

SEABASING: CONCEPT, ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sam J. Tangredi is Director of San Diego Operations for the planning-consulting firm Strategic Insight LTD, and a retired Navy Captain. Along with operational billets, he was the Head of the Strategy and Concepts Branch of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations and Director of Strategic Planning and Business Development for the Navy International Programs Office. He is the author of numerous articles on strategy and defense policy and has published three books, the latest being Futures of War.

Seabasing is a strategic concept that has been defined in a variety of often contradictory ways. It is officially a joint concept, but one that is widely perceived as a parochial tool to justify budget increases for the Department of the Navy. As an activity, seabasing has been described as both traditional and transformational.[1] Many proponents consider it a specific set of hardware-future platforms such as the mobile offshore base (MOB), or additional ships for the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF), such as the proposed Mobile Landing Platform which would allow for selective offload of prepositioned material while still at sea.[2] Its misapplied exclusive association with amphibious warfare, not a priority in the current Pentagon, has largely driven it out of policy discussions at the Office of the Secretary of Defense level. Ironically, seabasing came to prominence in the past decade under a Chief of Naval Operations determined to cut capabilities from the amphibious fleet to fund future surface combatants.[3] From 2002 to 2008, it appeared with great frequency and great passion in many professional defense journals and reports. But it is not once mentioned in the QDR 2010 report.

As a grand idea, it appears becalmed yet still visible out on the horizon. However, as a practical reality, U.S. forces engage in seabasing today-and every day. And the U.S. Marine Corps-along with a sometime supportive, sometime reluctant U.S. Navy-is projected to continue to make incremental improvements.

WHAT IS SEABASING ALL ABOUT?

There is both a broad and a narrow view of what seabasing is about. In its broad vision, seabasing refers to the capability to use the sea in the same way that U.S. forces use overseas regional bases for deterrence, alliance support, cooperative security, power projection, and other forward operations. This broad vision stems from conceptual discussions that began within the U.S. Navy in the 1990s. It is also reflected in the introductory sections of the more recent joint U.S. Marine Corps-U.S. Navy-U.S. Army Concept for Employment for Current Seabasing Capabilities, released May 19, 2010.

From that perspective, seabasing is decidedly not a new concept. U.S. forces have been seabasing since the U.S. Navy became a global Navy at the turn of the last century-and, arguably, even before. "The World War II 'fleet train' [auxiliaries, oilers and supply ships that replenished the combatant ships at sea] that provided the U.S. battle fleet with such unprecedented range and freedom of action" could be considered a seabase since it allowed the fleet to resupply at sea or in isolated anchorages.[4] Likewise, it is easily observed that aircraft carriers are floating airbases that can be positioned and repositioned on a global basis. Amphibious warships also constitute the components of a base for forces (primarily U.S. Marine Corps) that can be rapidly inserted onto land by both surface and air. Combining with the USN grey hulls of the amphibious fleet are the Military Sealift Command's civilian-crewed MPF ships.[5] The U.S. Army also operates prepositioning ships.

However, a narrower view, focused on improvements to amphibious and MPF ship capabilities-as exemplified in the report of the Defense Science Board's 2003 Task Force on Seabasing-currently predominates in operational discussions. This narrower view of seabasing focuses almost exclusively on naval expeditionary/amphibious capabilities and MPF support of the joint Services. This narrower view is used by the U.S. Marine Corps when justifying incremental improvements in naval expeditionary platforms.

As stated earlier, seabasing has never had one generally accepted definition. We see the term expressed as: seabasing, sea basing, Sea Basing, Enhanced Networked Sea Basing, seabased, sea base, and other variants. Each connotes a specific nuance designed to distinguish it from the others. It does have an official Department of Defense (DoD) definition, but one that many authorities agree is not complete. The current Joint Publication 1-02 (DoD Dictionary) defines seabasing as: "the deployment, assembly, command projection, reconstitution, and reemployment of joint power from the sea without reliance on land bases within the operational area." But it also notes: "See also amphibious operations (JP-3-02)."[6]

Although this definition is a great improvement over the previous DoD Dictionary version (which stated that seabasing was a technique of amphibious operations), the note betrays the lingering almost exclusive association with amphibious warfare. This is one of the reasons why significant discussions of seabasing have not appeared in the defense literature in the past two years. It has become apparent that Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates-kept in his position primarily to prevail in the "wars we are in"-discounts the likelihood of having to conduct major amphibious operation in the coming years. As noted, the Quadrennial Defense Review 2010 final report, along with the report of the QDR Independent Review panel, never mention seabasing. The QDR 2010 report does include a Mobile Landing Platform (MLP) in its listing of desired naval capabilities.[7] But a MLP, the first of which will be funded in the FY2011 defense budget, is merely another type of future Maritime Prepositioning Ship (MPS), largely "connecting" or complementing existing capabilities, and, in itself, does not indicate a strong commitment to seabasing.

If seabasing is defined as using the sea in the same way U.S. forces use regional land bases, clearly there can be degrees of seabasing in the same way that there are different types of land bases—from austere to well-developed infrastructures. Mid-developed seabases currently exist and have existed; a U.S. naval task force—depending on its configuration—can provide joint C4ISR, rapid strike capabilities using stealth or non-stealth assets,[8] special operations forces (SOF) insertion, theater ballistic missile defense (TBMD), control of regional air space, search and air rescue (SAR), and emergency medical facilities, space for a joint task force command element, and the positioning of infantry, light armor, and artillery ashore beyond the beach. This is comparable to a regional land base's capability (relative to the size of personnel assigned). Of course, it can move, thereby making enemy targeting more difficult. Its elements can also be widely dispersed throughout the regional sea, an advantage that can only be duplicated by a network of land bases.

However, it is unable to provide landing for heavy lift aircraft or store an iron mountain of supplies. Nor can it land significant amounts of heavy armor ashore. Nor can it make an Army or Air Force general feel fully in command of things—an unarticulated detriment to the perception of "jointness" (even if the U.S. Army officially supports seabasing). Yet, it can be most assuredly joint—and not simply by operating Army helicopters off aircraft carriers near Haiti.

In a practical sense, its jointness is not new. Army forces participated in amphibious assaults along with the Marines in the Pacific, and on their own in the European theater. Although the largest landing force in World War II (D-Day invasion) operated across a narrow channel, and, therefore, was well supported by land-based aircraft, such was not true in North Africa or Southern Europe.

If the essence of seabasing is a traditional U.S. capability, the debate in the past decade had focused primarily on:

(1) how capable seabasing can be made by applying new technologies and greater resources and whether it is valid in countering anti-access defenses;

(2) whether the U.S. Navy appears simultaneously to oversell the concept and under fund its resources and whether the other Services would support the concept in the joint arena;

(3) whether the U.S. Marine Corps is justifying amphibious lift through joint terminology, and struggling with the Navy over new ship programs and OSD over the future of MPF ships; and

(4) the implication that seabasing could be a replacement, not just a supplement, to regional land bases. This last issue is intensified because seabasing does not require another nation's permission.

SEA CONTROL, SOVEREIGNTY AND ANTI-ACCESS

Seabasing is a capability that exploits command of the sea or sea control. In fact, it can not exist without sea control. Since the collapse of the Soviet Navy in 1991, U.S. sea control has been a given, unlike the fight to achieve sea control in World War II. Clearly the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and perhaps others, intends to contest American sea control within its region.[9] However, PLA maritime capabilities have not yet matched their aspirations and it is unclear whether its efforts at sea denial would be effective. American global sea control is not yet broken, presumably allowing the continued viability of seabasing. But the growing ambition for regional denial capabilities-often referred to as anti-access or area denial strategies (A2/AD)-is itself undeniable.

Because it is dependent on sea control, it is natural that the U.S. Navy would provide the majority of seabasing platforms out of its own fleet. Originally the Rumsfeld-era Office of Defense Transformation defined sea-base as "a noun; the sea and not the things on it." [10] However, the seabase can be more properly thought of as the ships and platforms on which-and by which-the forces are positioned. The ocean is the fluid medium that provides both the terrain and the reduction in friction that allows for the movement of heavy objects. Metaphorically, it allows castles to move. These iron castles constitute the seabase. Within the castles are stored and transported the means of military power, including the expeditionary power of the U.S. Marine Corps and resupply for Army land forces. These castles also provide the best logistics platforms for humanitarian assistance in littoral regions.

As mentioned earlier, a most attractive feature of seabasing is that it provides for an overseas base of operation located close to or in a crisis area that is completely under the sovereignty of the United States.[11] Although the United States can project strike power from the continental United States (CONUS), this is just a small portion of the power projection required to affect events on land in combat or crisis. Seabasing provides for a forward presence and deterrence efforts that might not be achieved by latent conventional capabilities in CONUS. Seabasing is also the optimal means of providing sustained security cooperation and humanitarian relief. All of this can be conducted without violation of anyone else's sovereign rights under international law.

Proponents of seabasing like to quote British naval strategist Sir Julian S. Corbett's observation (in 1906) that Britain-then the world's greatest sea power, traditionally favored sovereign ports and bases that made her "independent of uncertain neutrals and doubtful allies." [12] But to justify spending resources on seabasing by the need for such independence is over-selling. America's current allies are neither weak nor uncertain, and in the current political environment it is doubtful they would place restrictions on basing when facing a mutual threat. However, it is valid to argue that spending on seabasing should be increased because anti-access capabilities of potential opponents (primarily China and Iran) have made fixed regional land bases extremely vulnerable. Seabasing also faces an increasing threat, but because of its mobility presents a much more difficult targeting problem for opponents.

Can new seabasing technologies outpace the growing anti-access threat? The Navy-Marine Corps are planning incremental improvements in expeditionary offload from sea to shore. The development of TBMD and improved air defense from Aegis destroyers and cruisers gives additional protection to the seabase. But if future survivability proves increasingly problematic, is a significant investment in improving overall seabasing warranted? And if so, what technological improvements should be prioritized?

Right now technological/engineering improvements are being applied to expeditionary offload. These are relatively low cost improvements. But more extensive acquisition-such as the MOB proposed in the 1990s-has lost favor in light of other priorities and concerns over anti-access capabilities. Proposed increases to the naval amphibious fleet are also vulnerable to these concerns. This seabasing versus anti-access debate has smoldered for some time and will likely get hotter.

SEABASING IN SEA POWER 21

Seabasing (or Sea Basing as it appears in the plan) was touted as one of the pillars of Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Vern Clark's Sea Power 21 plan and a means of "projecting joint operational independence." [13] It was also described "as the foundation from which offensive and defensive fires are projected-making Sea Strike and Sea Shield [two other pillars] realities. [14] But the plan omitted any discussion of amphibious ships (see note 5) and emphasized the striking capability of the cruiser-destroyer force. To omit the capability of the seabase to land forces ashore would seem to ignore the most significant means for the seabase to affect events on land, and relegates seabasing to fleet strike-unless the omission indicated a pre-decided budget priority. Clearly CNO Clark intended to emphasize the Navy's role in supporting joint forces already ashore and expressed support for MPF shipping in resupply of those forces. But this would be a joint supporting capability rather than a joint enabler.

But the emphasis on supporting joint forces via a new concept would not seem to engender much enthusiasm from other Services in the joint arena except as a quid pro quo: I'll support your program if you support mine. And it would seem almost a deliberate provocation of the Marine Corps, which would consider itself a full partner in any new naval concept. This resulted in a Navy overselling seabasing in the sense that it relied on old missions to justify a supposedly new construct. This was not an auspicious way to advance the seabasing concept. Given the length of time required for shipbuilding, it did allow the 2002 Navy to squeeze some money from amphibious shipbuilding—a decision that directly affects today's fleet.[15] The overall result is that even today it is not clear (CNO Clark's successors having largely ignored Sea Power 21) what the Navy's staff considers seabasing to be.

FUTURE OF U.S. MARINE CORPS 'EXPEDITIONARY OBJECTIVE'

Since the Navy construct of seabasing did not include the Marine Corps, the Marines did what they do best—declared it an expeditionary objective and took it. Seabasing was turned around from a concept that largely excluded amphibious assault capabilities to one focused on improving them. Such a focus would seem natural, even within the broad vision. But it did not bank on Secretary of Defense Gates' apparent discounting of the need for strong amphibious capabilities—capabilities that were not particularly needed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Recent OSD efforts to kill the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle program and the Marine Corps' efforts to keep it alive despite significant cost increases may have also tainted the U.S. Secretary of Defense's attitude toward amphibious capabilities, MPF and seabasing.

Consequently, the Marine Corps now views seabasing as a program of incremental improvements in amphibious lift, and primarily as developing capabilities to use MPF ships without having to offload in port. Offloading at sea, particularly a combat offload, requires using modern connector ships, such as the MLP, onto which cargo can be loaded from carriers of the Maritime Sealift Command and re-loaded onto landing craft air cushion (LCACs) in the sequence it is needed ashore. This would increase expeditionary landing capacity without the higher costs of building more amphibious warships.

But while the Marines experiment with incremental improvements, and received partial QDR endorsement, the Defense Department's program objective memorandum for fiscal year 2012 has mandated a drastic cut in the Navy's prepositioning budget. This could lead to putting two-thirds of the current MPF into reserve status and/or eliminate one of the three Maritime Prepositioning Squadrons (MPSRON)—specifically MPSRON 1, located in the Mediterranean region.[16] The decision reflects OSD's perception that the U.S. European Command/NATO will most likely not need the equipment in the immediate future. But a two-thirds cut, rather than incremental reduction, does not bode well for the overall concept of seabasing.

Even as Undersecretary of the Navy Bob Work, an expert on seabasing, outlined a future with more individually capable MPF ships in a October 5, 2010 speech at the National Defense Industrial Association's Expeditionary Warfare Conference, it became apparent that his view might not be shared on the OSD level. At the same conference, Brigadier General David Berger, Director of the Operations Division at Headquarters, Marine Corps described the defense leadership as divided between the view that MPSRON ships are merely floating warehouses and those who see it as a forward crisis response capability in support of the regional Combatant Commanders. Outgoing Marine Corps Commandant General James Conway defended Navy-Marine pre-positioning by contrasting it to the Army's view of pre-positioning as simply a fast means of resupplying forces already engaged on the ground. As Conway put it, "The Army uses theirs to support a capability. In many ways, ours [Navy-Marine Corps] is the [crisis response] capability." [17]

SUPPLEMENTING OR REPLACING LAND BASES

Whether seabasing can replace land bases, or at least a dependence on land bases, raises bureaucratic issues within DoD that contribute to a reluctance to commit to joint seabasing. To some extent, it is a question of foresight. If the future of U.S. war fighting consists of pacifying terror-supporting insurgent groups within land-locked countries, or the continuing use of quick striking SOF forces supported by land-based tactical aviation, including UAVs flown from CONUS, investment in seabasing would not seem a priority. At times this seems to be Secretary Gates' view, but not always. [18]

If future wars are going to be dominated by ever more precise global strike from the continental United States-which would seem to be the U.S. Air Force's preferred future, seabasing would also seem a much lower priority. In addition, a greater commitment to seabasing-along with a qualitative or quantitative reduction in overseas land bases-might cause allies and partners to question U.S. commitment to mutual defense.

However, if the future involves a range of regional crises in which the United States wishes to retain direct influence, there is a lot to commend seabasing as a primary instrument. As anti-access capabilities of potential opponents expand, the survival of regional land bases would seem problematic. The coordinates of these bases are well known and can be struck repeatedly by ballistic missiles relying solely on pre-programmed coordinates. But prioritizing seabasing could also mean a future defense posture in which overall DoD force structure is predominantly maritime. Relying primarily on naval assets as the foundation for most joint force regional basing would be largely seen as a defeat for jointness-which is still largely viewed in the DoD to mean a proportional share of the pie to all Services (and major Defense Agencies). This is a formula that the Gates Pentagon has yet to break, and as defense cuts are

imposed on major acquisition programs, it is likely that they will affect the Services roughly equally.

Although the developing Air/Sea Battle planning would seem to bring Air Force-Navy cooperation to a peak, the competition for resources between seabasing and global strike in a flat defense budget is obvious. At the same time, the Air Force is not keen to admit the vulnerability of its long-term regional bases, which are required if land-based tactical aviation is to be effectively applied to a regional contingency. The Army has an interest in resupplying its forces-presumably already on the ground-by sea, but it has no interest in becoming a second marine corps.

Under these circumstances, seabasing proponents might emphasize the role of supplementing regional basing, rather than replacing them. But in a flat or shrinking defense budget, "supplementing" any capability would likely be seen as a luxury.

THE FUTURE OF SEABASING: REALITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thinking About Seabasing: All Ahead Slow is the title of Bob Work's magisterial study, an approach he still espouses as Navy Under Secretary. It is an apt recommendation for a defense program environment in which seabasing is not viewed as a priority. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Marine Corps experimented with an amphibious warfare, thereby developing the concepts and equipment that would enable the great advances in amphibious assault needed in World War II. Experimenting with modest programmatic investment might do the same in advancing seabasing until its need is apparent for future contingencies.

However, if one takes the broader view of seabasing, the responsibility for improving the capacity to seabase falls primarily on the Navy-which must also make particular efforts to gain joint support for the broad vision. Dispersed platforms must be netted together (and securely), with the overall fleet functioning as a multiple-domain, combined arms base, rather than groups of independent task forces. The current CNO, Admiral Gary Roughead, has called for greater efforts in developing "revolutionary concepts" for naval information and computing, and his actions in combining the N2 (Naval Intelligence) and N6 (C4ISR) on his staff indicates his interest in the tighter netting of information. Tighter netting of dispersed platforms is indeed a requirement for successful seabasing, but is obviously not sufficient in itself.[19]

The current Gates' Pentagon must deal with a quandary regarding seabasing. Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan will continue to sour future Administrations on extensive commitment of

ground forces in crisis-torn states. On the surface, this would seem to benefit investments in naval capabilities, but because seabasing remains associated with putting ashore forces larger than SOF forces (e.g. Marine Expeditionary Units) it is unlikely to attract more than incremental investment.

One mission that might increase interest in netting a tight seabase is naval BMD, since reliable information from multiple sources (including land-based) can increase the probability of accurate target solutions. But it is easy to foresee BMD-capable ships as being treated as individual strategic assets, operationally separate from conventional forces. This would be a mistake. The Aegis destroyer providing ballistic or cruise missile defense is as much of the seabase as a Patriot battery defending an overseas land base is part of that base's combat infrastructure. At the same time, the ballistic missile defense provided to the land territory of allies by the same Aegis destroyer is as much a functional mission product of the overall seabase as the capability for landing troops ashore. The logistical network that flows through the seabase-such as fuel delivery by fleet oilers-is the means of keeping the Aegis destroyer on station.

Here are three recommendations for the Pentagon's consideration:

1. Examine and experiment with the broad vision of seabasing, particularly in conjunction with developing a joint operational concept for anti-access warfare, and in developing the particulars of Air/Sea Battle.
2. If a decision is made to reduce MPSRONS, a significant portion of the savings should be invested in the Marine Corps' programs for increasing the capabilities of the remaining MPF through new technologies and platforms. This is in keeping with earlier statements by Secretary Gates that the Services could keep most of the savings from cuts made.
3. Maintain naval BMD platforms as an integral part of deployed conventional forces-part of the seabase as exists today-rather than isolate them as an element of strategic deterrence.

Defense policy is all about making choices: who/what is the threat? what strategy should we adopt? how should we position or deploy our forces. As noted, it is also about managing resources, even for the United States with its incomparable military but current fiscal crisis. Since there is no certain answer, risk is always involved and alternative strategies must always be considered and evaluated. It is the responsibility of defense planners, and especially the defense leadership, to try to mitigate the risks as much as possible. As a concept, seabasing

mitigates risks involving overseas basing, anti-access defenses, and regional presence. The priorities given to mitigating these specific risks is an accurate indicator of the future that the defense leadership envisions.

A prudent strategy, for the United States that mitigates risk in uncertain times would be to strengthen capabilities that do not rely on non-sovereign overseas basing, even while working diplomatically to maintain alliances and access to overseas bases. It would appear best to invest in a balance between SOF capabilities, long-range CONUS-based capabilities (such as global strike) and highly maneuverable and well defended seabases. These capabilities would seem both compatible and complementary. CONUS-base forces can provide extensive firepower, but can not sustain "boots on the ground," in a contested region. Most U.S. interests overseas lie within range of seabased forces, our involvement in Afghanistan notwithstanding.

However, tighter resource constraints usually bring out the worst in organizational rivalries and bureaucratic politics; and a clash between seabasing, global strike, planning for future wars like the wars we are in, recapitalizing land forces, and expanding SOF capabilities seems inevitable. In the current Gates' Pentagon, such a clash would likely find seabasing on the shorter end.