

Tip of the Spear: the 13 Missions for US Marines in Okinawa by Tetsuo Kotani

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Confusion over the Futenma Relocation Facility (FRF) damaged the US-Japan alliance and raised concerns among regional countries about the direction of the alliance. Before resigning from office, former Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio said he finally understood the role the Marine Corps play in providing deterrence and the need for marines to be on Okinawa.

Throughout the mishandling of the FRF imbroglio, it was apparent that there was little understanding in Japan of the role Marines play when called upon. They can storm beaches in classic amphibious fashion, defend Japanese territory in support of the Security Treaty, etc., and much more.

Every marine is a rifleman

Regardless of military occupational specialty, every marine is first and foremost a disciplined warrior and part of a lean, versatile, flexible and ready force organized, trained, and equipped to operate from ships or to fight ashore as an air and ground combined armed force. This integrated force -- known as the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) -- consists of organic air, ground and logistics elements under a single command element, and enables the MAGTF to conduct self-sustained operations autonomously or with other forces. The MAGTF is unique among militaries of the world in many aspects and is the key to Marine operations. It provides a balanced, combined-arms force, which is scalable to meet the mission.

One key aspect is the ease by which a MAGTF ashore, by either permissive or forcible means, can be increased in size, capability and capacity to meet a growing requirement or threat. It arrives, usually from the sea, with the required logistics to self-sustain ashore for a period of time that increases with the size of the MAGTF. Whether involved in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, combat operations, or any other operation across the spectrum, the MAGTF is the world's premiere emergency response force, and the presence of Marines in Japan is a testament to US dedication to security in the region.

The Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is the smallest scale MAGTF, consisting of 1,500-3,000 Marines, and is forward-deployed around the world. The MEUs are characterized by their sea-based forward presence, expeditionary nature, ability to plan and respond to crises, and

are combined arms, air- and ground-force capable. The 31st MEU is based in Okinawa, Japan, and the 11th, the 13th, and 15th MEUs are based in Camp Pendleton, California.

The Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) is a rapidly deployable mid-sized MAGTF consisting of up to 20,000 Marines, and provides amphibious assault and sustained operations ashore for approximately 30 days.

The Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) is the largest MAGTF consisting of 20,000-90,000 Marines. The MEF is the principle Marine warfighting organization designed to respond to larger crises or contingencies such as combat operations in Korea or the defense of Japan. The MEF is capable of both amphibious and sustained operations ashore. The III MEF is based in Okinawa and I MEF is based in Camp Pendleton.

The MEF, the principle Marine Corps warfighting organization, provides geographic combatant commanders with a forward-deployed, rapid response force capable of conducting conventional amphibious and selected maritime special operations, across the spectrum of operations, at night or under adverse weather conditions, from the sea, by surface and /or by air under communications and electronics restrictions. The MEF ensures the combatant commander has MEF- or MEB-sized Marine forces for sustained combat operations such as in a Korea or regional conflict scenario or a MEU-sized force for small-scale rapid response.

The 31st MEU maintains sea-based forward presence on board the Navy's "Task Force 76" (Amphibious Force, Seventh Fleet) vessels, based in Sasebo. In certain power-projection scenarios, the 31st MEU can be designated "Task Force 79" (Landing Force, Seventh Fleet). Therefore, the Marines in Okinawa are an indispensable part of the Seventh Fleet as well.

The 31st MEU has 13 primary unclassified missions.

I. Traditional Amphibious Missions

- (1) Amphibious Assault -- The principal type of amphibious operation that involves establishing a force on a hostile or potentially hostile shore;
- (2) Amphibious Raid -- an amphibious operation involving swift incursion or temporary occupation of an objective followed by a planned withdrawal;
- (3) Maritime Interception Operations -- An amphibious operation including visit, board, search and seizure of a static maritime platform and selected maritime security missions;
- (4) Advance Force Operations -- An amphibious operation to shape the battlespace in preparation for the main assault or other operations of an amphibious or Joint Force by

providing battle space awareness and conducting reconnaissance, seizure of positions, preliminary bombardment and air support.

II. Expeditionary Support To Other Operations, Crisis Response And Limited Contingency Operations

(5) Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP) -- Rescue or extraction of downed aircraft and personnel, aircraft sanitization, and provide advanced trauma-life support in a benign or hostile environment.

(6) Airfield/Port Seizure -- Secure an airfield, port, or other key facilities in order to support MAGTF missions or receive follow-on forces.

(7) Expeditionary Airfield Operations -- The capability to conduct tactical air operations at austere locations, including short-field, unimproved runways.

(8) Stability Operations -- Conduct operations to help establish order when civilians cannot do so, to secure a lasting peace and facilitate withdrawal of US troops.

III. Noncombat Support Missions during Peacetime and Crisis

(9) Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief -- Programs conducted to relieve/reduce the results of natural or manmade disasters or other endemic conditions that might present a serious threat to life or that can result in great damage to or loss of property.

(10) Theater Security Cooperation -- Conduct combined and multinational military noncombat activities with other nations within the theater to advance mutual defense and security arrangements and to build allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations.

(11) Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) -- Operations directed by the US government whereby noncombatants are evacuated from foreign countries when their lives are endangered to safe havens or to the US.

IV. MEU Special Operations Capable MEU-SOC

(12) Direct Action -- Short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions in hostile, denied or politically sensitive environments against designated targets.

(13) Special Reconnaissance -- Surveillance in hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance.

The 31st MEU is capable of quick reaction both in crisis and peacetime -- rapidly assembling required forces to accomplish missions, using intelligence-based operational decision making, and acting as a rapid response force. In peacetime, the MEU acts as a "goodwill ambassador," and engages in stability operations (Mission 8), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Mission 9), and Theater Security Cooperation (Mission 10).

In the future, the 31st MEU will likely be called into action in a number of contingencies in Northeast Asia due to its range of capabilities. In the event of a military scenario on the Korean Peninsula or in the Taiwan Strait, the MEU can

readily perform many types of missions enabling the full combat capabilities of the MEF for sustained operations. In addition to conventional amphibious operations (Missions 1 and 2), the MEU has the capability to accomplish maritime interception operations (Mission 3), shape the battlespace in advance of follow-on forces (Mission 4) and conduct noncombatant evacuation (Mission 11).

As a collapse of North Korea -- rather than a North Korean invasion of South Korea -- has become a more likely scenario, the 31st MEU can search and seize the North Korean nuclear arsenal, and prevent proliferation of those weapons (Mission 11). And while the tension across the Taiwan Strait has been reduced, the 31st MEU can still play an important role by creating a fait accompli that the United States would be involved in any Chinese attack on Taiwan (Mission 4). The same can be said regarding the defense of Japan, and disputes over contested territories and waters such as the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea.

As a MAGTF, the 31st MEU will play an important role even under the AirSea Battle concept that aims to limit damage to US forward bases and forces while maintaining command and control networks and operational logistics. The MEU can be the Advance Force (Mission 4), and provide tactical air power support under the A2/AD environment to support Air Force and Navy operations (Missions 5, 6 and 7). Additionally, Marine special forces can conduct disrupting Direct Action activities (Mission 12) and special reconnaissance (Mission 13) in preparation.

The combat capability of the US Marines is a valuable psychological deterrent. The III MEF forces in the Western Pacific and the 31st MEU's presence in Okinawa and Iwakuni send a strong signal to countries including North Korea and China, that an attack on Japan's mainland, Okinawa or the Senkakus will immediately involve the United States. This "trip wire" effect means that the presence of Marine Corps on Okinawa has significant implications for regional security, and any discussion on Okinawa should not miss this fact.

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