



International War Game Explores Seabasing Concept

By Fred W. Baker III
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WASHINGTON, March 6, 2008 – More than 200 representatives from militaries and other agencies from around the world came to Maryland this week to discuss the U.S. military's seabasing concept and how it can be developed as a joint, multinational means of rendering aid and military support.



Bob Polk serves as the interagency team lead and moderates one of the forums at Expeditionary Warrior '08, where more than 200 representatives from militaries and other agencies from around the world gathered to discuss the U.S. military's seabasing concept. Defense Dept. photo by Fred W. Baker III
(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

The group came together for the annual Expeditionary Warrior '08 wargaming program held at the William F. Bolger Leadership Facility in Potomac, Md. The Marine Corps commandant chooses a topic for the war game each year related to organizing, training and equipping Marines.

Seabasing is the idea of using ships to place expeditionary airfields and ports at sea in regions where it may not be geographically or politically feasible to have a large contingent of forces ashore.

Described as having “the teeth ashore and the tail afloat,” the seabasing joint integrated concept was approved by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 2005. Since then, military officials have been working on assessing its capabilities and looking at how to integrate the concept across the force, and how to employ it in conjunction with multinational agencies. It is planned to be implemented by 2023.

“It’s one of our bread-and-butter issues,” said Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Tom Murray, commanding general of the Marine’s Warfighting Laboratory at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

The U.S. military has a history of projecting combat power from seas and waterways, but has relied on cooperation on host nations to build up power. Political and regional instability in countries around the world has reduced the number of airfields and ports available to U.S. forces, he said. This, combined with the reduction of the U.S. forces “footprint” across Europe and the Pacific, has forced the military to look at other ways to assemble, project and sustain operations in a way that optimizes the number of troops and support facilities required on the ground.

“As you look into the future and you (ask), ‘What is our enemy like? Who is it going to be?’ we really don’t know. It could be all over the place,” Murray said. “Without all of that stuff ashore, we’ve got to put it at sea.”

Proponents of the concept suggest that using the sea as a maneuver space creates uncertainty for enemy forces. The offshore position and easy maneuverability provide U.S. forces with multiple strike options. Also, seabasing makes it easier to protect forces and provide operational security in hostile environments, officials said. The rapid build-up of combat power in a specific location can also serve as a deterrent.

The concept is applicable across a range of operations, officials said. It also includes operations for rendering humanitarian aid and disaster relief. In some regions, ports, airfields and roads may not be accessible following a disaster. Seabasing could provide initial and sustained support for those contingencies.

The size of the seabase would vary depending on the mission. It could range from one ship to multiple task groups to international strike groups.

“It’s what it needs to be. It’s scaleable. It’s built for the situation, the mission, the location and what we need to do with it,” Murray said.

The seabase concept is designed to leverage U.S. Navy forces already in a region to join together in a tailored force able to deliver troops, tanks, aviation support, and other combat power and then sustain those forces logistically and recover them when the mission is finished. It would not necessarily eliminate the need for land-based security and logistics facilities in all instances.

U.S. forces already have worked together in operations that resemble seabasing for disaster relief and special operations, officials said.

“Seabasing is not something new. We’ve been doing it. We’ve been doing it jointly. But basically it’s been ad hoc,” said retired Marine Brig. Gen. Bruce Byrum of the Navy’s expeditionary warfare division. His office is responsible for working with the other services and combatant commanders to hash out the seabasing concept.

“Our forces are not necessarily organized or designed to work efficiently together, and we’re trying to work on that efficiency,” he said.

Difficulties with implementing the concept include making the services’ varied equipment interoperable and training forces that are not used to seabased operations, as well as integrating international military and civilian watercraft and equipment. It would also call for rewriting doctrine to some extent across the services, and could call for revisions in programmed equipment purchases.

Byrum said that this forum gives his office the opportunity to talk directly with other services and agencies about the concept and to see what capabilities seabasing could provide.

The group was broken down into seminar-style classrooms, each with a moderator. Forty international guests from 11 countries as well as all U.S. military services and the Coast Guard worked through three different scenarios in which a seabase was used. The scenarios included combat operations, counterterrorism and disaster relief.

Byrum said the sessions are allowing them to concentrate on the capability gaps and where his office should progress in the future.

“Even though we have tried to integrate many of the service concepts into the joint integrated concept, we still need to get a better understanding of ... what are the implications to the services,” Byrum said. “What this exercise is allowing us to do is work with the other services to get a better focus and vision of what their requirements might be for seabasing.”