

2023 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: Second Place

Get Families Out of the First Island Chain

Remove an adversary's advantage

by LtCol Brian A. Kerg

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The general sat at the table, hands clasped together, staring up at the members of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). His service uniform felt stifling. Beads of sweat started to roll down his forehead. He nervously dabbed at the sweat with a handkerchief.

The SASC chair nodded at an aide, who started the video reel.

The first clip showed the general, testifying to Congress before the recently concluded Sino-American War. Showing much more confidence and gravity than he displayed today, the general described the looming threat of the People's Liberation Army and predicted the year that China would be capable of and willing to seize Taiwan. "We must act decisively now to prepare for this fight!" the general said then.

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ly enjoying themselves. Looking into the camera and smiling warmly, the general made his pitch: "Soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines—there's no better place to bring your family than here. Be a part of our team, and our family, out here in the Pacific!"

Finally, the third clip began. It was footage recorded and live-streamed by families during the Massacre of Okinawa at the start of the war. Rockets smashed into base housing. A school burned like an

families, physically separated families and service members by force; in the chaos, dependents were beaten with batons, and children were trampled to death. With the island cut off from resupply in the months that followed, the remaining footage showed families slowly starving to death and succumbing to what should have been manageable illnesses.

The reel ended. The SASC chair turned to the general. "Do you care to explain yourself?" she asked.

More sweat trickled down the general's forehead. He stared up at the SASC members and tugged at his collar, struggling to find the words to begin.

The Threat

As described in the preceding vignette, the DOD is caught in a state of cognitive dissonance regarding the situation that is coming to a boil in the Pacific. DOD officials make increasingly dire predictions about the looming threat of China's increasing capability to seize Taiwan.¹ Our commander-in-chief repeatedly states that the United States will support Taiwan in a conflict, effectively committing U.S. military forces to such a fight.² Operationally, then, it is to the advantage of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to strike U.S. bases and stations across the Pacific early to mitigate the United States' ability to interfere in a Taiwan contingency.³ This makes the first island chain (FIC) a combat-zone-in-waiting. And yet, with the exception of the Unit Deployment Program, Ma-

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The reel moved immediately to a second clip; a command-produced public affairs message intended to encourage service members to seek orders overseas. It featured the same general, in relaxed, loose-fitting civilian attire, walking along a Japanese beach with his family. His wife and children smiled and laughed, clear-

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ines do not deploy to the FIC—they execute Permanent Change of Station orders to the FIC, families and all.

To be clear, this is a problem for the entire Joint Force. This article will discuss what remains strictly within the Marine Corps' control and examine the problem only through Marine Corps equities. In the context of the FIC, for the Marine Corps, this problem revolves centrally around service members and their families assigned to Okinawa, Japan, where the preponderance of Marine Corps forces in Japan are stationed.⁴

Regarding the Marine Corps, its forces in the FIC stand within the weapons engagement zone of the PRC with an ever-shrinking window predicting the PRC's capability to initiate aggression to seize the island of Taiwan. Such an invasion will inevitably require the PRC to target U.S. forces on installations throughout the FIC.⁵

However, the Service continues to treat those stations, for many practical purposes, as garrisons within the sanctuary of the homeland. Critically, the families and dependents of service members also reside within the weapons engagement zone. Should hostilities occur, families will inevitably be killed, and non-combatant evacuation operations will compete for resources getting to forces to the fight. If the threat is as grave as advertised, the Marine Corps has accepted the risk of placing families in anticipated kill zones.

The Case for the Status-Quo

There are several reasons why families might be kept in the FIC. Perhaps the Service does not give credence to the threat windows claimed by senior DOD officials, so it is best for the Marine Corps not to assume the significant cost of removing families from the FIC. But this line of thinking is undercut by the threat-informed and aggressive efforts of the Service to rapidly transform III MEF into a formation optimized to contribute to a fight against the PRC in line with these same threat windows.⁶

Perhaps instead the removal of families from the FIC would be perceived as escalatory to the PRC, a signal of preparation for war. This might simultane-

ously be perceived as escalatory to the Marine Corps' Japanese hosts and cause great friction within the U.S.-Japanese alliance. But this, too, is undercut by the rapid preparations for a PRC fight made not only by the Marine Corps but also by the Japanese Self Defense Force.⁷ Preparations for war are public, significant, and ongoing. Removal of families would simply be another logical and operational step and could in turn assure our Japanese allies by demonstrating the depth of the Marine Corps' commitment to meaningfully prepare for war.

A third line of thinking is that families are skin in the game, a gambit by which to deter PRC aggression. This assumes that the PRC believes that the significant death of U.S. dependents caused during an attack against U.S. forces in Japan would tip the hand of the United States, incentivizing policymakers and the electorate to support a war against the PRC. Yet, the historical record is resoundingly empty of similar examples. In general, an act of war

as Task Force 51/5 in Bahrain. Alternatively, expanded Unit Deployment Programs could send cohesive organizations to III MEF in Okinawa for up to a year, bringing greater operational stability. The constant movement of Marines into the FIC would create an even greater Service-wide proficiency and preparedness for a PRC conflict, mitigating manpower challenges that often send the same Marines repeatedly to the FIC while others may spend a decade or more of their careers without getting stationed overseas. Finally, this would allow greater stability to families and maintain greater job opportunities for spouses as they remain in place at the same duty station while their Marine deploys overseas, addressing a critical factor affecting retention.⁹

The Benefits of an FIC Without Families

An FIC without families provides essential advantages for the viability of the Stand-in Force concept.¹⁰ Among others, the strategic, operational, and

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is perceived by both the aggressor and the target as an act of war, and civilians have and will likely continue to bear the cost of this while not contributing to deterrence in any meaningful way.⁸

Finally, there is the simple fact that such a transformation would be very difficult and, at the front end, very expensive. It would likely mean orders to Okinawa become one-year unaccompanied tours or year-long deployments in most cases, introducing some risk to unit cohesion and proficiency as personnel constantly rotate in and out of theater. It would also introduce another layer of cost regarding family housing from the bases and stations from which these Marines deploy. Still, existing models exist upon which to build, such

tactical risk is reduced; orders to the FIC become a deployment, creating greater opportunities for persistent employment that the PRC threat demands; and critical space for infrastructure and force employment becomes available. Together, these benefits optimize readiness and maximize deterrence.

Risk Mitigation

With families out of the FIC, the risk is significantly reduced. The strategic risk to U.S. morale of watching families die in realtime on social media is removed from the body politic and reduces decision-making pressures on U.S. policymakers. The operational risk to competition for mobility assets is removed, allowing commanders to focus

on the fight instead of balancing that against the demands of non-combatant evacuation operations. Additionally, the tactical risk to troops feeling psychologically and emotionally bound to familial obligations is removed, reducing response time between initiation of hostilities and getting troops in position to execute their mission.

It's a Deployment

With families stateside and with shortened tours, an unaccompanied year overseas becomes a deployment, with acceptable expectations for employment akin to deployments during Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. Battle rhythms are no longer constrained by operating hours of child development centers, DODEA schools, and other familial obligations. This makes it culturally and operationally more feasible and acceptable to man and employ combat operations centers at major subordinate commands at levels that allow meaningful, proactive, and responsive command and control (C2) of forward-deployed forces. Similarly, it becomes more acceptable to persistently deploy forces from Okinawa to key maritime terrain across the FIC for the duration of the deployment, rather than in short, episodic bursts. In short, III MEF can actually be employed as a persistently ready stand-in force.

Buying Back Space

Space available for basing Marine Corps forces on Okinawa continues to shrink per the limitations imposed by the Defense Posture Review Initiative. With families removed from the FIC, the space currently allotted to family housing and associated services suddenly becomes available for infrastructure development. This will allow for the creation of hardened structures, underground facilities, and continuity of operations sites that will keep the stand-in force operable even under the threat of persistent enemy long-range precision fires. In addition, the Marine Corps gains additional space remaining under its own authorities for the persistent employment and installation of sensors and defensive capabilities that

will support integrated air and missile defense for key nodes across the FIC.

Conclusion

Amidst public assertions from the most senior officials in the DOD that the threat window from the PRC is rapidly closing, and a Marine Corps that is rapidly transforming III MEF to prepare for this fight, the Marine Corps continues to assume incredible risk to its posture and readiness by keeping families forward deployed in a combat-zone-in-waiting.

To optimize the Marine Corps' ability to contribute to the Joint Force's

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ability to deter the PRC, and to fight and win if necessary, the Marine Corps should remove families from the FIC. This will buy down military risk, enable commanders to meaningfully C2 their forces and employ them persistently at key maritime terrain, and buy back space needed for the development of critical infrastructure and the deployment of sensors and integrated air and missile defense assets. Without such action, Marine Corps forces in the FIC may still be caught flat-footed and hamstrung by the brutal realities of war when families are stationed within the blast radius of enemy fires.

Notes

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