

USMC Amphibious Capability Critical to Popping Area Denial ‘Bubbles’



U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Kaleb, a crew chief with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 461 Clark sits on the CH-53E Super Stallion's ramp as the aircraft leaves the USNS D. T. Williams (T-AK-3009), April 5, 2021. 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing is participating in Dynamic Cape 21.1, an operational logistics exercise simulating a Marine expeditionary force's ability to exercise command and control in a contested environment as well as exercising naval integration in a joint environment. *U.S. MARINE CORPS photo by Lance Cpl. Caleb Stelter*

Whether operating in the Euro-Atlantic or Indo-Pacific theaters, U.S. naval forces and their allies and partners must confront constrictions in operations – in both peacetime and crisis – generated by adversaries attempting to apply anti-access or area denial strategies, known as A2/AD.

Such strategies are designed to deny access for U.S. and other forces to key waters and coastal regions by inflating A2/AD “bubbles” around, for example, critical choke points at sea or entry points ashore.

In the Euro-Atlantic theater, areas like the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. (GIUK) gap region in the North Atlantic, the Kattegat and Skagerrak Straits that connect the North and Baltic seas, and the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea region, especially around the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, are examples of strategic areas adversaries could attempt to “bubble” by using mines, anti-ship missiles, submarines or strike aircraft. The East China Sea and the southern reaches of the South China Sea are areas of potential A2/AD actions in the Indo-Pacific region.

In any Western naval efforts to deter, defend against or deploy through A2/AD efforts, amphibious forces would play a critical role. Deployed at sea to deliver effect ashore, amphibious task groups and the marine forces they insert provide a capability that is critical to popping any A2/AD bubbles.

“Amphibious capability is a strategic capability – the threat of joint forcible entry remains a strategic capability,” Lt. Gen. Brian Beaudreault, commanding general of the U.S. Marine Corps’ II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF), told Seapower. “We’re still going to need an ability in the future to come from an unexpected direction, seize and hold ground, take something of value, and/or destroy something. Whether it’s a light raiding force or a distributed element of a larger whole, amphibious force remains a threat the adversary is going to have to honor.”

The U.S Marine Corps is the United States’ amphibious force. In the Euro-Atlantic theater, the responsibility of generating amphibious presence at sea and delivering amphibious effects ashore rests with II MEF, based on at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The Marine Corps delivers its amphibious effect in partnership with the U.S. Navy. For II MEF, this partnership is based around its increasingly integrated relationships with U.S. 2nd Fleet, based in Norfolk, Virginia, and U.S. 6th Fleet, based in Naples, Italy.

In the Indo-Pacific region, III MEF, based in Okinawa, Japan, provides the amphibious force, supported by U.S. 3rd Fleet, based in San Diego, and U.S. 7th Fleet, based in Yokosuka, Japan.

Integrated Scale

The Marines have always been tasked with exploiting the sea as a maneuver space to deliver amphibious effect across the

littoral region. However, with returning great power competition and the naval rivalry it brings raising the risk of more significant security crises, Western navies are increasingly focused on delivering integrated effect at scale. For the U.S. naval force, integration between the Navy and Marine Corps components – known as Blue-Green teaming – is increasingly important in generating and delivering force at scale, whether for simple presence at sea or for inserting forces across the littoral seam between sea and shore.

Another key element in how the Blue-Green team enables force generation and delivery is forward deployment. Situated at sea in amphibious ready groups or expeditionary strike groups, Marine Corps forces will often find themselves forward deployed within striking reach of an A2/AD bubble, or even inside one.

Adversary efforts to restrict movement and access at sea is not a new development in naval strategy or warfare. What has perhaps changed is adversary joint forces are creating a layered A2/AD capability threat. In Marine Corps assessments of adversaries' A2/AD strategies and how to counter them, amphibious force plays a certain role.

"What we realized when we studied A2/AD is that we are the inside force," Beaudreault said. "So, while many others [ask] 'How do you attack from the outside in?,' it's our view – and it's certainly true in III MEF, day-to-day – that we're already operating inside the weapons engagement zone. The nature of the problem is not 'How do you fight your way into it?' It's 'How do you survive and thrive within it?'"

The Marine Corps is addressing this question in several ways. For example, it is developing new concepts of operations such as distributed maritime operations (DMO) or expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO).

"The best method of ensuring your survival and effectiveness

is to distribute in smaller forces, relying on capabilities that are low probability of intercept that still support a kill-chain with massed effects,” Beaudreault said.

The Marines are focused on how the service can enable naval maneuvers at sea through land-based operations, Beaudreault said. This can be done through DMO or EABO, or through using a large continental force. In all such contexts, II MEF and the Corps more widely are assessing how improved Marine Corps sensing and long-range fires capability in particular can help the Navy achieve sea denial and sea control.

Here, the Navy-Marine Corps Blue-Green team will make a significant capability and operational contribution. The F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter provides a step-up in sensing capability and will deploy this capability from expeditionary advanced bases ashore and from carrier strike groups and amphibious ready groups at sea. The U.S. naval long-range precision strike inventory includes several systems bringing different capabilities, although the Kongsberg-Raytheon Naval Strike Missile is becoming an increasingly prominent arrow in the quiver.

The Naval Strike Missile is deployed currently on three Navy Independence-class littoral combat ships. Navy spokesman Alan Baribeau told *Seapower* the service is continuing to install strike missiles on Independence-class hulls, prioritizing fits based on availability schedules and operational commitments. The Naval Strike Missile is also slated for future fits to the Freedom-class littoral combat ships and is a candidate system for future frigates and amphibious ships.

“I think the broader recognition is that the change now from before in the A2/AD [context] is that we’re going to be in there, and there are a lot of systems,” Beaudreault said. “When we look at ranges and sensing capability in the adversary, how do we deny theirs and still thrive within? That is the art of where we’re trying to go.”

In terms of building integrated Blue-Green capability, he said the two services have looked at a range of issues including ship survivability and what amphibious capabilities any future platforms will provide. In amphibious capability terms, Beaudreault highlighted the Corps' integrated role with the Navy in addressing traditional naval warfare tasks such as antisubmarine and anti-surface warfare, and underlined the importance of capabilities like long-range precision fires and of dealing with threats such as coastal-defense cruise missiles and hypersonic missiles.

Aviation Integration

In terms of integrated capabilities that meet the "survive and thrive" requirement in the A2/AD context, assets like the F-35 provide significant increase in effect as individual platforms.

"Those F-35s can hold any target at risk essentially, and that is a huge capability for us when we're aboard amphibious ships, being able to not just survive but again thrive as that inside force," Beaudreault said.

Integrated airwings can provide value for operational commanders, and not just for individual operations or for Blue-Green teams, but for the U.S. Air Force, allies and partners.

Beaudreault said Marine Corps experience in recent exercises, such as the MEFEX 21.1 simulated training activity held at command-and-control hubs across the East Coast in November 2020, highlighted the benefits for combatant commanders in having a more integrated maritime airwing.

"It is the efficiencies to be gained by developing perhaps a maritime aviation command element and looking at how we better merge carrier-based aviation with the Marine Aircraft Wings," he said.

Joint and combined integration of aviation and other force elements can provide wider capabilities, for example in contributing to integrated air and missile defense, Beaudreault said.

“Ballistic missile defense and air defense remain my No. 1 concern in a European scenario. That is by far the top of the list,” he said. “After we’ve gone through the deployment phases and we’re operating ashore, depending on what the combined force air component commander has or hasn’t been able to achieve, you still want to be able to know that I’m tucked up under a Patriot umbrella from the Army or an Aegis-capable ship from the Navy, and within their coverage.”