

# Winning Sea Control

Transforming naval expeditionary forces

by Maj Brian Kerg, LtCol Nathan Dmochowski, LT Joseph Hanacek, USN

**P**reventing *Fait Accompli* The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) both describe strategic competition with revisionist powers as the central challenge facing the United States now and in the future.<sup>1</sup> These potential adversaries, notably China and Russia, seek to reshape the international balance of power in their favor, further their own interests at the expense of those of the United States and its Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) allies and partners, and act in ways that flout the rules-based international order. These ends are pursued through *fait accompli* strategies that quickly seize objectives and create anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) situations that may prevent friendly governments from having the time or political will to strike back, as escalation may be deemed too costly.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the United States deterred adversaries through a strategy of reactive punishment. However, the growing military and economic strength of potential adversaries, combined with *fait accompli* strategies, makes deterrence through punishment nonviable. Instead, deterrence by *denial* is emphasized by both the NSS and NDS as the preferred means of countering adversary *fait accompli* strategies. The United States, in cooperation with its allies and partners, must present adversaries with a credible deterrent that changes their decision making such that traditional, western military conflict is avoided outright. Adversaries must be made to believe that if they pursue aggression, they will be identified early and badly beaten, and will thus avoid aggression in the first place.

How the United States, its allies, and partners can feasibly employ a strategy of deterrence by denial is the central

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question that must be answered by the DOD in general and the Department of the Navy (DON) in particular. One of the most influential members of Congress on national security, Marine Representative Mike Gallagher, (R-Maine), recently made precisely this point in an article entitled, “State of (Deterrence by) Denial.” As Rep. Gallagher and others have made clear, the DOD and DON lack a framework upon which to ensure defense spending produces feasible denial capabilities. This is not for lack of trying, but the efforts across the Services have at times provided more confusion than clarity. With the release of several joint and naval concepts, inclusive of expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO), joint access and maneuver in the global commons, littoral operations in a contested environment, and distributed maritime operations (DMO), planners across the naval Services are reaching different and sometimes conflicting conclusions about what is expected from Service, much less DOD leadership. Unclassified versions of these concepts remain too vague to be of use to policymakers, while classified versions are hidden from the public

and cannot contribute to the public discourse. DON risks confusing both internal and external audiences with a dizzying array of new concepts and terms without an overarching, unclassified, and available vision by which to unify these supporting concepts.

The political will to fund a meaningful deterrence by denial capability is present. Congressional leaders, however, are calling on all stakeholders to prioritize this effort over local and parochial interests.<sup>3</sup> But to reach the tipping point, DOD and DON must thoroughly and publicly articulate how they will provide deterrence through denial. They must describe to the public how and why they should appropriately fund the military toward credible deterrent capabilities. *Stand-in naval expeditionary forces conducting EABO, employed to complement DMO, will make this case to both Congress and the American people.*

## Naval and Combined: An Integrated Concept for EABO

EABO is inherently naval and combined in nature. While some planners to date have focused exclusively on the Marine Corps when developing EABO,

it must holistically integrate Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, MDT-allied, and partner forces to enable a persistent stand-in force.

*Naval forces and sea control.* Naval forces enable sea control and sea denial by establishing and operating from expeditionary advanced bases (EABs) at sea and ashore, using a variety of platforms deployed in littoral regions including from pre-existing, yet transformed—in accordance with the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: August 2019)—forward deployed bases such as those that the naval force has in places like Japan. If not permanent already, once established in their designated operating areas, naval forces deploy and operate sensor, shooter, command and control, sustainment, deception, and other capabilities required to persist forward as stand-in forces.<sup>4</sup>

These naval forces extend sea control from EABs. They exploit expertise and systems from the sea-surface, sub-surface, air, space, and cyber domains that are employed by and sustained from EABs. Importantly, current Navy Expeditionary Combatant Command capabilities are uniquely primed to support this concept, providing options for site preparation and mobility that will increase EAB-hosted forces' responsiveness, displacement, reconstitution, and survivability.<sup>5</sup> Unmanned and manned craft extend sea control and provide transportation and connector support, supporting ship-to-shore, shore-to-ship, and shore-to-shore movements.

*Allies and Partners: Persistent access and sea control from the contact layer.* MDT-allies and partner forces are the premier enabling feature of EABO. American allies and partners live, operate, and thrive inside the weapons and sensors engagement zone of U.S. adversaries every single day. The global operating model describes these forces as operating in the contact layer, and here we differentiate between a "persistent" contact layer and a "reinforcing" contact layer.

Forces in the persistent contact layer remain forward deployed with MDT-allies and partners as part of regularly scheduled operations and theater secu-

rity cooperation (TSC). Reinforcing contact layer forces are those expeditionary and special purpose units placed in the contact layer through dynamic force employment. Partnering EAB-hosting and hosted forces with America's allies and partners, whether through recurring deployments of EAB forces in the persistent contact layer or through dynamically re-tasked expeditionary forces in the reinforcing contact layer, allows them to seamlessly integrate and support sea control and denial missions. Allies and partners offer persistent access to the contact layer, from which naval stand-in forces can operate from EABs and provide sea control and denial.

Allies' and partners' ability to conduct EABO can also be improved in multiple ways. First, naval forces should be trained and educated to conduct EABO alongside allies and partners in schools located at Quantico, VA, and Newport, RI. Further, EABO capacity can improve through increasing interoperability of equipment and skillsets, refined through more training and collaboration with coalition commanders. Finally, forces deployed to conduct TSC must be trained, equipped, and employed as a stand-in force that simultaneously builds capacity for sea control and denial among combined forces. In this way, EABO empowers MDT-allies and partners.

### **EABO and Stand-in Forces**

The EABO concept is applied within the dual-posture context of stand-in forces and stand-off forces. The following proposed definitions for each build on the joint access and maneuver in the global commons' definitions of inside and outside forces. This will better illustrate the role of stand-in *naval* forces.

Stand-in forces persist forward inside the range of adversary weapons and sensors to deter malign behavior and respond to conflict. Adversaries are compelled to consider the capabilities of stand-in forces when planning, providing friendly forces with the advantages of a deterrence by denial strategy. Stand-in forces assure allies and partners provide access for the joint force and other U.S. government agencies while simultaneously enabling efforts from other U.S. government agencies by demonstrating resolve through presence and responsiveness.

Stand-off forces are designed to minimize risk by engaging with long-range fires outside the range of most, though not all, enemy weapons and sensors. Stand-off forces consist of conventional forces and systems that permit massing of force and historically win battles during full-spectrum combat operations. However, they are postured outside an adversary's weapons and sensors en-



**Future expeditionary forces would be naval and combined.** (Photo by Cpl Israel Chincio.)



**Consideration must be made for long-range fires outside the range of enemy weapons systems.** (Photo by Sgt Charles Plouffe.)

agement zone until threats have been minimized and they can close in mass.

EABO enables the stand-in naval forces that provide sea control and denial, changes adversary decision making to favor U.S. interests, deters aggression, and prevents conflict. During full-spectrum combat operations, EABO-enabled stand-in naval forces allow joint and naval commanders to exploit opportunities to leverage stand-off forces and win battles at sea and ashore.<sup>6</sup>

*Providing sea denial and sea control.* Sea denial and sea control is provided by these stand-in naval forces from EABs through several lines of effort and operation. First, the deployment of sensors and shooters provides credible force or the threat of force to adversaries, deterring them through denial. Second, the employment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems provides situational awareness to joint, maritime, and fleet commanders.<sup>7</sup> Third, these forces persist forward and maximize survivability through signature management, use of key maritime terrain, passive defense, and treaty, ally, and partner integration. Finally, and perhaps most critically, they maintain the vital human-level connections required to sustain and strengthen any alliance or partner relationship.<sup>8</sup>

### EABO Support to DMO, Naval, and Joint Forces

DMO employs naval forces in a dispersed fashion across the maritime theater to deter adversary forces from concentrating and projecting power. Friendly naval forces avoid the risks associated with concentration while providing an asymmetric advantage to fleet commanders and MDT-allies and partners, in turn creating dilemmas for adversary decision makers.<sup>9</sup> Finding these increasingly distributed forces also imposes significant costs on adversaries as they will need to invest in increasingly more command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to locate them.

EABO complements and facilitates DMO in its pursuit of these ends. DMO requires persistent forward presence of friendly sea control and sea denial capabilities as a precondition for application. While DMO provides advantages in its own right, it can only provide commanders with an asymmetrical advantage while dispersed if effects are massed. This calls for operation of EABs inside the weapons and sensor zone, ensuring DMO can be more vigorously applied by allowing stand-in forces to provide mutual support and create integrated maritime defense-in-depth.

Key to this depth is the offensive, including sensing, capabilities provided by EABO forces and the credible application of deterrence by denial. This in turn provides naval commanders a means by which to feasibly support entry of stand-off forces, allowing for decisive naval campaigns that overcome and mitigate adversary A2/AD, and ultimately provide a means of entry of the joint force into theater.

### Mission, Tasks, and Organization

Currently, EABO-capable forces remain conceptual and lack the assigned mission and tasks required to shape force design, training requirements, employment, and experimentation. What follows is a tentative description of those very elements.

*Mission:* Enable sea control and sea denial from expeditionary advanced bases in support of joint, maritime, and naval commanders in order to permit freedom of maneuver for naval forces.

*Tasks:* Conduct security cooperation with host-nation forces to perform all EABO tasks. Deploy inside the weapon and sensor zone from which to operate EABs. Persist forward indefinitely as a stand-in force; maintain persistent situational awareness inside the weapons and sensor zone and provide this awareness to fleet, maritime, and joint commanders. Locate, target, and destroy adversary maritime forces inside the weapons and sensor zone with long-range fires ashore and with naval expeditionary capabilities at sea. Establish EABs to host and employ capabilities required to support fleet, maritime, and joint commanders. Deny adversaries the ability mass forces to coerce or attack allies and partners located near key maritime terrain. Protect vital U.S. economic interests passing above, on, and below key maritime terrain. Finally, expand EABs as required to support follow-on operations and tasks.

*Task organization.* EABO forces should be task organized according to the requirements of the mission. Elements may field and employ anti-ship cruise missiles; swarms of sea-surface, sub-surface, and aerial unmanned systems; and long-range precision ground



fires as needed to support fleet, maritime, and joint commanders. EABO task organization should be fluid, agile, and tailorable.

### Composition

Options for the composition of EA-BO-capable forces are model agnostic; they should be composed in a way that best provides sea control and sea denial, enabling freedom of maneuver. Any expeditionary unit, through dynamic force employment, can be tasked to conduct EABO and serve as a stand-in force. At the same time, current force models and capabilities can be re-purposed toward this end. Composition can also be tailored toward employment in both the persistent contact layer and reinforcing contact layer. Composition options might include:

*Persistently deployed TSC teams.* TSC teams will be re-tasked to provide initial EABO capabilities alongside MDT-allies and partners. Alternatively, TSC teams will be dynamically re-tasked to other sites to provide operationally relevant capabilities to an EAB.<sup>10</sup>

*Designated companies and batteries within selected infantry and artillery battalions.* Such units would be appropriately equipped and trained in EABO training and requirements standards. Ideally, high proficiency and a full load-out would be available to all Marine forces, but as EABO development continues across the Service, selected batteries and companies may be the focus of effort—akin to selecting an individual infantry company within a battalion landing team to serve as its boat company.<sup>11</sup>

*Newly organized maritime commando battalions and squadrons.* Such units would fully integrate Marine and Navy Expeditionary Combatant Command capabilities. As required, detachments could be deployed on an *ad-hoc* basis, or the battalion could be deployed cohesively.<sup>12</sup> Initial fielding could be modeled off of the recently fielded experimental battalion model, prioritizing units conducting Unit Deployment Programs (UDP) to the INDO-PACOM area of responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Instead of deploying UDPs to execute legacy mission essential tasks



**EABO forces will also need to be composed so that they provide for sea control and denial capability.** (Photo by LCpl Juan Anaya.)

and training and requirements standards in a deployed environment, units selected for this EABO deployment program (EDP) would provide sea control and denial, and offer another means for deterring adversaries in a region while refining EABO tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP).

*Rotational forces and Special Purpose MAGTF.* These forces would be EABO-capable and deployed to regions where persistent sea control and denial are required. Just as a MEU is always forward deployed and providing combatant commanders with the full spectrum of MEU capabilities, so too could EABO-capable rotational forces be persistently deployed and providing sea control and denial where it is most required. This would place an unyielding check on adversary aggression within the persistent contact layer, enabling deterrence over the long-term.

### *Si Vis Pacem, Habere Maris*

Adversaries of the United States and its MDT-allies and partners employ and are refining *fait accompli* strategies to reshape the global balance of power to suit their ends. In response, the NSS and NDS call for the United States to pursue strategies of deterrence by denial, rather than rely on the increasingly ob-

solete strategy of deterrence by reactive punishment.

In the collective rush to conceptualize meaningful deterrent strategies, the DOD and DON have released a litany of strategic documents and force design concepts. However, they have not coherently expressed to Congress and the American people how deterrence by denial will be brought to fruition; Service leaders have been unable to tell Congress and taxpayers why they should appropriate funds to support the development of specific deterrence by denial capabilities.

This vision for the development of EABO does just that. Naval stand-in forces can be integrated and employed to provide sea control and sea denial. EABO enables the stand-in naval forces that provide sea control and denial, changes adversary decision making to favor U.S. interests, deters aggression, and prevents conflict. The United States and its MDT-allies and partners will no longer secure peace by preparing for war. Using these ideas as a framework for force design, we will secure peace by controlling the sea: *Si Vis Pacem, Habere Maris*.

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### Notes

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