to hide in plain sight. II MSB established and consistently supported three independent nodes and then sub-

station will reduce II MSB's demand to provide transportation, sustainment, and force protection requirements forward while simultaneously limiting exposure for MEF leaders inside the adversarial weapons engagement zone (Figure 1).

Critical Components to Support the MEF CE

Whether responding to crisis or contingency, II MSB must be prepared to complement the MEF CE's diverse employment options to best enable them to C2 all assigned forces. II MSB serves to complement the MEF CE's balanced

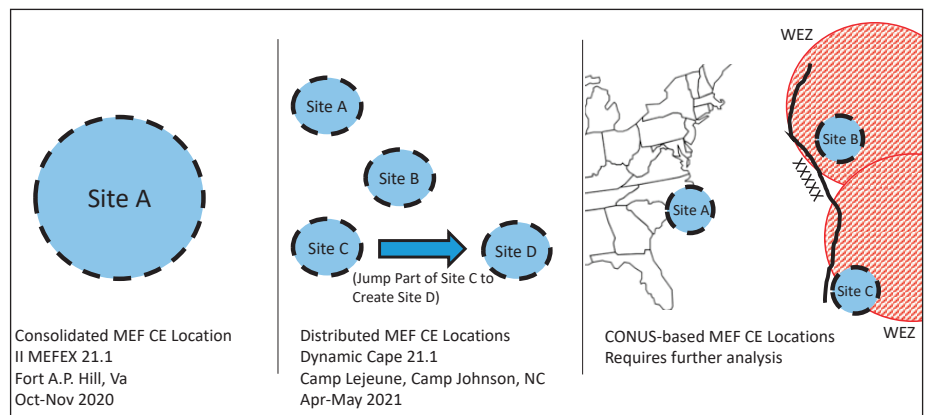


Figure 1. II MEF CE employment constructs (not all inclusive). (Figure provided by author.)

and flexibly capabilities designed to respond to military operations across the competition continuum. Many support requirements exceed II MSB's organic capabilities and will likely require augmentation from throughout the MAGTF. Additionally, regardless of which MEF CE employment construct is selected, critical components remain common to each model. The below describes a few components but is not all inclusive.

Signature Management. As the Commandant of the Marine Corps noted, "Friendly forces must be able to disguise actions and intentions, as well as deceive the enemy, through the use of decoys, signature management, and signature reduction. Preserving the ability to command and control in a contested information network environment is paramount."³ To generate continuous uncertainty for an adversary, signature management planning must be fully-integrated by all stakeholders and nested within the broader operational plan, not done as an afterthought or at the expense of completing traditional exercise objectives. The three signature domains—physical, technical, and administrative (Figure 2)— may provide indicators of friendly force actions. By leveraging the diverse and extremely capable intelligence experts resident within the MIG, units can gain a bet-



Marines must balance reliable, technologically-advanced communications with signature management efforts to prevent revealing friendly force activities and intentions. (Photo by Cpl Brendan Custer.)

ter understanding of the operational environment and develop a signature management plan accordingly.

Military planners work diligently to gather essential elements of information: "the most critical information requirements regarding the adversary and the operational environment needed by the commander to assist in reaching a decision."⁴ Similarly, it should be understood an adversary is work-

ing simultaneous collection efforts on friendly forces. We rely heavily upon the Critical Information List (CIL), which may include unclassified information but still warrants protection. The aggregation of information on the CIL could lead to discovering or revealing otherwise classified information. The CIL works to protect essential secret information paramount to achieving success for friendly forces in the operational environment.

The MEF CE's signature may take many forms. If not monitored, potential friendly force indicators revealed in one domain may be closely examined and combined with other indicators to reveal a more comprehensive snapshot of friendly force activities and intentions.

A few often-overlooked scenarios are highlighted below to further showcase the importance of signature management. As an example, host nation support for products and services is essential to achieve favorable results during crisis or contingency response. To solicit and obtain such services, however, often requires specific details to be made publicly available for sourcing. The joint force often requests seaport terminal services to be sourced from the host nation to support their requirements.

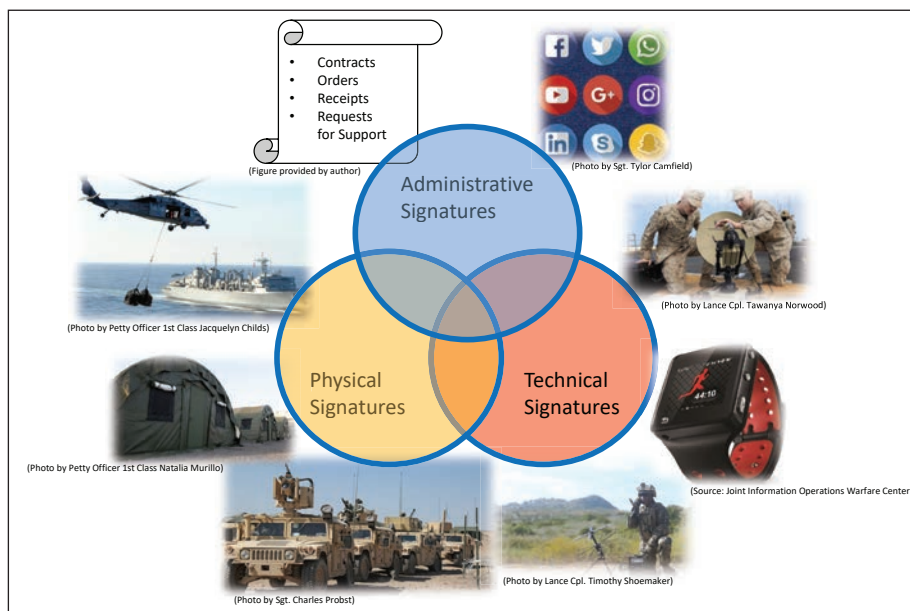


Figure 2. Signature domains. (Figure provided by author.)

This action may potentially provide an adversary with pertinent information on ship class, capabilities, offload timelines, locations, and throughput of military resources.

Additionally, aircraft, ships, trains, and other modes of transportation often have transmitters that operate almost entirely on unclassified networks. With relative ease, nefarious actors can generally pinpoint past and present locations of these assets commonly used for military personnel and equipment movements. When these data points are pieced together, they can often be used to reveal information otherwise protected by the CIL.

Force Protection. For each MEF-level exercise, II MSB has requested and received a host of augments from each Major Subordinate Command to complement the battalion's force protection efforts. As a result, II MSB provides 24-hour force protection capability to the CE, but there are limitations on what the team of augments can accomplish by themselves. During real-world crisis or contingency response, a robust force-protection capability is required and must be influenced by intelligence experts, regardless of which MEF CE employment construct is chosen. Force protection requirements would be threat-informed to address matters such as survivability; protections from adversarial special operations forces; air and ballistic missile threats; as well as chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attacks.

The consolidated, traditional MEF CE model is easier to protect in many regards as everyone is centrally located. A quick reaction force also remains in close proximity ready to respond on short notice if needed. The challenges with massing the CE in a singular location leaves many leaders susceptible to a singular attack. Force protection efforts must be closely integrated with the Rear Area Operations Center and in concert with the rear area coordinator, the joint force, our allies, and partners, as well as the host nation to address matters such as a layered defense in depth, integrated air missile defense, and similar threats. II MSB uses force protection efforts to safeguard the MEF CE's centers of



II MSB provides a Force Protection capability to the MEF CE which must be nested with Navy, Joint, Host Nation and other stakeholders (Photo by Sgt Alexis Flores.)

gravity while protecting, concealing, reducing, or eliminating their critical vulnerabilities. Thus, II MSB's force protection efforts have many relevant equities with signature management, combat service support, and other critical components.

Combat Service Support. II MSB can more-easily push all logistical requirements forward to support the MEF CE in a consolidated site. Health services,

extend organic support, distributed foraging and increased contracting will position II MSB to best support the MEF CE through non-standard and commercial procurement while limiting reliance on the traditional supply chain. Additionally, II MSB discovered host nation support and a comprehensive reachback capability allowed the distributed MEF CE cells to receive the necessary support while also limiting

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transportation, maintenance, engineering, food service, and others can efficiently operate from a singular area. To support a more-distributed CE, the battalion can no longer leverage economies of scale common in a consolidated site and must be prepared to replicate support for each smaller CE cell. This increases the complexities with developing a comprehensive concept of support while ensuring adequate services remain available at point and time of need. To

their overall footprint. A hub-and-spoke approach, combined with 21st century foraging, will nest nicely with this employment construct.

Recommended Way Forward

To complicate an adversary's decision cycle and provide increased opportunities for the MEF commander, II MSB must remain prepared to support a variety of CE employment constructs. These options must be fully understood,

exercised, and rehearsed to build and maintain unmatched proficiency.

Commanding and controlling a widely dispersed formation as described in DMO and EABO may increase the requirement for communications and electronic equipment. Thus, *careful consideration must be given to signature management efforts*. Units must be prepared to consistently operate within strict emissions controlled environments. Commanders, planners, and communicators should reevaluate traditional communications practices. In the past, low-signature communications may have been set aside for the technologically-advanced, expedient, and reliable means to communicate. Consider what communications may hide well in the relative noise floor: “Special attention is required to ensure effective signature management and signal security during each phase, stage, and step of an operation.”⁵

Encourage the use of spectrum and signal frequency analyzers when practical. If done accurately, this enables electromagnetic compatibility testing and allows friendly forces to monitor our own signatures. The analyzers should be used to observe and set to trigger an alarm should signatures surpass a certain threshold.

Adversary intelligence collection capabilities, including satellite vulnerability requests and times, should be understood early in the planning process. This will give planners an idea of what may be overhead and what capabilities may be leveraged against friendly forces. Matters such as these, which are derived from intelligence and information experts from throughout the MIG, may inform how II MSB will fight the MEF. Plan actions and applicable protections accordingly.

Establish and promote the importance of a Signature Management Operational Planning Team. To be effective, signature management requires a “whole of staff” approach. Just like operations security has equities throughout the entire organization and extends down to the most junior Marine and Sailor, so does signature management. It must not be limited to a singular section and requires the support from everyone in-



Health services support, to include casualty care and evacuation, remains one of the many services II MSB provides. (Photo by Sgt Isaiah Campbell.)

involved to be effective. Otherwise, we risk giving an adversary an otherwise preventable advantage.

II MSB will continue to identify and coordinate anticipated augmentation needed to conduct operations across the range of military operations. Baseline personnel and equipment requirements must address a host of MEF CE employment constructs. Planners should not wait until crisis to begin identifying resource shortfalls and sourcing. This has certain signature management, force protection, and combat service support equities as well.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for the commander to employ the MEF CE. As a result, II MSB must focus on providing a host of diverse MEF CE employment options to set favorable conditions for MEF-level warfighting. Flexibility and reliability, especially across the MSB, work in concert to generate increased operational capability and overall force resiliency for the commanding general’s headquarters. Anticipating requirements in advance to support a variety of MEF CE employment constructs is complex and requires ongoing collaboration with many key stakeholders. II MSB recognizes the importance of this no-fail mission and is

committed to work in concert with the II MEF CE and II MIG Headquarters to achieve ultimate success.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 2-0, Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: October 2013).
5. Headquarters, Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, (Washington, DC: February 2021).

>Author’s Note: The author wishes to honor the late Col Arthur J. Corbett, USMC(Ret) for his insight and counsel which paved the way for this research; the Marines, Sailors, and civilians of II MSB who continue to push the envelope; and his family for inspiring him beyond measure.

