



*HIMARS units must be on a relatively large area of flat land to maneuver and launch weapons, which would make them more susceptible to enemy detection and negate the low-observability portion of the EABO concept. U.S. Marine Corps (Joshua Sechser)*

### **Shortfalls in the Marine Corps' EABO Concept**

*Expeditionary advanced basing would be problematic on both strategic and operational levels.*

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<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/july/shortfalls-marine-corps-eabo-concept>

Earlier this year, the U.S. Marine Corps unveiled a ten-year transformation program that will see it divested of 12,000 personnel and its entire main battle tank fleet.<sup>1</sup> Just as eye-catching about *Force Design 2030* is the increase in the number of rocket-artillery/missile batteries (largely for the antisurface warfare, or ASuW, portfolio) from 7 to 21.<sup>2</sup> This shows that the Corps is moving away from a land combat posture to one more focused on supporting naval operations. Underpinning this shift is the much-touted expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept. According to the Marine Corps website, EABO seeks to “turn the sea denial table’ on potential adversaries” and “further distribute lethality by providing land-based options for increasing the number of sensors and shooters beyond . . . seagoing platforms.”<sup>3</sup>

In the context of a Sino-U.S. crisis or conflict, then, EABO would exploit Beijing’s disadvantaged location in maritime Asia by deploying ASuW, anti-air warfare, and supporting capabilities on territory along the first island chain to bottle up Chinese forces.<sup>4</sup> In other words, at first glance, EABO would give the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) a taste of its own antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) medicine. This idea is, however, problematic at the strategic and operational levels.

### **Location of Bases**

The million-dollar question is, “Where will EABs be set up?” The conventional wisdom is that they will be located in friendly territory, and a *prima facie* look at the first island chain on the map shows Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines would be most relevant to operationalize EABO, given their proximity to maritime chokepoints. Over the years, studies by various think tanks such as the RAND Corporation (in 2013) and Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA, in 2016 and 2019) have posited the utility of emplacing A2/AD systems in territory along the first island chain to counter China—provided the hosts allow the deployment of such forces on their soil.<sup>5</sup>

What if this does not come to pass? Taiwan is a good option to hold PLA forces at-risk during a contingency in the western Pacific, given its central position along the first island chain. For obvious

political reasons, though, U.S. military assets cannot be sent to bolster Taiwan's defenses short of an actual cross-strait war. And while U.S.-Vietnam ties have been flourishing in recent years, largely because of a mutual need to counter an increasingly assertive Beijing, Hanoi's distrust of Washington, coupled with its strategic autonomy and strong sense of nationalism, similarly could preclude U.S. forces from being stationed in Vietnam, during peace or war.<sup>6</sup>

That leaves the Philippines and Japan, which are the southern and northern anchors, respectively, of the first island chain. The Philippines is a treaty ally of Washington, but Manila's actions in recent years have frayed bilateral relations. This has led some observers to contend that the government of the mercurial Rodrigo Duterte constitutes the "biggest stress test for the alliance in decades."<sup>7</sup> Coupled with a potential pivot by Manila toward Beijing during the same time period, it is anybody's guess whether EABs could be prepositioned on Filipino soil or set up during a contingency. It also is worth noting that efforts in past years to stockpile U.S. equipment and supplies in the Philippines have met with limited success because of government restrictions. This has led to the 2019 CSBA report cautioning that the United States "should not adopt a strategy that succeeds or fails based on access to the Philippines."<sup>8</sup>

It seems the EABO concept could be most realistically actualized on Japanese soil, given the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance and Tokyo's longstanding wariness of Beijing. In fact, Marine Corps Commandant General David H. Berger has revealed that the first of the EABO-centric Marine littoral regiments will be headquartered in Japan.<sup>9</sup> Whether such units could be deployed from Japan during a western Pacific contingency is the key issue. There will be political questions raised in Tokyo should the issues at stake not directly involve Japan, for instance, over the Spratlys or *perhaps even Taiwan*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, history—from Operation El Dorado Canyon to Operation Desert Fox to Operation Iraqi Freedom—has shown the United States that permission to deploy from the soil of even staunch allies and partners can never be guaranteed. And even if potential host nations are receptive to hosting EABs, expect China to respond with "a mixture of political and economic pressure and inducements to dissuade [these nations] . . . from cooperating with the United States," as the 2019 CSBA report notes.<sup>11</sup>

A recent addition to the EABO literature by T. X. Hammes acknowledges the concern over the possible lack of host-nation access as a valid one.<sup>12</sup> The retired Marine colonel also writes in his *War on the Rocks* piece that potential host nations "will be more likely to let these small (EABO) units ashore than a traditional expeditionary brigade or force."<sup>13</sup> There is an element of truth in this. It probably does not matter much, though, whether a multiple-platoon-sized force (the concept of operations for the Marine littoral regiment) or a brigade is involved, as any force involved in the fight would be a target for the enemy, and this invariably would shape the host government's calculus.<sup>14</sup> After all, striking this force (rather than a larger one) would be less escalatory, and being able to defeat it in detail would be a major propaganda victory for China. The key premise of the EABO concept lies in having access to friendly overseas territory from which Marine forces can deploy, and this represents a single point of failure should access not be forthcoming.

The Marine Corps also has considered taking over small, unpopulated islands to set up EABs and have carried out drills in this regard.<sup>15</sup> This line of thinking is somewhat dubious. Where, then, would these islands be in the western Pacific? Those of military value along the first island chain already belong to sovereign nations. If an island is assumed to be neutral, uninhabited, and suited for EABO in the western Pacific, it has to be seized by an amphibious assault force of considerable size. Then, a relatively large vessel or two from the amphibious Navy, together with a screening force, would be needed to transport

a contingent of the ASuW-capable High-mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HiMARS) and supporting assets to the island. Such a force would not be low signature and would be vulnerable to China's A2/AD complex.

The light amphibious warship, which the Navy said it will start buying as soon as 2023, should have a lesser problem of signature management given its much smaller size (only around 200 feet long).<sup>16</sup> However, it is anybody's guess when the light amphibious warship will fully come on board, given the travails of recent Navy programs—consider the *Gerald R. Ford*-class aircraft carrier, *Zumwalt*-class destroyer, and the littoral combat ship. However, the question remains, would U.S. military leaders be confident enough in the light amphibious warship's stealth to deploy, without escort, one (with its 30-person crew and 75 embarked Marines) or two of them into China's A2/AD thicket?



*The positioning of an EAB will be vital to its success. On the chance that a U.S. ally is not open to hosting a base from which to launch attacks, the United States has considered taking over small, unpopulated islands and has conducted drills to this effect. U.S. Marine Corps (Kyle P. Bunyi)*

### **Operational Concerns**

There also are operational shortfalls in the EABO concept *per se*. First, there is the issue of signature management. In this regard, the Marine Corps website says that EABs would deploy “mobile, relatively low-cost capabilities in austere, temporary locations.”<sup>17</sup> It adds that an EAB:

may be employed to position naval ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] assets, future coastal defense cruise missiles . . . anti-air missiles . . . and forward arming and refueling points . . . and other expedient expeditionary operating sites for aircraft . . . critical munitions reloading teams for ships and submarines, or to provide expeditionary basing for surface screening/scouting platforms.<sup>18</sup>

From this description, one would think of it as a fairly large and well-established node or a series of nodes for conducting military operations, not the stealthy and ad-hoc base that many, including General Berger, have made them out to be. Therefore, the two statements on the Marine Corps webpage seem contradictory.

To be sure, the base may not contain all of the aforementioned capabilities. Nevertheless, even if an EAB possesses just one of such capabilities, it would face the conundrum of balancing lethality and signature management. Since the idea behind EABO is to turn the sea-denial table on potential adversaries, its focus should be ASuW. In this regard, the Marines are looking into deploying various mobile antiship fires, including the Naval Strike Missile (NSM) and the Tomahawk cruise missile. But

these platforms need to operate in numbers great enough to threaten the adversary more credibly. In addition, these mobile missile launchers do not operate alone. They must work in tandem with supporting assets such as command-and-control platforms.

It is one thing to say that by using “shoot-and-scoot” tactics, such a force could readily move out after firing its weapons to reduce detectability. Indeed, General Berger has spoken of EABO incorporating as best as possible the “smallest, lowest signature options that yield the maximum operational utility.”<sup>19</sup> However, a complement of HiMARS (together with its force multipliers), for example, is hardly that. To freely maneuver and launch its weapons, the HiMARS unit must be on a relatively large area of flat land (more susceptible to enemy detection), negating the low-observability portion of the EABO concept.<sup>20</sup>

Touching on the same issue, Hammes has a point when he contends that shoot-and-scoot worked quite well for the Iraqis during the 1991 “Great Scud Hunt,” even with highly favorable circumstances for the allies, adding that the same tactic could reduce the signature of EABs.<sup>21</sup> However, ISR systems have improved greatly in the almost three decades since then, and China’s burgeoning ISR umbrella could make EABs stationed on the first island chain more detectable and more vulnerable.

Another issue with such bases would be sensor coverage.<sup>22</sup> Without the support of aerial ISR platforms, an EAB’s “eyes” would be limited to the range of its land-based sensors, typically only a couple dozen miles because of the Earth’s curvature. Bearing in mind the maxim that “a weapon system can only shoot as far (and as well) as its sensors,” the 110-plus-mile striking reach of the NSM will be for naught if the weapon system can receive data only from a ground-based radar with coverage of 18–25 miles.

This is something that Hammes does not account for in his *War on the Rocks* piece when he advocates having missiles be “containerized” and mated with innocuous-looking civilian trucks and ships to complicate the adversary’s targeting picture.<sup>23</sup> This modus operandi will undoubtedly reduce detectability, but the combat effectiveness of these containerized missile launchers is subject to supporting elements. Without exogenous assets such as aerial ISR, these weapon systems cannot shoot as far. To be certain, air power, whether manned or unmanned, could significantly extend what the base can “see.” However, an organic aerial ISR capability would increase the EAB’s detectability as it would need airstrips and other facilities to support flight operations.

Finally, the viability of the forward bases, assuming they have been established and remain undetected, is another major concern, as their logistical chains will be located well within China’s A2/AD envelope. As the saying “the enemy has a vote” goes, the concept of operations for EABs seems not to factor in enemy interdiction of resupply efforts. Sustaining the bases would be problematic, as even small units must be resupplied regularly in the face of long-range Chinese missiles.

The Marines’ expeditionary advanced base operations concept sounds good on paper, but a closer examination reveals that it has inherent limitations as well as contradictions at both the strategic and operational levels. These shortfalls exist arguably because of putting the cart before the horse. Perhaps such issues should be thought through more assiduously before EABO and related operational concepts are promulgated.

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1. GEN David H. Berger, USMC, Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030* (Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020), 7.

2. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, 7.
3. U.S. Marine Corps, "Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations," [www.candp.marines.mil/Concepts/Subordinate-Operating-Concepts/Expeditionary-Advanced-Base-Operations/](http://www.candp.marines.mil/Concepts/Subordinate-Operating-Concepts/Expeditionary-Advanced-Base-Operations/).
4. See James R. Holmes, "Defend the First Island Chain," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 140, no. 4 (April 2014).
5. Terrence Kelly, Anthony Atler, Todd Nichols, and Lloyd Thrall, *Employing Land-Based Anti-Ship Missiles in the Western Pacific* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013); Bryan Clark and Jesse Sloman, *Advancing beyond the Beach: Amphibious Operations in an Era of Precision Weapons* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016); and Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp, Billy Fabian, and Peter Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).
6. It also bears consideration that Vietnam's defense policy is based on the four "nos": no defense alliances, no foreign troops on its soil, no partnering with an external party to fight another power, and no use of force or the threat of it to resolve disputes. See Linh Pham, "Vietnam Releases Defense White Paper, Reaffirming No Military Alliance," *Hanoi Times*, 26 November 2019, [hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-releases-defense-white-paper-reaffirming-no-military-alliance-300279.html](http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-releases-defense-white-paper-reaffirming-no-military-alliance-300279.html).
7. Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Would Ending the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement Actually Do?" *The Diplomat*, 28 January 2020, [thediplomat.com/2020/01/what-would-ending-the-us-philippines-visiting-forces-agreement-actually-do/](http://thediplomat.com/2020/01/what-would-ending-the-us-philippines-visiting-forces-agreement-actually-do/).
8. Mahnken, Sharp, Fabian, and Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain*, 43.
9. Gina Harkins, "The Marine Corps' 1st New Littoral Regiment Will Be Headquartered in Japan," *Military.com*, 2 April 2020, [military.com/daily-news/2020/04/02/marine-corps-1st-new-littoral-regiment-will-be-based-japan.html](http://military.com/daily-news/2020/04/02/marine-corps-1st-new-littoral-regiment-will-be-based-japan.html).
10. There is much debate over whether Japan would get involved in a Taiwan contingency. While Article 9 of the Japanese constitution disavows the use of force or threat of its use to settle international disputes, an interpretation of this clause in 2014 would allow Tokyo to exercise the right of "collective self-defense" and partake in military operations if its allies come under attack.
11. Mahnken, Sharp, Fabian, and Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain*, 57–58.
12. T. X. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place," *War on the Rocks*, 15 April 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/building-a-marine-corps-for-every-contingency-clime-and-place/>.
13. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place."
14. Shawn Snow, "New Marine Littoral Regiment, Designed to Fight in Contested Maritime Environment, Coming to Hawaii," *Marine Corps Times*, 14 May 2020, [marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/05/14/new-marine-littoral-regiment-designed-to-fight-in-contested-maritime-environment-coming-to-hawaii/](http://marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/05/14/new-marine-littoral-regiment-designed-to-fight-in-contested-maritime-environment-coming-to-hawaii/).

15. Megan Eckstein, "How to Seize Islands, Set Up a Forward Refueling Point: Marine Corps Recipes for Expeditionary Operations," *USNI News*, 13 September 2019, [news.usni.org/2019/09/13/how-to-seize-islands-set-up-a-forward-refueling-point-marine-corps-recipes-for-expeditionary-operations](https://news.usni.org/2019/09/13/how-to-seize-islands-set-up-a-forward-refueling-point-marine-corps-recipes-for-expeditionary-operations).
16. For an insightful critique of the light amphibious warship concept, see "Berger's Amphibious Ships," *Navy Matters*, 13 May 2020, [navy-matters.blogspot.com/2020/05/bergers-amphibious-ships.html](https://navy-matters.blogspot.com/2020/05/bergers-amphibious-ships.html); and "Light Amphibious Warship Update," 18 May 2020, [navy-matters.blogspot.com/2020/05/light-amphibious-warship-update.html](https://navy-matters.blogspot.com/2020/05/light-amphibious-warship-update.html).
17. "Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations."
18. "Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations."
19. GEN David Berger, USMC, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, 11.
20. "Marines, Sea Control, and HiMARS," *Navy Matters*, 15 November 2017, [navy-matters.blogspot.com/2017/11/marines-sea-control-and-himars.html](https://navy-matters.blogspot.com/2017/11/marines-sea-control-and-himars.html).
21. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place."
22. "Marines, Sea Control, and HIMARS."
23. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place."

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