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SEA BASING

Concept, Issues, and Recommendations

Sam J. Tangredi

Sea basing is a strategic concept that has been defined in a variety of often contradictory ways. It is officially a joint concept, but it is widely perceived as a parochial tool to justify budget increases for the Department of the Navy. As an activity, sea basing 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 or additional ships for the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF), like the proposed Mobile Landing Platform, which would allow for selective off-load of prepositioned material while still at sea.² A misperceived *exclusive* association with amphibious warfare, not currently a priority in the Pentagon, has largely driven sea basing out of policy discussions at the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) level. Ironically, sea basing came to prominence in the past decade under a Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) determined to cut capabilities from the amphibious fleet so as to fund future surface combatants.³

From 2002 to 2008, it appeared with great frequency and was discussed with great passion in many professional defense journals and reports. But it is not once mentioned in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) 2010 report.

As a grand concept, it appears becalmed, if still visible out on the horizon. However, as a practical reality, U.S. forces engage in sea basing today—and every day. The U.S. Marine Corps—along with a sometimes supportive, sometimes reluctant U.S. Navy—is projected to continue to make incremental improvements.

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WHAT IS SEA BASING ALL ABOUT?

There are both broad and narrow views of what sea basing is about. In its broad vision, “sea basing” 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.⁴ This broad vision stems from conceptual discussions that began within the Navy in the 1990s. It is also reflected in the introductory sections of the more recent Marine Corps/Navy/Army *Concept for Employment for Current Seabasing Capabilities*, released on 19 May 2010.

From that perspective, sea basing is decidedly not a new concept. U.S. forces have been sea basing since the Navy became a global force 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 sea base, since it allowed the fleet to resupply at sea or in isolated anchorages.⁵ Likewise, it is easily observed that aircraft carriers are floating air bases that can be positioned and repositioned on a global basis. Surface ships are sea bases for strike systems (Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles), as well as for theater ballistic-missile defense sensors and weapons. Submarines are also—depending on tactical employment—strike sea bases. Amphibious warships constitute the components of a base for forces (primarily Marine Corps) that can be rapidly inserted onto land by both surface and air. Combining with the Navy “grey hulls” of the amphibious fleet are the Military Sealift Command’s civilian-crewed MPF ships.⁶ The Army too 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 sea basing—currently predominates in operational discussions of joint capabilities. This narrower view is used by the Marine Corps when justifying incremental improvements in naval expeditionary platforms.

As stated earlier, sea basing has never had one generally accepted definition. We see the term rendered 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 deployment, assembly, command projection, reconstitution, and reemployment of joint power from the sea without reliance on land bases within the operational area.” The entry adds, “See also amphibious operations (JP 3-02).”⁷

This definition is a great improvement over the previous DoD dictionary version (which stated that sea basing was a technique of amphibious operations), but the note betrays the lingering, near-exclusive association with amphibious warfare. This is one reason why significant discussions of sea basing have not appeared in the defense literature in the past two years. In his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates—kept in his position primarily to prevail in the “wars we are in”—appeared to discount the likelihood of major amphibious operation in the coming years. As noted, the Quadrennial Defense Review 2010 final report and the report of the QDR Independent Review panel never mention sea basing. The QDR 2010 report does include a Mobile Landing Platform (MLP) in its listing of desired naval capabilities.⁸ But the MLP, of which the first is to be funded in the fiscal year 2011 defense budget, is designed to facilitate the movement of cargo by “connecting” existing maritime prepositioning ships and does not in itself indicate a strong commitment to sea basing.

If, however, sea basing is defined as using the sea in the same way U.S. forces use regional land bases, clearly there can be degrees of sea basing, in the same way that there are different types of land bases—from austere to well developed infrastructures. Within this range, sea bases currently exist and have existed; a naval task force—depending on its configuration—can provide joint C4ISR,* rapid strike capabilities using stealth or nonstealth assets, special operations forces (SOF) insertion, ballistic missile defense (BMD), control of regional airspace, search and rescue, emergency medical facilities, space for joint task force command elements, and a means of positioning of infantry, light armor, and artillery ashore beyond the beach.⁹ This capability is comparable to that of a regional land base, 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 a regional sea, an advantage that can be duplicated ashore only by a network of land bases. Depending on operational requirements, sea-basing platforms may not have to operate in proximity of one another to provide mutual support.

However, physical limits prevent a current sea base from landing heavy-lift aircraft or storing “iron mountains” 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 (though the U.S. Army officially supports sea basing). Yet it can be most assuredly joint—and not simply by virtue of, say, operating Army helicopters off aircraft carriers near Haiti.

* Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

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—that of the 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.

Since the essence of sea basing appears a traditional American capability, the debate of the past decade primarily focused on the following questions:

- Is it an effective method of countering antiaccess defenses?
- How much more capable can sea basing be made by applying new technologies and greater resources?
- Considering that the Navy appears simultaneously to oversell the concept and underfund its resources, will the other services continue to support the concept in the joint arena?¹⁰
- Does the sea-basing concept justify improvements to Navy–Marine Corps amphibious lift, and will it help the Marine Corps in its struggles with the Navy over new ship programs and OSD over the future of MPF ships?
- Could sea basing become a replacement for, not just a supplement to, regional land bases? Unlike overseas land bases, sea basing remains under sovereign American control and does not require other nations' permission.

SEA CONTROL, SOVEREIGNTY, AND ANTIACCESS

Sea basing is a capability that depends on command of the sea, or sea control. In fact, it cannot exist *without* sea control. Since the collapse of the Soviet navy in 1991, U.S. sea control has been a given—unlike the situation in World War II, when the Allies had to fight to achieve sea control. Clearly the People's Liberation Army intends to contest American sea control in the western Pacific. However, China's maritime capabilities have not yet matched its aspirations and it is unclear whether Chinese efforts at sea denial would be as effective as the more alarmist reports would indicate.¹¹ American global sea control is not yet broken, presumably assuring the continued viability of sea basing. But the growing ambition among littoral states for regional denial capabilities—often referred to as “antiaccess” or “area denial” strategies—is itself undeniable.

Because it is dependent on sea control, the U.S. Navy would naturally provide the majority of resources for sea-basing platforms, out of its existing fleet and ship-construction budget.¹² Originally the Donald Rumsfeld-era Office of Force Transformation defined “sea-base” as “a noun; the sea and not the things

on it.”¹³ However, the sea base 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 upon which heavy objects move and the reduction in friction that allows them to do so—metaphorically, the ocean allows castles to move. These iron castles constitute the sea base. Within the castles are stored and transported the means of military power, including the expeditionary strength of the Marine Corps and resupply for Army land forces. These castles also provide the best available logistical platforms for humanitarian assistance in littoral regions.

As mentioned earlier, a most attractive feature of sea basing is that it offers an overseas base of operation located close to or in a crisis area but that is itself completely under the sovereignty of the United States.¹⁴ The strike power that can be projected from the continental United States is just a small portion of that required to affect events on land in combat or crisis. Sea basing provides for a forward presence and thereby produces deterrence effects that might not be achievable through latent conventional capabilities in the continental United States. Sea basing is also a means of providing *sustained* security cooperation and humanitarian relief. All of this can be achieved without long-term violation of anyone else’s sovereign territory under international law.

Proponents of sea basing like to quote British naval strategist Sir Julian S. Corbett’s observation (1906) that Britain—then the world’s greatest sea power—traditionally favored sovereign ports and bases that made it “independent of uncertain neutrals and doubtful allies.”¹⁵ But to justify spending resources on sea basing by the need for such independence is to oversell the concept. America’s current allies or partners are for the most part neither weak nor uncertain, and in the current political environment it is doubtful that they would place disabling restrictions on basing in the face of a mutual threat. Indeed, if anything, current trends seem to be in the direction of an increasing willingness on the part even of nontraditional allies (such as Singapore) to accommodate an American military presence on their territory. However, it is valid to argue that spending on sea basing should be increased on the grounds that antiaccess capabilities of potential opponents (primarily China and Iran) have made fixed regional land bases extremely vulnerable.

Sea basing itself faces an increasing threat but because of its mobility represents a much more difficult targeting problem for opponents. Can, however, new sea-basing technologies ultimately outpace the antiaccess threat? The Navy and Marine Corps are planning incremental improvements in expeditionary off-load from sea to shore. The development of theater-ballistic-missile defenses and the improved air defense represented by destroyers and cruisers having the Aegis combat system gives additional protection to the sea base. But if future

survivability proves increasingly problematic, will a significant investment in improving overall sea basing have been warranted? If it appears that it would, what technological improvements should be prioritized?

Right now, technological and engineering improvements are being applied to expeditionary off-load. These are relatively low-cost improvements. But more extensive acquisition—such as the Mobile Offshore Base, proposed in the 1990s—has lost favor in light of other priorities and antiaccess issues. Proposed increases to the naval amphibious fleet are also vulnerable to these concerns. This debate—sea-basing versus antiaccess—has smoldered for some time and will likely get hotter.

SEA BASING IN SEA POWER 21

Sea basing (or “Sea Basing,” as it appears in that document) was touted as one of the pillars of the “Sea Power 21” plan, issued by Admiral Vern Clark as CNO, specifically as a means of “projecting joint operational independence.”¹⁶ It was also described “as the foundation from which offensive and defensive fires [that is, strikes from a distance, by artillery, air, missile, etc.] are projected—making Sea Strike and Sea Shield [two other pillars] realities.”¹⁷ But the plan omitted any discussion of amphibious ships and emphasized the strike capability of the cruiser-destroyer force.¹⁸ To omit in this way the capability of the sea base to put forces ashore would seem to ignore the most significant means by which the sea base can affect events on land and limits sea basing to fleet strike and defense—unless the omission in fact reflected a predecided budget priority. Clearly Admiral Clark intended to emphasize the Navy’s role in supporting joint forces already ashore; he expressed support for MPF shipping in resupply of those forces. But this role would be a joint supporting capability rather than a joint enabler.

Yet the emphasis on supporting joint forces via a new concept would not seem to have engendered much enthusiasm from other services in the joint arena except as a quid pro quo—*I’ll support your program if you’ll support mine*. In fact, it would seem almost a deliberate provocation of the Marine Corps, which would consider itself a full partner in any new naval concept. These factors resulted in the Navy’s overselling sea basing, in the sense that it relied on old missions to justify a supposedly new construct. This was not an auspicious way to advance the concept, but it did allow the Navy in 2002 to squeeze some money from amphibious shipbuilding—a decision that, given the length of time required for shipbuilding, directly affects today’s fleet.¹⁹ The overall result is that even today it is not clear—Admiral Clark’s successors having largely ignored Sea Power 21—what the Navy Staff considers sea basing to be.

THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS “EXPEDITIONARY OBJECTIVE”

Since the Navy construct of sea basing did not include the Marine Corps, the Marines did what they do best—declared it an expeditionary objective and took it. Sea basing 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’s 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’s efforts to keep it alive despite significant operational limitations and cost increases—may have also colored the Secretary of Defense’s attitude toward amphibious capabilities, MPF, and sea basing.

Consequently, the Marine Corps now views sea basing as a program of incremental improvements in amphibious lift and is primarily interested in developing the ability to use MPF ships without having to off-load them in port. Off-loading at sea, particularly in a combat environment, requires modern connector ships, such as the MLP, which can transfer matériel from cargo carriers of the Maritime Sealift Command to air-cushion landing craft (LCACs) in the sequence it is needed ashore. This approach would increase expeditionary landing capacity without the higher costs of building more amphibious warships.

But although the Marines have experimented with incremental improvements and have 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 put two-thirds of the current MPF into reserve status or eliminate one of the three maritime prepositioning squadrons—specifically MPS Squadron 1, located in the Mediterranean.²⁰ The decision reflects OSD’s perception that the U.S. European Command and NATO will most likely not need the equipment in the immediate future. Nonetheless, a two-thirds cut, as opposed to an incremental reduction, does not bode well for the overall concept of sea basing.

Even as Under Secretary of the Navy Robert O. Work, an expert on sea basing, was outlining a future with more individually capable MPF ships in a 5 October 2010 speech at the National Defense Industrial Association’s Expeditionary Warfare Conference, it was becoming 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 those who view MPS squadron ships as merely “floating warehouses” and those who see them as a forward crisis-response capability in support of the regional combatant commanders. General James

Conway, near the end of his tenure as Commandant of the Marine Corps, defended Navy-Marine prepositioning by contrasting it with the Army's view of prepositioning, which he described 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 MPF] is the [crisis response] capability."²¹

SUPPLEMENTING OR REPLACING LAND BASES?

Whether sea basing can replace land bases, or at least dependence on land bases, raises bureaucratic issues within DoD that contribute to the reluctance to commit to joint sea basing. For one thing, a greater commitment to sea basing—along with a qualitative or quantitative reduction in overseas land bases—might cause allies and partners to question American commitment to mutual defense. To some extent, however, it is a question of foresight. If the future of American war fighting consists of pacifying terror-supporting insurgent groups within landlocked countries or continuing the use of quick-striking SOF forces supported by land-based tactical aviation (including unmanned aerial vehicles flown from the continental United States), investment in sea basing would not seem a priority.²² At times this seems to be Secretary Gates's view, but not always.²³ 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—sea basing would also seem a low priority.

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 sea basing as a primary instrument. As antiaccess capabilities of potential opponents expand, the survival of regional land bases becomes problematic. The exact locations of these bases are well known; they can be struck repeatedly by ballistic missiles relying solely on preprogrammed coordinates. But prioritizing sea basing could also mean a future defense posture in which overall DoD force structure is predominantly maritime. Relying primarily on naval assets as the foundation of most joint force regional basing could be seen as a defeat for jointness—which is still largely considered in DoD to mean proportional shares of the pie for all services (and major defense agencies). This is a formula that the Gates Pentagon did not 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 planning related to the "Air/Sea Battle" operational concept would seem to be bringing Air Force-Navy cooperation to a peak, the potential for competition for resources between sea basing 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 presumed to be

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. Until May 2011, the Army’s focus—with program leadership by the Department of the Navy—was the development of the Joint High Speed Vessel (JHSV), a ferry-based logistics catamaran built by Austal USA. The JHSV, which is not considered combat survivable, is designed for high-speed insertion of troops in “‘soft power’ missions—responding to natural disasters, providing humanitarian assistance, conducting port visits and training partner military forces, among others.”²⁴ In May, the Army transferred its share of the JHSV program to the Navy.

Under these circumstances, sea-basing proponents might emphasize supplementing regional bases rather than replacing them. But in a flat or shrinking defense budget, “supplementing” any capability would likely be seen as a luxury.

THE REALITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

At the same time, there is a practical crosscurrent in the Asia-Pacific region that might force the United States to look to sea basing as a land-basing replacement—the agreed shift of Marine Corps personnel from Okinawa to Guam.

Thus far the question of sea basing versus land bases has been discussed in terms of which posture is more defensible and could deliver more capabilities. But in the Asia-Pacific, the most troubling contingencies remain possible conflicts in the Taiwan Strait and Korea. Okinawa is 110 nautical miles (two hundred kilometers) from Taiwan and approximately 670 nautical miles (1,250 kilometers) from Seoul, Korea. Guam is over 1,470 nautical miles (2,700 kilometers) from Taiwan and 5,900 nautical miles (eleven thousand kilometers) from Seoul. The greater distances from Guam to either potential point of conflict would appear to require a more extensive amphibious transport operation than would be necessary from Okinawa. That means, first, a need for greater at-sea logistics, more fuel being but one consideration. Second, the force would be exposed to potential standoff attacks for a longer period before it could reach its effective operational area.

Another consequence of the shift is a possible reduction in practical deterrence. A swift Chinese campaign across the Taiwan Strait would likely be intended as a *fait accompli* that would preclude American reaction. In calculating the potential for success, whether an opposing force is 110 or 1,470 nautical miles away makes a considerable difference. It is unreasonable to argue that air transport can make up for this distance, since airlift cannot move significant amounts of equipment. Though the JHSV could transit quicker than amphibious warships, it requires port facilities for off-loading and has a limited payload.

The overall result is a lessening of a previously well established deterrent to precipitate action.

Options to overcome this tyranny of distance are to station more heavy equipment closer to the area of potential conflict and rely on the airlifting or “JHSV-ing” of troops into the theater, establish other land bases closer to the area, rely on global strikes from the continental United States, or maintain or be able to quickly assemble a robust sea base within striking distance of the area.

Stationing more heavy equipment in the region and relying on airlifted troops to man it reduces the footprint required by a land base, but the question of where the equipment sets can be located remains. A possibility is Okinawa, if the Japanese government were to agree. Another possibility is on Taiwan itself, but regional political considerations currently make that choice imprudent. Establishing extensive land bases would seem to pose the same problem: Where would they be put? Again, both equipment locations and land bases have fixed coordinates, well known to an attacker.

Strikes from the continental United States simply cannot be relied upon in such a scenario; the nation is not now capable of effective conventional strikes from that distance.

All this leads to the conclusion that the ability to assemble a robust sea base—defined broadly—from forward-deployed joint and naval forces would be the most effective tool and means of practical deterrence in such a conflict. Although antiaccess systems can certainly threaten a sea base, targeting moving ships at sea is still a much more difficult problem than is attacking fixed points on land. For example, deception is a much more viable tactic for a sea base than for an unmoving land base.

THE FUTURE OF SEA BASING: REALITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thinking about Seabasing: All Ahead, Slow is the title of Robert Work’s magisterial study of this subject, and it reflects an approach he still espouses as Under Secretary of the Navy. It is an apt recommendation for a defense-program environment in which sea basing is not viewed as a priority. Under the constrained budgets of the 1920s and early 1930s, the Marine Corps experimented with amphibious warfare, ultimately developing the concepts and equipment that would enable the great advances in amphibious assault needed in World War II. Experimentation, with modest programmatic investment, might do the same in advancing sea basing until its need is apparent for future contingencies.

However, if one takes the broader view of sea basing, the responsibility for improving the capacity to sea base falls primarily on the Navy—which must also make particular efforts to gain joint support for that broad vision. Dispersed

platforms must be netted (securely) together, with the overall fleet functioning as a multiple-domain, combined-arms base rather than as a group of independent task forces. As CNO, Admiral Gary Roughead called for greater efforts in developing “revolutionary concepts” for naval information and computing, and his combining the naval intelligence (N2) and C4ISR (N6) branches of his staff indicated his interest in the tighter netting of information. Tighter netting of dispersed platforms is indeed a requirement for successful sea basing, but it is obviously not sufficient in itself.²⁵

The current Pentagon must deal with a quandary regarding sea basing. Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan will sour future administrations on extensive commitments of ground forces in crisis-torn states. On the surface, this would seem to refocus DoD on improving naval capabilities, but because sea basing remains associated with putting ashore forces that are larger than SOF units (e.g., Marine expeditionary units), it is unlikely to attract more than incremental investment.

One mission that might increase interest in a tightly netted sea base is naval ballistic-missile defense, 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 a part of the sea base 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 that same Aegis destroyer is as integral an aspect of the overall sea-base mission as is the capability for landing troops ashore. The logistical network that flows through the sea base—such as fuel delivery by fleet oilers—is the means of keeping the Aegis destroyer on station.

Here are four recommendations for the Pentagon’s consideration:

- Examine and experiment with the broad vision of sea basing, particularly in conjunction with developing a joint operational concept for antiaccess warfare and elaborating the particulars of Air/Sea Battle.
- If a decision is made to reduce MPS squadrons, a significant portion of the savings should be invested in the Marine Corps’s 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.
- Maintain naval BMD platforms as integral parts of deployed conventional forces—part of the sea base as it exists today—rather than isolate them as an element of strategic deterrence.

- Assess the deterrent effect and responsiveness that sea basing can have in an Asia-Pacific region in which land bases are not close to potential points of conflict. This itself requires more extensive study of the comparative survivability of sea basing under antiaccess conditions.

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 mitigate the risks as much as possible. As a concept, sea basing has the potential to mitigate risks involving overseas basing, antiaccess defenses, and regional presence. The priority given to mitigating these specific risks will be 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 nonsovereign overseas basing, even while working diplomatically to maintain alliances and access to overseas bases. It would appear best to invest in a balance among SOF capabilities, long-range capabilities based in the continental United States (such as global strike), *and* highly maneuverable and well defended sea bases. These capabilities would seem both compatible and complementary. U.S.-based forces can provide extensive firepower but cannot sustain “boots on the ground” in a contested region. Most current American interests overseas lie within range of sea-based forces, our involvement in Afghanistan notwithstanding.

However, tighter resource constraints usually bring out the worst in organizational rivalries and bureaucratic politics; a clash among sea basing, global strike, planning for future wars like the *wars we are in*, recapitalizing or “resetting” land forces, and expanding special-operations capabilities seems inevitable. Under the current Pentagon leadership and the economic constraints facing the U.S. government, such a clash would likely find sea basing on the short end.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was published as an “E-Note” by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, www.fpri.org, in November 2010.

1. Robert Work, *Thinking about Seabasing: All Ahead, Slow* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2006),

p. iv. See also Work, “On Sea Basing,” in *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the Twenty-First Century*, Newport Paper 26, ed. Carnes Lord (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2006), pp. 95–181. Another excellent study that emphasizes historical continuity of sea basing while crediting its transformational attributes is Gregory J.

- Parker [Cdr., USN], *Seabasing since the Cold War: Maritime Reflections of American Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 30 June 2010).
2. One of the strongest proponents of the Mobile Offshore Base (MOB) in the 1990s was Adm. William A. Owens, USN. See his *High Seas: The Naval Passage to an Uncharted World* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995), pp. 163, 165, and Owens and Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000), pp. 175–76, 205. See also an excellent discussion in Henry J. Hendrix II [Lt. Cdr., USN], “Exploit Sea Basing,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (August 2003), pp. 61–63. Commander Parker’s *Seabasing since the Cold War* study includes one of the best artist’s interpretations of the MOB—originally drawn by John Berkey for the April 2003 edition of *Popular Mechanics* (p. 8).
 3. This is my interpretation of Adm. Vern Clark’s decisions as Chief of Naval Operations in the early 2000s. Such a motive was never publicly stated. See Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*.
 4. Commander Parker has an admirably succinct way of describing what sea basing is about: “It’s about Land” (Parker, *Seabasing since the Cold War*, p. 5). Moreover, it can be described as *turning sea into land*.
 5. Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 9.
 6. This broad-vision interpretation is consistent with sea basing as defined in the U.S. Navy’s 2002 policy “Sea Power 21,” except that Sea Power 21 made *no* mention of amphibious ships as part of sea basing—an incomprehensible, albeit deliberate, omission. Work critically discusses this omission, dismissing Navy staff excuses that Sea Power 21 was a “Navy” document, not a “naval” document, that was accordingly not intended to include the Marine Corps or, thus, the amphibious ships associated with it (Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, pp. 163–65). But he does not mention the key factor that the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Clark, whose career had been almost exclusively in ships of the cruiser-destroyer type, had little if any interest in expanding shipbuilding resources on amphibious ships. Rather, he saw reductions in amphibious capabilities as a “bill payer” for increasing the capabilities of the cruiser-destroyer force. On Sea Power 21, see Vern Clark [Adm., USN], “Sea Power 21: Projecting Joint Power,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (October 2002), pp. 32–41.
 7. U.S. Defense Dept., *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02 (Washington, D.C.: 12 April 2001 [as amended through 31 July 2010]), p. 412, available at www.dtic.mil/.
 8. U.S. Defense Dept., *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: February 2010), p. 46, available at www.defense.gov/.
 9. Primary stealth assets being cruise- and conventional-ballistic-missile-launching submarines (SSGNs).
 10. The development of a Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept (JIC) in 2005 can be seen as joint service support.
 11. See discussions in Sam J. Tangredi, “No Game Changer for China,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (February 2010), pp. 24–29, and Craig Hooper and Christopher Albion, “Get Off the Fainting Couch,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (April 2010), pp. 42–46.
 12. This would not seem as contentious an issue under the broad definition as it does under the narrow one—in which case it seems a more obvious case of resource trade-offs between surface combatants and amphibious warships.
 13. Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 8.
 14. Sovereignty might be shared with allies or partner nations if they provided ships, platforms, or personnel for the sea base.
 15. Quoted in Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 17.
 16. Clark, “Sea Power 21,” p. 36.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. Work, *Thinking about Seabasing*, p. 9.
 19. See Grace V. Jean, “Marines Question the Utility of Their New Amphibious Warship,” *National Defense* (September 2008).
 20. Cid Standifer, “Work: Prepositioning Set for Big Changes,” *Inside the Navy*, 11 October 2010.
 21. *Ibid.* Italics supplied, to reflect emphasis as originally spoken.

22. It can be argued that sea basing is also valuable in small, often short-duration, operations that can be supported by air based in the continental United States and involve only a small number of troops on the ground, with naval forces providing the logistics, command and control, and quick-reaction “fires.”
23. In a 2009 *Foreign Affairs* article, Secretary Gates outlined his plan as being one that maintains balance “between trying to prevail in current conflicts and preparing for other contingencies, between institutionalizing capabilities such as counterinsurgency and foreign military assistance and maintaining the United States’ existing conventional and strategic technological edge against other military forces, and between retaining those cultural traits that have made the U.S. armed forces successful and shedding those that hamper their ability to do what needs to be done.” While “other contingencies” could indicate operations that sea basing could facilitate, it should be noted that he refers to maintaining “the United States’ existing conventional and strategic technological edge” rather than an existing edge in capabilities. Analyses of the article have pointed to “balance capabilities” as meaning a balance across the spectrum of conflict—but that may not be what was meant. In any event, the secretary’s natural focus has been on unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism—in which sea basing would play largely a supplemental, not a critical, role. Robert M. Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” *Foreign Affairs* (January–February 2009).
24. Grace V. Jean, “Aluminum ‘Truck,’ Joint High Speed Vessels: Great Potential, but Questions Remain,” *National Defense* (March 2011).
25. Andrew Burt, “New Memo from CNO: Roughead Seeks ‘Revolutionary’ Concepts in Information and Computing,” *Inside the Navy*, 11 October 2010.