Projecting Power in Contested Regions: Marine Corps' EABO Moves from Paper to Reality

U.S. Marine Corps Pfc. Aiden Mcmahon carries an M224 60mm mortar during a field training exercise at the Central Training Area, Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan, May 14, 2025. The FTX allowed Marines to build tactical proficiency in support of expeditionary advanced base operations. *Photo credit: U.S. Marine Corps | Lance Cpl. Rodney Frye*

The Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept debuted in 2019 as a new strategy for the U.S. Marine Corps to fight not only with the support of naval forces but also to defend and support those forces in turn, coordinated operations that project and hold power from sea to shore in contested littoral regions.

In a sense, the time honored-quip that Marines "aren't retreating, just attacking in a different direction" reflects

a new capability to attack in any direction from any island chain or coastline.

In March 2019, Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson jointly announced the development of the EABO strategy as a way to hold a contested region and dissuade a potential adversary from detecting, much less engaging, in an area where flexible mobile bases would be an elusive target with high-tech capabilities.

Neller and Richardson approved and signed the previously classified Concept for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, beginning a development that in the past seven years has rapidly progressed from words on paper to hands-on exercises and innovations in the maritime environment.

The initial blueprint for the evolving concept was the Marine Corps' Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Operations, followed by a second edition in March 2023. The vision of the two service chiefs is described in the 134-page manual, which includes "a foundational naval concept to address challenges created by potential adversary advantages in geographic location, weapons system range, precision and capability," while also "integrating Fleet Marine Force (FMF) and Navy capabilities to enable sea denial and sea control, and support sustainment of the fleet."

EABO on the Move

The U.S. Navy has had the Marine Corps' back for more than 80 years of expeditionary warfare in the Pacific, but with EABO the Corps holds much more than the high ground. Instead, the vision is to cover an extensive, spread-out littoral region of coastline, island and choke points with advanced technology that can strike not only surface and aviation targets but also can direct surface forces on incoming threats. The concept also calls for quickly packing up and redeploying to a

different austere location with equal firepower and air assets defending against aggressors who might not know where the Navy-Marine Corps team is.

Recent exercises halfway around the globe in the High Countries like Denmark demonstrated how NATO countries can work in concert with Marines to quickly set up bases with advanced equipment airlifted onto remote fields with short runways and minimal facilities.

High Countries were an apt description for Marine Corps Europe taking part in a Norwegian-led Arctic operation that took place from Sept. 1-3, 2025, the latest test of Expeditionary Advance Based Operations. It demonstrated that NATO Allied forces from the United Kingdom Royal Air Force and Norwegian armed forces could work alongside Marines in a first-of-its kind mission to quickly insert military assets to a remote and austere location.

The prime focus of the operation was to practice real-world NATO sea denial and maritime domain awareness capabilities. In turn. the operation helped contribute the ability to quickly respond and defeat any crisis or threat to NATO allies.

The deadliest threat to adversary surface combatants was also tested with rapidly deployed Light Tactical Vehicles (LTVs) airlifted as a stand-in for launch bases of the U.S. Marine Corps special weapon for littoral regions and choke points, the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), pronounced “Nemesis.”

The Marines also tested NMESIS anti-ship missile deployments earlier in the year in arguably the most highly contested area of future conflict, the Luzon Strait, a choke point for China to wage war against Taiwan and threaten merchant shipping.

The lethal component of the unmanned mobile launcher gives Marines the ability to sink warships and other maritime targets from land, one more aspect of the EABO doctrine.

U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant Brandon Arey, a Light Armored Reconnaissance Marine with White Platoon, Bravo Company, 2nd LAR Battalion, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines, throws a Puma RQ-20B drone into flight during Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, Dec. 6, 2021. *Photo Credit: U.S. Marine Corps | Cpl. Armando Elizalde.*

Back to the Future

"Hit 'em where they ain't" was the Korean War motto of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur as he pulled an end run against Chinese and North Korean forces nearly encircling the South Korean capital of Seoul. EABO does something similar but more to the tune of, "Where we ain't you'll never know until it's too late."

The different between the classical island-hopping expeditionary operations and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations is summed up on the Marine Corps website: "EABO support the projection of naval power by integrating with and supporting the larger naval campaign. Expeditionary operations imply austere conditions, forward deployment and projection of

power. EABO are distinct from other expeditionary operations in that forces conducting them combine various forms of operations to persist within the reach of adversary lethal and nonlethal effects."

All three Marine Expeditionary Forces have conducted exercises using the Stand-In Force concept and EABO in multiple regions globally.

"Our two Marine Littoral Regiments are reinforcing the Marine Corps' Force Design vision for distributed, lethal, maneuverable and purpose-built formations in the Indo-Pacific," said Marine Corps Combat Development Command's Lieutenant Colonel Eric Flanagan.

"Sustaining Marines in contested environments is just as critical as sensing the enemy or maintaining command and control. The Marine Corps is shifting from traditional supply chains to a more agile, resilient sustainment network – one designed to maneuver under threat, reinforce dispersed forces, and sustain operations across the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific," Flanagan said.

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps are addressing a key gap in the Indo-Pacific by developing the Medium Landing Ship (LSM), designed for enhanced mobility, beach access and sustainment in contested littoral environments.

As part of this effort, the Navy has selected the Damen Naval Landing Ship Transport 100 (LST 100) design as the basis for the LSM program. The non-developmental design will reduce cost, schedule and technical risk. Feeling the need for speed, both the Navy and Marine Corps are eager for the urgently needed capability to reach the fleet thanks to accelerated timelines made possible with the proven design.

Critical Enablers

The rapid move from 2019 theory to present-day reality

includes the just-completed 2025 Aviation Plan, which provides a renewed focus on distributed operations and emphasizes sustained operational effectiveness in contested environments through enhanced logistics, sustainment strategies and expeditionary advanced base concepts.

Flanagan, from his perspective as director of communications strategy and operations, sees the future as present with the airborne forces of the Marine Corps.

“Our modern technologies like the ACV, MV-22, CH-53K and F-35B are all critical enablers of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, enabling forward-deployed, distributed operations. Years of wargaming, experimentation and study have matured our concepts for EABO,” Flanagan said, “so that our concepts align with the way the broader force will fight.” .

Jim McClure’s first exposure to the Marines was as a four-year scholarship Marine Option Midshipman at the University of Notre Dame. He is a Life Member of the Navy League of the United States and a frequent contributor to Seapower*. This story first appeared in the February-March, 2026, issue of* Seapower*.*

Hegseth: Iranian Warship Sunk by U.S. Submarine Torpedo

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — An Iranian warship has been sunk by a torpedo fired from a U.S. Navy submarine, the Secretary of War said. The action would be the first ship sunk by torpedo fired from a U.S. Navy ship since World War II.

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth said on March 4, 2026, that the Iranian ship was sunk in the Indian Ocean

According to the BBC, the sunken ship was the IRIS Dena, a guided-missile frigate that went down off the southern coast of Sri Lanka. The ship was one of six ships of the Moudge class.

According to Reuters, the Sri Lankan Navy rescued 32 people from the ship, of a crew estimated to number 180 members. At least 80 crew members died in the action.

The action represents the first sinking of an enemy warship by a U.S. submarine's torpedo since World War II.

During the Falklands War, on May 2, 1982, the Royal

Navy nuclear-powered attack submarine HMS Conqueror sank the Argentine Navy cruiser ARA Belgrano with a torpedo. The Belgrano was formerly the light cruiser USS Phoenix.

U.S. Navy submarines are armed with 21-inch Mark 48 21-inch diameter torpedoes.

Navy Announces 13 Fiscal 2026 Ship Retirements

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy has announced its plan to retire 13 ships during fiscal 2026, including two ships held over from last year.

In a Feb. 20 message released by Rear Admiral M. D. Behning, acting deputy chief of naval operations for Warfighting Requirements and Capabilities, the planned retirements included six warships and seven auxiliary ships. Most of the retirements are planned for the summer.

The two Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruisers on the list,

USS Shiloh (CG 67) and USS Lake Erie (CG 70), originally were to be decommissioned in fiscal 2025. Shiloh had transferred to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, from Yokosuka, Japan, but was kept in commission with the change in presidential administrations. Lake Erie was deployed to the U.S. 4th Fleet supporting Operation Southern Spear and had remain deployed as fiscal 2025 expired. The ships will be stored as support assets and their retirement by September will leave the fleet with five cruisers.

One Los Angeles-class attack submarine, Newport News (SSN 750), was inactivated in January. Its inactivation will be followed in August by that of USS Alexandria (SSN 757), leaving the fleet with 18 Los Angeles-class boats. The submarines will be scrapped.

One of the early Freedom-class littoral combat ships, USS Fort Worth (LCS 3), will be decommissioned by July and will be scrapped. A Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship, USS Germantown (LSD 42), will be decommissioned by September and retained as a support asset, leaving the fleet with five other ships of the class.

Three Henry J. Kaiser-class fleet replenishment oilers are being removed from service with Military Sealift Command in 2026: USNS Big Horn (T-AO 198) by March and USNS John Ericsson (T-AO 194) and Pecos (T-AO 197) by July. The Big Horn and Pecos are being transferred to the Maritime Administration, and the John Ericsson will be retained as a support asset. These retirements will leave the fleet with ten oilers of the class. The ships are being replaced by the John Lewis class T-AOs, which first deployed in 2025.

Three Watson-class large, medium-speed, roll-on/roll-off ships will be transferred to the Maritime Administration: USNS Pomeroy (T-AKR 316) by April, USNS Watkins (T-AKR 315) by July, and USNS Red Cloud (T-AKR 313) by September. The

retirements will leave the Military Sealift Command with three ships of the class.

The singular VADM K.R. Wheeler (T-AG 5001) will be transferred from the Military Sealift Command to the Maritime Administration by July. It is equipped with an offshore petroleum distribution system uniquely designed to pump fuel ashore from up to eight miles.

Marine Corps to Retire Last AV-8B Harrier IIs in June

AV-8Bs of VMA-223 seen in flight in April 2023. (Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. Theodore Bergan)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Marine Corps plans to retire its last Boeing AV-8B Harrier II vertical-takeoff and landing attack jets this summer, according to the 2026 Marine Corps Aviation Plan released Feb. 10, 2026.

The Corps operates only one remaining Marine attack squadron (VMA), VMA-223, which is based at Marine Corps Cherry Point, North Carolina. The squadron will conduct the last flight of a Harrier on June 3, during a series of ceremonies scheduled for June 1 through June 5.

VMA-223 currently has a detachment of AV-8Bs assigned to the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed on board the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7). The Iwo Jima has been operating in the U.S. Southern Command's area of responsibility in support of Operations Southern Spear and Absolute Resolve. This is the last scheduled deployment of the AV-8B.

VMA-223 is scheduled to be redesignated a Marine fighter attack squadron in fiscal 2027 as it trains to fly the F-35B Lightning II short takeoff/vertical landing strike fighter.

The Marine Corps began flying Harriers in 1971, beginning with the AV-8A and later AV-8C versions. The much-improved AV-8B Harrier II version entered service in January 1985. Further upgrades resulted in the night-attack AV-8B(NA) version, with many further upgraded with radar as the AV-8B Harrier II Plus version.

AV-8Bs served in numerous combat operations, including Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, Operation Allied Force, Operation Odyssey Dawn, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, Operations Inherent Resolve and Resolute Support, and most recently in Operation Southern Spear.

"Equipped with precision-guided munitions (PGMs), an advanced LITENING targeting pod, and LINK-16, the Harrier has a distinguished legacy of destroying surface targets and

escorting friendly aircraft, providing the Marine Corps with a relevant and survivable fight-tonight capability," the aviation plan said.

Coast Guard Gearing Up to Absorb Massive Investment, Commandant Says

Artist rendering of the Arctic Security Cutter (Bollinger)
By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – With nearly $25 billion in reconciliation funding from Congress, the U.S. Coast Guard is moving out on some new programs and adding to others as it prepares for an expansion in numbers of cutters, aircraft, bases, and

personnel, the Coast Guard's commandant told Congress.

Adm. Kevin Lunday, commandant of the Coast Guard, testifying Jan. 29, 2026, before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, said the reconciliation law passed in 2025 was the "most significant investment in Coast Guard history."

Lunday told the committee that with the expanded force bought with the reconciliation law, the service would need congressional support for consistent, sustained funding to operate it.

The Coast Guard recently has awarded contracts to build six Arctic Security Cutters (ASCs) with plans to build a total of 11. Lunday said that – of the first six – four will be built in the United States by Bollinger Shipyards and two in Finland by Rauma Marine Construction Oy. The new icebreakers are based on the Multi-Purpose Icebreaker design by Seaspan Shipyards of Vancouver, Canada, developed with Aker Arctic Technology Inc of Helsinki, Finland. In service, the ASCs would greatly expand the Arctic capabilities of the Coast Guard.

The reconciliation law also funds 22 cutters, including three of the six contracted ASCs, nine new Offshore Patrol Cutters and 10 additional fast response cutters (FRCs), bringing the FRC program total to 77 cutters.

Lunday said the Coast Guard gas requested information from the defense industry regarding a new class of light and medium icebreakers to replace old icebreaking tugs. These cutters would be built in the United States, he said.

The commandant also said that a second Great Lakes Icebreaker was one of his top priorities.

He affirmed that the first Polar Security Cutter is on track for delivery in 2030.

The Coast Guard also is procuring six additional HC-130J Super Hercules maritime patrol aircraft and 40 additional MH-60 Jayhawk helicopters. The additional MH-60s will enable the service to replace MH-65 Dolphin helicopters and to have more MH-60s to deploy on the expanding force of cutters including Polar Security Cutters.

Lunday said the reconciliation law will enable the Coast Guard to accelerate phaseout of its MH-65 helicopter fleet before the originally planned retirement year of 2037.

The law also added procurement of some MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles.

Under the Force Design 2028, the Coast Guard is expanding its force by 15,000 personnel. Lunday pointed out that 13,000 personnel will be needed to crew the 11 Arctic Security Cutters.

Singapore, Denmark Plan to Join the P-8 Poseidon Club

A New Zealand Defence Force P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. (Photo credit: Defence Public Affairs, Corporal Naomi James)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — In recent weeks two more nations have been approved by the U.S. State Department for possible procurement of Boeing-built P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft (MPA).

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) has announced that Denmark and Singapore each have been approved by the U.S. State Department for possible Foreign Military Sales of three and four P-8A aircraft, respectively.

The procurement of the four P-8As and associated systems and support services for Singapore is estimated to total $2.316 billion. The sale also would include MK54 lightweight tordedoes drawn from existing U.S. Navy stocks, the DSCA announced on Jan. 20, 2026.

Earlier, the DSCA announced on Dec. 29, 2025, the State

Department approved the possible sale of three P-8As and associated systems and support to Denmark. The value of the sale is estimated at $1.8 billion.

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress, the agency said.

Interestingly, the two nations have not traditionally operated long-range MPA. The acquisitions will strengthen the anti-submarine and surface warfare capabilities of allies of the United States and NATO allies.

The P-8A is operated by seven armed forces including the U.S. Navy, Royal Australian Air Force, Royal Air Force, Royal Norwegian Air Force, New Zealand Defence Force, Republic of Korea Navy, and German Navy. The Royal Canadian Air Force also has P-8As on order. All of these except the Royal Air Force previously operated versions or derivatives of the P-3 Orion. India also operates a similar version of the Poseidon purchased by direct commercial sale, the P-8I Neptune.

One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Building U.S. Navy Hedges Against Rising threats

Sailors secure the rigid-hull inflatable boat on the midship of the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG 54) during small boat operations in the South China Sea, Sept. 4. 2025. *Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Mark Bergado*

The U.S. Navy faces challenges on multiple fronts. At sea, the fleet is stretched thin responding to China's continued gray-zone aggression and defending shipping in the Middle East from drone or missile attacks. At home, new ship deliveries fall further behind, fleet readiness is slipping, and recruiters are playing catch up after years of missing goals.

More money and industry innovation could help the Navy mitigate its challenges. But they don't tackle the root cause of a shrinking, less-ready fleet – the Navy's force design, which emphasizes large, multi-mission crewed warships and aircraft over robotic and autonomous systems (RAS) or less-complex vessels.

The Navy's preference for large, crewed platforms is logical. Smaller ships lack the endurance for transoceanic deployments,

RAS can’t perform peacetime missions like search and rescue or counter-piracy, and the cost of long-endurance crewed ships or aircraft suggests each one should be multi-mission.

But the Navy cannot afford a fleet of highly survivable warships large enough to address the its global responsibilities. Rising costs and delays in maintaining aging guided missile destroyers (DDGs), amphibious ships, and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) are already shrinking the operational fleet by forcing the Navy to retire ships early or sideline them for years.

Rather than continuing to field a shrinking force of exquisite ships and aircraft, the Navy should field a larger force of crewed and uncrewed platforms that gain an edge over opponents through their payloads and ability to combine in a diverse array of changing effects chains across domains. By shifting complexity from inside individual ships and aircraft to the kill chains between them, this fleet could gain decision-making advantages over adversaries and generate capacity or capability when and where it is needed.

Deterring without Dominance

After three decades of being the largest, most capable fleet on Earth, the U.S. Navy faces adversaries who are exploiting technology proliferation to field forces that can threaten U.S. military dominance. China is the most prominent example. With the world’s largest rocket force and navy, the People’s Liberation Army could keep Taiwan’s allies at bay long enough to blockade Taiwan or attempt an invasion.

There are a small number of intense scenarios that would require a substantial portion of the fleet, or of key elements of the fleet. The U.S. Navy has traditionally designed the fleet to meet the demands of these scenarios. In its post-Cold War period of dominance, the Navy could build a force able to counter a Taiwan invasion and retain enough residual

capability to handle any other situation, albeit much less efficiently than a purpose-built force.

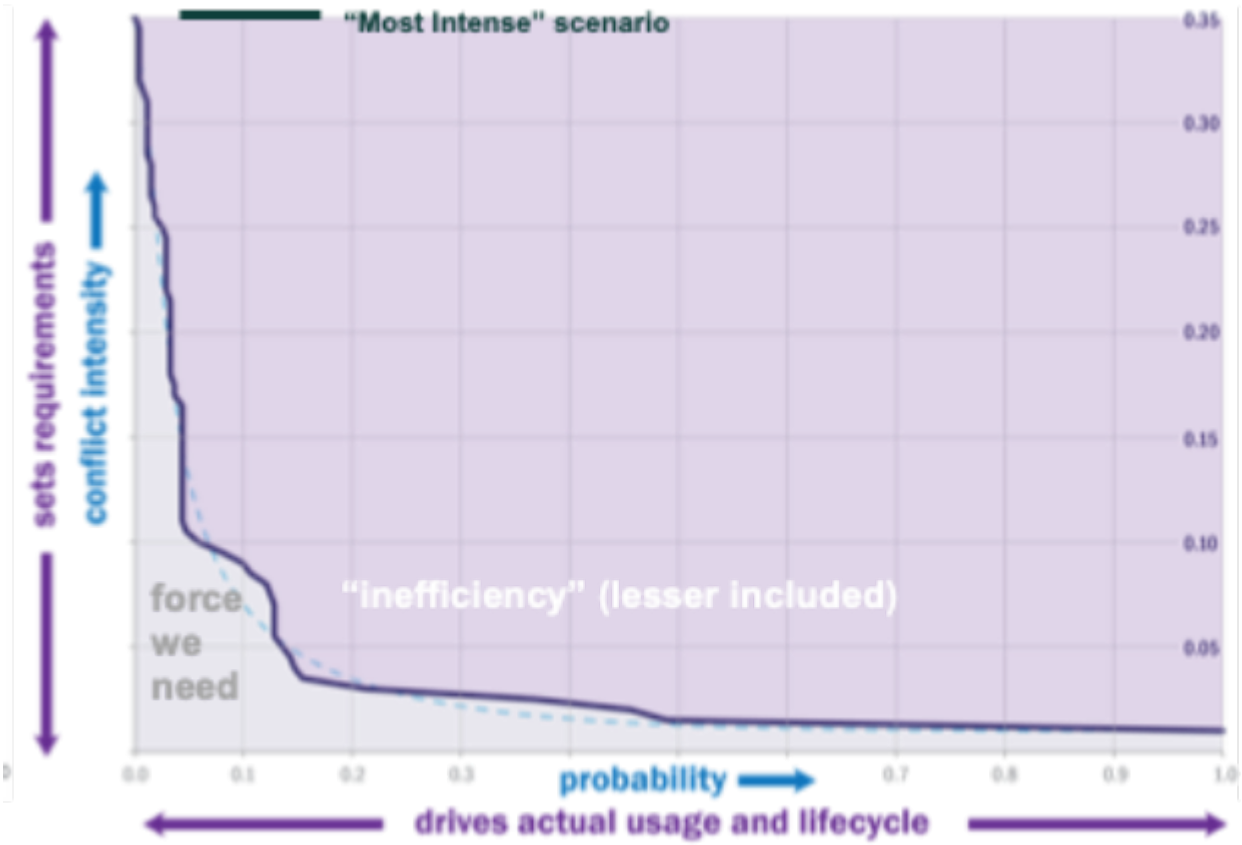

Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates this approach. It shows U.S. combat deployments from 1943 to 2011 in terms of the probability a given portion of the force is deployed on any given day. (This chart is based primarily on U.S. Air Force data, which is the most comprehensive). The peak on the chart represents World War II, but the speed and scale of a Taiwan invasion would preclude significant mobilization. Navy leaders logically sized the active fleet for that scenario.

But the PRC's improving and growing military is driving up the capability and capacity needed to defend Taiwan. In the early 2020s, the Navy began to retire or slow production of ships and aircraft that were less relevant to a Taiwan invasion scenario. The one-size-fits all fleet started looking like a one-trick pony fit for one situation and ill-suited for many others.

Other stressing scenarios soon emerged as adversaries began exploiting military-relevant commercial technology and geography. Russia expanded its invasion of Ukraine beyond Crimea and is growing its submarine fleet, Iran's Houthi proxies attacked shipping across the Red Sea and Bab El Mandeb, and China intensified air and maritime incursions into Philippine and Japanese territory.

This expanding set of challenges leaves the Navy in a strategic cul-de-sac: It doesn't have enough forces with sufficient capability to be dominant in each region, but it cannot grow in its current form under any realistic budgets. In his opening speech during his assumption of office, new Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Daryl Caudle argued the Navy should use "hedge forces" to solve this force planning challenge.

Hedge forces are specialized groups of units designed to address high-consequence, low-probability situations like those on the left side of figure 1. These forces would provide the additional capability and capacity needed for a specific scenario but may not have broad utility in other regions or situations. Figure 2 depicts this force design paradigm using the data of Figure 1.

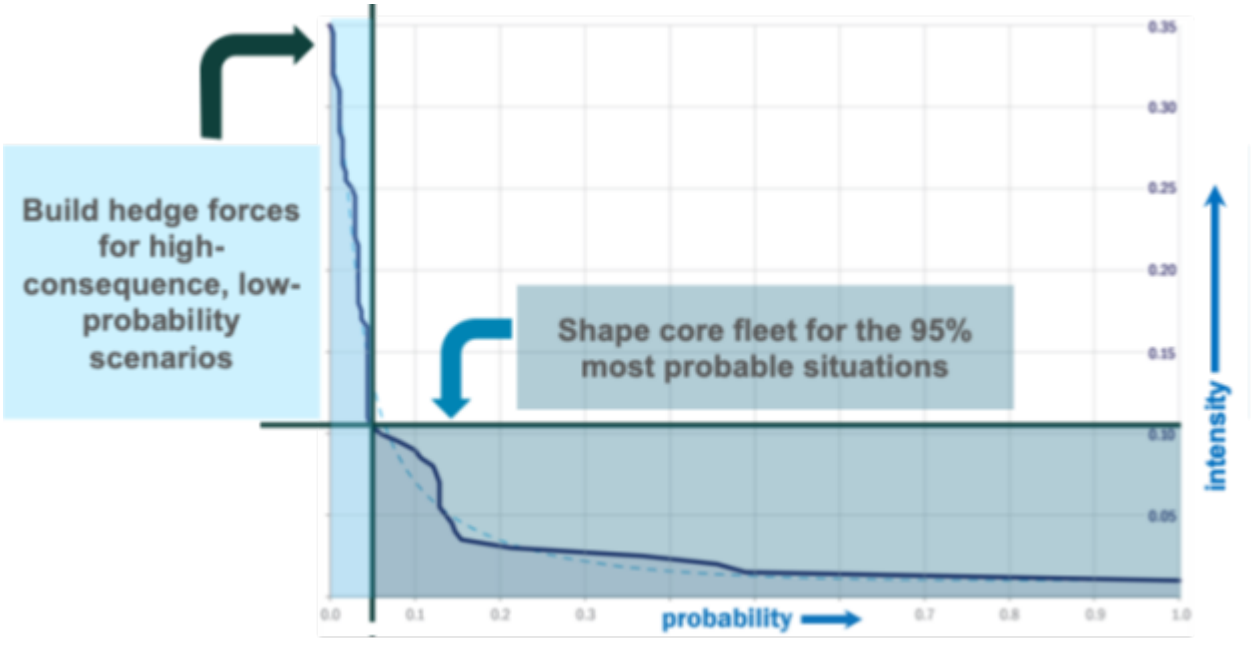

Figure 2

Under this paradigm, the Navy would size its core fleet – or the traditional Navy of today – for the bulk of scenarios that could emerge, including high-probability day-to-day conditions such as homeland defense or responding to gray-zone provocations. The core fleet should also be able to mount relatively large campaigns like Operations Desert Storm or Iraqi Freedom by surging additional deployments for the duration of operation. The Navy would build hedge forces to address the 5% of operational problems that would overstretch the core fleet.

The Navy should forward base hedge forces at allied facilities in their region of interest and organize them separately from the rotationally deployed core fleet. Because they are composed for a specific scenario, hedge forces will generally not be relevant to other theaters and scenarios, although some units may move in response to changing capability and capacity needs among hedge forces. Forward basing helps deter opponents by showing that hedge forces can quickly, potentially automatically, respond to aggression. And from a fiscal perspective, forward basing reduces the number of hedge force units needed compared to rotationally deploying them from U.S. territory.

The Navy's need for hedge forces to be specialized and forward based suggests they should be predominantly composed of RAS. Conflicts in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Middle East show that RAS can be relevant in high-end conflict. For example, after losing its navy to attack or capture, Ukraine's military restored access to vital shipping lanes by pushing the Russian Black Sea Fleet to the far side of Crimea using uncrewed attack boats and undersea vehicles.

RAS also offer dramatically lower costs of procurement and, most importantly, sustainment. By shifting some functions of traditional crewed platforms onto uncrewed systems, the Navy could gain scale at lower costs than it would take to achieve the same capacity through crewed ships or aircraft.

The Navy is pursuing RAS and associated operational concepts through an accelerating set of experiments. These initiatives – including Task Force 59 in the Middle East, 4th Fleet in Central and South America and the Integrated Battle Problems in the Indo-Pacific – are great examples of applying new technologies to thorny operational problems. But the Navy needs to go further and stop treating uncrewed systems as merely an additive to the crewed force.

The U.S. Department of Defense is experimenting with concepts like those used by Ukraine and Iran's proxies to create a "hellscape" for Chinese invaders in the Taiwan Strait. By attacking troop transports with drone boats, undersea vehicles and loitering munitions, a hedge force of RAS could slow or disrupt the invasion, giving U.S. and allied forces targeting information and time to destroy PLA ships with long-range missiles and torpedo fires.

But the hellscape cannot stop an invasion alone. It will need missile attacks from aircraft, submarines and surface combatants to defeat the invasion fleet and its escorts. However, surface forces will be hard-pressed to get close enough to deliver weapons and survive. The Navy could fill the gap by instead relying on a distributed fires hedge force of Modular Attack Surface Craft and submarines in the early phases of the fight.

The MASC program includes three RAS vessels, the largest of which would carry 16 missiles. Hudson Institute's wargaming and modeling suggests distributed uncrewed missile launchers with between 16 and 32 weapons offer an effective balance between undermining adversary planning and creating risks to adversary objectives. RAS vessels with larger magazines are easier to detect, have difficulty efficiently using their weapons before coming under attack and are large enough to be worth multiple enemy missile salvos. RAS vessels with fewer weapons are often unable to successfully attack a defended target alone, creating a need for coordinated attacks that can

be difficult if communications are degraded.

The Navy could benefit from building RAS-based hedge forces to address other stressing situations. For example, deployments by quiet Russian SSNs through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (G-I-UK) gap could quickly overwhelm U.S. antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces, especially if other operations in Europe demand attention from U.S. SSNs, P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and DDGs. And a renewed campaign of drone attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea could once again stretch a Navy surface combatant fleet that is also defending U.S. carriers, territory and other sea lanes.

A Dramatically Different Surface Fleet

This new force design paradigm implies changes in the makeup of the core force. For example, if a largely uncrewed hedge force can slow and disrupt a Chinese invasion, the Navy may need a lower rate of fires from surface combatants, strike-fighters, and SSNs. As a result, the Navy could reduce the number of crewed platforms it buys or delay their next generation.

But the changing threat environment also matters. The fleet's successful air defense actions in the Middle East during the last two years showed that countering drone and missile attacks is getting harder. These operations already stress the capacity of today's DDGs. Hudson Institute's wargaming with U.S., Australian and Japanese officers during the last year suggest China could overwhelm U.S. DDGs and successfully engage U.S. carriers well into a conflict in the Western Pacific.

DDGs will soon have to focus on air and missile defense and forgo other missions like ASW or strike due to combat system and magazine limits. Despite their reach, Tomahawk missiles still require DDGs to approach adversaries like Iran, Russia and China within anti-ship missile range and each adversary

would be willing to expend substantial numbers of $20 million ballistic missiles on a $3 billion DDG.

This suggests the surface force will need to both increase its magazine capacity and the range of its weapons to conduct offense and defense during tomorrow's conflicts. The Navy could realize those characteristics by renewing its pursuit of a CG(X) guided missile cruiser. A CG(X) could, like today's Ticonderoga CGs, carry 130-plus missiles in a vertical launch system magazine. Like the Navy's planned DDG(X), a CG(X) could also carry larger missiles like the Navy's planned hypersonic conventional prompt strike weapon that can reach targets more than 1,500 nautical miles away.

But with a cost of likely more than $5 billion per ship, the Navy will not be able to replace today's DDG-51s with new CG(X) or DDG(X) hulls on a one-for-one basis. While today's DDG-51s will be in the fleet for decades to come, the Navy will need to complement its new, larger surface combatants with smaller, less expensive vessels.

Unfortunately, the Constellation guided missile frigate cannot become that more affordable counterpart to the DDG-51. Originally planned to cost less than $800 million per hull, the FFG-62 class has been plagued by production delays and cost overruns driven in large part by Navy design revisions. The Congressional Budget Office now estimates each FFG will cost at least $1.4 billion.

With a cost nearly twice that of its parent FREMM FFG design or the Navy's original estimates, the FFG-62 no longer has a role in the Navy fleet. Its 32-cell vertical launch system magazine lacks the capacity to defend another ship against even the Houthi threat. The FFG-62's very low frequency sonar will generate long detection ranges against quiet submarines but still would place the ship well within submarine-launched anti-ship missile range. And the FFG-62's cost and complexity prevent the Navy from automating the ship or buying it in

sufficient numbers to be considered expendable or attritable.

Surface force leaders could use the Navy's budget constraints to reshape the fleet for deterrence in a post-dominance era. Instead of continuing the flawed and overpriced FFG-62 program, the Navy could pursue a smaller missile corvette like the Israeli Sa'ar-6 or Swedish Visby. A corvette would not be multimission capable like the FFG-62, but it could carry the same 32-cell VLS magazine for offensive weapons. With a reloadable Rolling Airframe Missile air defense system, it would be survivable against realistic missile salvos.

If the Navy used an existing design without significant modifications, it could purchase at least two corvettes for the cost of each planned FFG-62. This is not a novel approach. The Navy is beginning procurement this year of a new medium landing ship based on the Israeli logistics support vessel, which itself was derived from a U.S. Army landing ship.

Corvettes could conduct coastal defense around the United States and across the Western Hemisphere. But they could also lead and manage hedge forces overseas that are defending Taiwan, countering submarines at the G-I-UK gap, clearing mines in the Strait of Hormuz or defeating air attacks in the red Sea. Although hedge forces will be predominantly composed of RAS, human operators will still need to maintain, command and protect them when not in use. Corvettes could help provide those functions while also providing maritime security and addressing other threats.

With their lower complexity and smaller size, the Navy could also automate corvettes enough for them to be remote missile launchers during wartime, as it did with the fast troop transport USNS Apalachicola. They could then join the distributed fires hedge force in defeating amphibious assaults or blockades.

The Navy's fleet design needs dramatic change to deter in a

post-dominance era. Instead of relying on the broad overmatch of its one-size-fits-all fleet, the Navy should pivot to a smaller core fleet complemented by hedge forces to address its most challenging operational problems. Without a change like this, the Navy will lose relevance as opponents exploit proliferation and geography to threaten America's allies and interests. .

Bryan Clark is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. This story originally appeared in the December issue of Seapower *magazine.*

Navy Selects Damen to Build New Medium Landing Ship

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy has selected Damen to build the new medium landing ship (LSM) for the service. The ship will be a version of Damen's LST 100 class.

Damen is a shipbuilder headquartered in The Netherlands. Its LST 100 class is in production for Australia and other customers.

The selection was announced on Dec. 5 on X in a video of Navy Secretary John C. Phelan, who said that the move was the second initiative is support of re-designing the U.S. fleet. The first was the truncation of the Constellation-class guided-missile frigate program to only the two ships currently under construction. The truncation, announced a week earlier,

was the result of delays in the program. Phelan announced that a new class of frigates will be designed to give the Navy the small surface combatants that it needs.

The Navy plans to build 35 LSMs to transport Marines and their equipment within theaters of war with an “organic, littoral mobility capability in the Indo-Pacific and around the world and provides with a critical intra-theater maneuver asset that is able to embark, transport, and land Marines, weapons supplies and equipment around the theater without requiring access to a pier,” said General Eric Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps, in the same X video. “The medium landing ships will enable our Marines to be more agile and flexible in austere where there are no ports … within the adversary’s engagement zone.”

The LST 100 resembles in concept the LSTs of World War II, equipped with bow doors and a ramp to discharge vehicles onto a beach. Damen’s design is an intra-theater transport that displaces approximately 4,000 tons. According to Damen’s website, the ship is 100 meters long and has a beam of 16 meters and a draft of 3.5 to 3.9 meters. The ship is designed with berthing for a landing force, cargo space of 1,020 square meters of roll-on/roll-off cargo space and to be operated by a crew of 18. The ship features a large crane and a helicopter landing pad. Phelan said the LSM would have a range of more than 3,400 nautical miles.

The selection of an “off-the-shelf” design came as the Navy determined that other proposals with new designs were too costly and would take too long to join the fleet. In the same video, Admiral Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, stressed producibility and maintainability after an era of shipbuilding in which the delivery of new ships took too long.

Future Attack Submarine Utah Christened at Electric Boat

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — The future Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine Utah (SSN 801) was christened during ceremonies at the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Connecticut, on October 25, 2025.

According to a posting on X @GDElectricBoat "The Virginia-class assembly building at shipyard was all decked out on October 25 for the christening of PCU Utah (SSN 801). EB shipbuilders, the ship's crew, U.S. Navy personnel and government officials joined both live and virtually to

celebrate this significant milestone commemorated by a joint swing. Mrs. Sharon Lee (left) and Mrs. Mary Kaye Huntsman, co-sponsors of Utah, broke a bottle of sparkling cyser – a honey and apple cider wine from Utah – on the ship's hull to commemorate the christening."

When commissioned, the USS Utah will be the 10th and final Block 4 version of the Virginia-class submarines to be built by General Dynamics Electric Boat and HII's Newport News Shipbuilding.

Cancer to Capricorn: A Maritime Showdown for the Global South

Coast Guard personnel observe the cloud-covered ocean from the ramp of an HC-130J Super Hercules maritime patrol aircraft in

support of Operation Southern Shield 2023 in October 2023. The Coast Guard recently completed the first high-seas boardings and inspections off the coast of Peru under a newly adopted multi-lateral agreement to monitor fishing and transshipment operations within the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization Convention Area. *Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Ensign Geoffrey Wittenberg*

On Sept. 2, the United States really stepped up its decades-long war on drugs by sinking a boat in international waters filled with narcotics, killing 11 members of the Tren de Aragua gang. This attack, which the current administration has been hinting at for a while, opens a chance for a fresh look at how America approaches Latin America and Africa and rolling back China's dangerous march across the region.

Bounded by the two tropics, Cancer and Capricorn, is a region that faces similar threats and significant opportunity. In the same area, China has been waging a nearly 20-year campaign to win over the so-called "global south." For China, the global south is a fancy way of saying former colonies in the southern hemisphere, with all sorts of different histories, national interests and aspirations. By taking a maritime approach in a maritime corridor between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the United States has a chance to beat China and unite the region around shared interests like security and trade.

Both African and Latin American countries are well aware of great power games and their not-so-distant colonial past. But unlike the wider global south, the nations of Latin America and Atlantic coastal Africa are connected by language, culture and shipping routes. That's why an offshore approach focusing on common maritime interests will work, providing real benefits for the people of this region and American citizens without triggering memories of the past.

On the other hand, China's strategy has centered around massive infrastructure projects, elite capture through graft and lopsided trade deals. But this approach alienates the

local community, which too rarely benefits from Chinese presence, while local political leaders bow for short-term Chinese favors. As it stands, Africa has seen many such efforts fail, has suffered under debt diplomacy and seen its natural resources exploited. One notable example is Uganda's renegotiating the tough terms of a 2015 deal with China to expand and modernize its Entebbe Airport for $200 million.

Latin America is not far behind. In June 2025, China's state-owned COSCO started operations at Chancay Port in Peru, a $3 billion Chinese project to build a modern, highly automated shipping hub. Construction continues despite local concerns about labor and environmental impacts. These ports projects have long been suspected of being used for nefarious purposes. CSIS' Christopher Hernandez-Roy raises this concern in a September 2023 article titled, "Are Chinese Ports in Latin America Preferred by Organized Crime?"

China's influence in Africa goes beyond trade and big infrastructure projects. Their distant fishing fleets often poach in places like the Gulf of Guinea, around the Galapagos Islands and recently off Argentina's coast. In June, Argentine forces blocked about 300 Chinese fishing boats from entering their exclusive economic zone, where coastal states retain the right to all natural resources within it, including the seabed. This ongoing standoff has become a regular occurrence, leading to the sinking of a Chinese trawler in 2016 and warning shots fired again in 2019 by Argentine forces. Africa has also faced challenges from a predatory Chinese fishing fleet in its waters.

To address lawlessness at sea, Gulf of Guinea countries have been working together since 2011 in an annual maritime security exercise called Obangame Express. Led by the U.S., it usually involves over 32 participating nations. This exercise has helped improve regional maritime security against piracy, illegal fishing and other crimes. The investment in regional maritime awareness contributed to the capture of a Chinese

fishing vessel, Hai Lu Feng, in 2020. This uncovered some disturbing truths: Chinese fishing fleets used registration and location data for multiple ships to avoid paying licensing fees, duties and limits on fishing. This allowed them to overfish, harming local fishermen. The discovery of this activity was partly due to U.S. maritime capacity-building and skills practiced at Obangame Express. If these skills were applied on a transatlantic scale, they could potentially disrupt the activities of cartels as well – cartels that have been killing almost 100,000 Americans every year.

Africa and Latin America have also been hit hard by drug cartels, causing addiction and chaos. This point has repeatedly been made in United Nations World Drug Reports. The cartels make over $500 billion a year from illegal drugs trade. Cocaine is the cartels' fastest-growing product, which they sell in near equal volume to both North America and Europe. China helps the cartels by selling them precursor chemicals needed to make fentanyl. This makes the cartels more dangerous and weakens local governments in Latin America. In turn, the cartels and Chinese criminal gangs, like the Bang Group, take advantage of this. Venezuela is a good example, where under economic pressure the Maduro regime has increasingly turned to China, Russia and the cartels.

How to Stop It

We can stop this by attacking the cartels' business model. We can do this by making it harder for them to ship chemicals and traffic in people, while also cracking down on illegal fishing and smuggling by China. We can also create new trade relationships between the United States and Latin America and Africa.
To start, we should focus on a few countries that are already fighting the cartels and illegal fishing and are seeking to grow their economies.

The Tren de Aragua incident shows the war on the cartels is

starting, but America isn’t alone in this fight. To win, we need to destroy the business model the cartels rely on. This will mean working with other countries who are on the same page, such as El Salvador, which has been really aggressive in stopping smugglers at sea. They’ve been coordinating with the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South). Likewise, we can enforce maritime rights targeting illegal Chinese fishing with Guinea, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau.

Sailors aboard guided-missile frigate USS Simpson’s rigid hull inflatable boat drive along side a Chinese vessel fishing in Senegal’s Exclusive Economic Zone after dropping off a joint-boarding team of U.S. Coast Guard and Senegalese navy members and an inspector from Senegal’s Department of Fisheries to conduct a routine inspection in 2012. *Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Petty Officer 1st Class Daniel Mennuto*

Most pressing is fighting the cartels. To really hit the cartels’ bottom line, we need to stop both shipments of cocaine and the chemicals they use to make fentanyl. This is something many experts have been saying for a while now. In a December 2023 article for the National Interest, James DiPane

and I explained the cartels rely on several sea routes to move 90% of their drugs. The most important routes cross the Pacific to Mexico and into the U.S., ferrying precursor chemicals from China to Mexican cartel fentanyl production sites and cocaine from South America. They also rely on stops in other countries before moving into the United States or through Europe's most porous border, French Guiana. Smugglers are drawn to French Guiana because once they're inside, they can use local drug mules to fly directly to Europe with fewer customs and immigration checks. This reliance on international shipping or airfreight routes is a weakness for the cartels.

JIATF-S was established in 1989 and has had some success in stopping this illegal trade but haven't been able to end it completely. Right now, officials say they only stop about 10% of this trade because they don't have enough Coast Guard cutters and patrol aircraft. To make a real difference, we need to expand JIATF-S and change the law so they can focus on all of the cartels' illegal trade on the high seas. We also need to be more careful about China's fishing fleets, which are often suspected of smuggling things like counterfeit cigarettes and worse.

European countries such as the Netherlands, Italy France, and the United Kingdom are also affected by drug trafficking and human smuggling, but there's more to it than just a threat. There's also a chance for more economic growth and trade, especially when it comes to offshore energy exploration.

The war in Ukraine has shown that NATO, which is supposed to be a strong alliance, is actually pretty weak. And after three years of war in Ukraine, it's still relying on Russia for a lot of its energy, making it harder to get Russia to agree to a ceasefire. Erasing this dangerous reliance on Russian energy should lead Europe to look for alternate sources of energy, such as in Western Africa and Latin America. Italy is already looking to trade more energy with North African countries and are also trying to deal with the issue of illegal migration

and drug trafficking. Europe needs more deals like this to meet its energy needs.

New Opportunities

There’s a new hotspot for offshore energy reserves off the coast of Guyana, a country that’s still under threat from its neighbor Venezuela. Just last March, a Venezuelan patrol boat threatened vessels working for ExxonMobil in Guyanese waters. And after a years-long military build-up, the danger of war isn’t over with Venezuela claiming Guyana’s Essequibo region. This threat puts Guyana’s estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped offshore crude oil at risk. Guyana is already the third-largest non-OPEC oil producer in the world. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, these petroleum reserves offer an alternative to Russian energy.

There’s more to this story than just oil between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. There are also opportunities to reduce our dependence on China, like finding new sources of rare earth minerals, expanding trade and developing new industries. For example, the U.S. helped Congo and Rwanda end a long and bloody war, and a minerals development deal brokered by the White House opens them to American investment in mining their mineral resources, especially copper and cobalt. Moreover, Latin America and Africa could be great alternatives to Chinese manufacturers. According to a July report by ISS Africa Futures, developing energy generation with American investment could unlock the potential of Africa’s vast mineral reserves. In Latin America, Argentina is now shaking off years of currency controls and economic volatility, and it’s booming at an estimated 5.5% GDP growth in 2025, according to the World Bank.

America already has an economic tool and framework that’s proven to work: Prosper Africa. Established by the Trump Administration in late 2018, it has facilitated more than 800 deals with 45 African countries worth a whopping $50 billion.

And guess what? This initiative helped connect small and medium enterprises, which create seven out of 10 new jobs, according to the World Bank. This approach is a stark contrast to China's elite-focused approach and benefits the widest populations in both markets, American and African. We should definitely expand this to include Latin America as a viable alternative to China's debt diplomacy.

Between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, our people have a common interest in fighting the cartels, protecting our natural resources and making our economies more resilient. As such, it is time to forge a new transatlantic partnership to grow secure and resilient economies that stretch from the Galapagos Islands to the Gulf of Guinea.

China's debt diplomacy strategy of resource extraction, poaching resources where it can, enabled by elite capture, is inherently flawed. China has teamed with the cartels and unleashed their worst behavior on those too weak to resist, but without any viable alternative. That is, until the U.S. can energize resistance and collaboration for common good.

A maritime Cancer-to-Capricorn strategic economic and security framework can deliver results that viable alternative partners in Africa, Latin America and Europe can support. Success will create a more free and prosperous future for everyone, not just Americans. The first step is to work with our partners in the Cancer-to-Capricorn corridor. Together, we can finally and effectively challenge China's plan for the global south on terms that are fair and beneficial to everyone.

Brent Sadler is a 27-year Navy veteran with numerous operational tours on nuclear powered submarines, personal staffs of senior Defense Department leaders and as a military diplomat in Asia. As a senior research fellow at a leading D.C. think tank, Brent's focus is on maritime security and the technologies shaping our future maritime forces, especially the Navy. This article first appeared in the November issue of

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