

# The Influence of Coalition Amphibious Power

The modification of combat as we know it

by Maj Troy E. Mitchell

**W**arfare transcending all boundaries and limits is unrestricted warfare. This kind of war focuses on readiness, omnipresent information, and a multi-domain battlefield. This means superimposing all weapons and technology at will; destroying military and non-military boundaries lying between the worlds of war and non-war; and modifying many of the current principles of combat and re-writing the rules of war.<sup>1</sup> The United States and its allies face a future political-military operating environment mirroring unrestricted warfare against adversaries like China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran. The 38th *Commandant's Planning Guidance* directs the Service to focus on major combat operations in a naval campaign, which has facets of unrestricted warfare.<sup>2</sup>

The trouble with military comprehension of future warfare lies in the fact that this is not a traditional war. Russia provides us examples of a non-traditional style of warfare; in 2008, Russia used cyber warfare to enable conventional military maneuvers against Georgia, and in 2014, the “little green men” seized Crimea.<sup>3</sup> As warfare transgresses to “little green men” emanating from Russia or “little blue men” in the South China Sea, the confluence of massive population growths in hyper-connected, urban, littoral regions and the rise of hybrid actors creates conflicts for which the United States is insufficiently prepared.<sup>4</sup> Throughout history, the United States fought and innovated

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from the perspective of previous conflicts, yet the concepts of proxy wars and allied support provide opportunities to exercise influence and power outside the norms, values, and laws of traditional warfare.<sup>5</sup> Today, China, North Korea, Russia, Iran, and non-state violent extremists refocus the United States' national power relative to plans, capability development, modernization, and intelligence collection requirements.<sup>6</sup> Each of these entities leverage economic coercion, political influence, unconventional warfare, information operations, cyber operations, and military capabilities to advance their national interests. If the United States were to clash with these adversaries—singularly or combined—it would compete with a military dimension falling below the conventional threshold triggering a traditional and decisive military response.

If the United States must use military power as the means to achieve national interests, its adversaries have exploitable beaches to project amphibious power. If a war were to break out, the United States and its allies could not penetrate the complex, multifaceted defenses of their adversaries without sustained amphibious power. For a millennium, naval forces have exploited coastal waters as a maneuver space to attack their adversar-

ies' weaknesses, enhance their own positions, and dominate the littorals. Since World War II, the United States has maintained the largest and most ready amphibious fleet in the world, with an average of over 10 ships and 6,000 Marines on a deployment. These forces have conducted over 100 amphibious operations to cope with disasters, evacuate civilians, destroy coastal targets, and help U.S. allies and partners respond to crises.<sup>7</sup> With countries like Japan and Australia developing amphibious power, and other countries increasing their capability and capacity to conduct amphibious operations, the Marine Corps leads coalition allies through teaching, coaching, and mentoring roles. Through a coalition-centric amphibious strategy, the Marine Corps can continue to maintain its relevancy through niche expeditionary operations that support securing and retaining key maritime terrain while fostering global relationships and refining how the United States conducts amphibious operations in modern, technological environments.

The Marine Corps can remain a visionary of amphibious power by developing, testing, and evaluating interoperable capabilities with its allies and partners. Interacting with and advancing allied amphibious partnerships

builds the capacities and capabilities of partners in order to manage global security requirements. Such a coalition-centric strategy, focused on national interests, would foster the expeditionary nature of the Marine Corps with the whole of Government support.

### The Nature of Strategy

Major changes in the global security situation can inspire or compel a strategic shift in U.S. military obligations. In today's operating environment, complex systems fluctuate and exhibit unpredictability. Strategic shifts are often in response to something that makes existing adversaries more dangerous, such as a new capability or technology, or to a change in an adversary's behavior or strategy. New adversary alliances signal a fundamental change in conflict and compel a strategic shift. Shifting alliances drive strategy in classic works of statecraft, like Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* or, more recently, Russia's alliance with Iran to support Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the United States calculates conducting information operations with coalition partners or potential allies because of the risk of misperception. Misperception is a risk when adversaries do not share cultures, languages, values, or other attributes because strategy seeks psychological and physical effects.

### Coalition-Centric Amphibious Strategy

Transitioning from the current enemy-centric strategy against the United States' adversaries to a coalition-centric amphibious strategy provides favorable circumstances to relinquish the global security force requirements of the U.S. military. Coalition-centric amphibious strategies empower U.S. allies to protect their near regions while advancing their capabilities through experience and technological advancements. Providing allies with these capabilities enhances their ability to influence their near regions. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps and Navy can align with their regional counterparts to advance coalition amphibious warfare.

Multi-national joint capabilities in a coalition environment are required to

defeat the deficit of the Navy's amphibious shipping.<sup>8</sup> Through a coalition-centric amphibious strategy, a possibility exists to certify U.S. military capabilities with coalition partners, which would enhance the military's capability to project power from allied ships—and vice versa—if Navy ships are unavailable in the time of need. The creative naval integration of Marines on naval shipping beyond LHDs, LPDs, and LSDs is not the only challenge.<sup>9</sup> The lack of proficiency in projecting military capabilities from coalition amphibious ships and of clear, allied communications networks for sharing and collaborating remain a shortfall. From classified networks to video teleconferences and file transfers, each military has different complexities prohibiting the option for coalition amphibious power projection

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in today's world. These complexities create unnecessary challenges in the conduct of interoperable amphibious warfare, which inhibits military support because of the required clarity by clear and precise communications. The summation of additional time for planning, preparations, rehearsals, and deconfliction provides time for the adversary to out-cycle coalition military responses. Finally, through close and enduring coalition partnerships, coordinating elements of national power into a comprehensive approach to joint operations will increase the collaborative means to gain and maintain a shared understanding of the historical and enduring problem and the complexities involved in developing comprehensive amphibious solutions.<sup>10</sup>

A focused coalition-centric amphibious strategy provides an opportunity for the Marine Corps to again define itself as a focused naval force-in-readiness that increases global security capacity by conducting coalition amphibious operations and allied doctrine. The *Marine*

*Corps Operating Concept* codifies some of these principles "as part of a Combined/Joint force to assist one of our key allies in repelling an aggressive neighbor and quelling a proxy-force insurgency."<sup>11</sup> Many U.S. military personnel perceive global military exercises as the sideshow event during predeployment training or while deployed as a force-in-readiness. A focused coalition-amphibious strategy provides the opportunity for the United States to move beyond the sideshow perception and realize that future technological amphibious operations require coalition support and augmentation to achieve success. The United States cannot achieve mission success against its adversaries by itself.

Even short of a war, coalition amphibious power provides a crucial deterrent. A coalition-amphibious strategy empowers American allies through a disciplined initiative to avoid overextension of a military force's capability. Empowering allies is crucial to deterrence. To empower amphibious allies, the United States can coordinate through respective countries' certification processes for amphibious connectors—both surface and airborne—to develop a combined amphibious capability.

### Interagency Opportunity

Using all of our government and non-governmental capabilities in coordination with partner nations, we can provide a "team of teams" that can train, evaluate, and deploy. Whether coalition partners and the U.S. military mass to a region to support humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, non-combatant evacuation operations, major combat operations, or other operations, a whole of government perspective provides a unified focus on coalition and state national interest—vice a sole-military focus differing from political objectives. The whole of government teams can use the coalition-centric amphibious strategy to educate military planners and coalition counterparts regarding interagency perspectives, networks, capabilities, funding, and interests that support the unity of purpose toward achieving efficient and timely strategic coalition end states. With the coalition

interagency and military capabilities aligned, the teams can collaborate regarding the use of complementary military systems and capabilities from amphibious coalition shipping for planning and coordination before entering the operating environment and transitioning ashore. Unfortunately, much of the coalition interagency support interacts with the DOD's joint/combatant command staffs without providing

War is a highly institutionalized political violence that involves major powers and the penetration of political borders. Whether the decision to forward power projection enables stability or responds to unrestricted warfare, the procurement and advancement of the amphibious platform capability should cause the orchestration of a coalition-centric amphibious strategy.<sup>14</sup> Developing this strategy will enable future

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operational staffs that have the requisite knowledge to achieve the strategic effects desired by the government. Without a combined interagency-coalition amphibious staff, communications transcribed via signals, messages, emails, or other means may be lost in translation from a whole of government perspective.

Daniel J. Boorstin stated, “The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance—it is the illusion of knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> The U.S. military—like so many others—has immense capability and capacity. Amphibious operations will continue to be an important element of U.S. military strategy.<sup>13</sup> With adversarial concerns emanating from China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran, the United States may have to look to its allies for support to project concentrated amphibious power. Unfortunately, the U.S. military and allied forces are not sufficiently interoperable and unified in their military progression. A lack of understanding may lead to increased friction during a time of unified military obligations. Why not use today's operating environment and coalition military training exercises to progress complementary amphibious systems and network architecture to advance collective interagency partnerships and military capacity for future coalition wars?

advancements, exercises, and international opportunities for allied military responses and prepare combined forces based on their national interests. By redefining the Marine Corps' role in conducting naval amphibious operations with American coalition partners, collectively the United States and its allies are empowering global security while assessing operational plan responses. How will the Marine Corps redefine itself? Will it pursue advancements in allied amphibious partnerships? Or will it continue to innovate in isolation? The future is uncertain with adversaries rapidly advancing their military capabilities. The United States requires the help of allies to develop a preventive war strategy. Without a coalition-centric strategy, the United States remains alone in global defense.

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**Notes**

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