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The Power of Amphibious Operations in the 21st Century

By Daniel Gouré

Predicting the demise of amphibious warfare has been a hobby for many military historians, defense analysts and even veterans. The advent of new military capabilities, such as jet aircraft, quiet attack submarines, ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and, of course, nuclear weapons, repeatedly caused the U.S. defense establishment to question the feasibility of large-scale amphibious operations. Most recently, critics point to the rise of so-called anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

However, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of amphibious warfare have always been greatly exaggerated. Historically, amphibious operations evolved in response to the rise of new defensive capabilities. In many instances, the same technologies were employed both by the amphibious assault forces and by the defenders on the beach.

Those concerned about the anti-ship cruise missile threat to U.S. amphibious forces should recall that during the battle of Okinawa, the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet experienced some 4,000 Japanese air strikes, including nearly 2,000 by the 1944 equivalent of a cruise missile, the kamikaze. The current A2/AD challenge is only the latest turn of the great offense-defense wheel.

It is worth pointing out that in modern times most amphibious operations have been successful in terms of achieving operational surprise, defeating shore defenses and putting a large number of troops and equipment ashore. The number of modern amphibious operations that were defeated on beaches can be counted on one hand. A larger number, but still a relative handful, failed to exploit an initial, successful landing by moving inland and thus were bottled up on the beachhead.

Major amphibious operations profoundly changed the course of the conflict in a major theater. Examples of such operations include the Japanese campaigns in Malaya and the Philippines, the Allied landings in North Africa, Sicily, Salerno and Normandy, MacArthur’s campaign in the Southwest Pacific, the Inchon landing during the Korean War and the British liberation on the Falkland Islands.

Ironically, the rise of the A2/AD threat only served to increase the value of amphibious forces. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. withdrew most forward-deployed forces from Europe and East Asia, preferring a posture based on expeditionary deployments from the continental U.S. With the rise of high-end threats in regions of interest, the U.S. faced a serious challenge to its access regions.

The military needs to find ways around the A2/AD threat. Part of the answer will be technological. But as former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work observed, success against an adversary with robust A2/AD capabilities will also require agile maneuver by amphibious forces, including large forcible entry operations.

Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs) and their embarked Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) could be particularly useful in countering A2/AD systems. Forward deployed ARG/MEUs would be inside an adversary’s defensive umbrella. This might seem to be a vulnerable position, but, if properly sized and equipped, these formations could act from the opening of hostilities to blow holes in enemy defenses.

In addition to defeating hostile A2/AD systems, U.S. combatant commands will need to create their own version of an A2/AD “umbrella” in support of forward-deployed forces and allies and to deny an enemy’s ability to attack our air and sea lines of communications. The currently fashionable concept of Multi-Domain Battle envisions U.S. land forces not only conducting defensive operations but also offensive strikes against enemy targets from forward bases. If such positions do not exist or have been overrun, they must be seized or liberated. Hence, the role for major amphibious operations.

The Navy and Marine Corps are acquiring new platforms and systems that will enhance the effectiveness of amphibious forces in operations across the spectrum of conflict. The stealthy F-35B, able to operate from large deck amphibs and small airfields, provides a particularly useful capability for attacking defended targets and providing targeting information for other platforms and weapons systems. Improved ship-to-shore connectors, including the MV-22 Osprey, the CH-53K heavy-lift helicopter, and air cushion landing craft will enable Marine Corps units to project power onto the land further and faster.

The impact of new aviation assets on future amphibious operations cannot be overestimated. An analysis about the future of amphibious operations by the RAND Corporation observed that “Marine Corps aviation is on a path to significantly alter what even ARG/MEUs are capable of doing, and it is important to shape the rest of the force to acknowledge this change. An ARG/MEU with F-35Bs and MV-22s is not just capable of local influence, but can project power and provide defense in ways impossible just a few years ago.”

More needs to be done to exploit the potential of amphibious warfare forces in the 21st Century. First and foremost, the Navy needs to acquire additional amphibious warfare vessels. The minimum desired level is 38 ships, the number needed to lift 2.5 Marine Expeditionary Brigades and the number required to conduct a major landing operation. Several analyses propose higher numbers, between 40 to 50 ships. In addition, the Navy needs to move forward with its plans to procure additional Landing Helicopter Assault ships, capable of operating the F-35B and MV-22, and to replace its aging Landing Ship Dock fleet with the larger and more capable LR(X).

In anticipation of combat with more capable adversaries, U.S. amphibious forces will require greater reach and lethality. A study by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments proposes, inter alia, enhancing the aviation elements in the ARG/MEU, providing both amphibious ships and landing force with long-range fires and improving air and missile defense capabilities.

The Marine Corps is looking for ways to provide its truck-mounted High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) with an anti-ship capability. It recently experimented with firing the HIMARS from the deck of an amphib. The Army’s Long-Range Protected Fires program, one of the service’s modernization priorities, also could be useful for long-range strikes by amphibious warfare forces. Naval forces operating within an adversary’s A2/AD umbrella could carry large numbers of cheap drones equipped with jammers and other electronic warfare systems to blind sensors and interrupt networks.

Properly sized and configured and employing the right operational concepts, U.S. amphibious forces could be a powerful tool in a combatant commander’s arsenal.