Military excellence is defined by the excellence of our Marines; their thinking, ability to innovate, adapt, and to overcome the challenges presented by complex environments, threats, and conditions. Marines continue to rely upon our history of naval character, responsiveness and military professionalism to guide our Corps into the future. In these pages, you won’t find an answer to every problem posed by the future. Instead, you should consider it as both a window into many different futures and a mirror to allow you to reflect upon your own ability to operate within them. Many of the words and phrases herein—power projection, seabasing, crisis response, enhanced MAGTF operations, engagement and countering irregular threats—should be very familiar to all Marines. Don’t let this familiarity lure you into thinking there is nothing new within these pages. Old ideas can take on an entirely new life when placed with a new context - and if there is one constant reflected in our view of the future, it is that there is no longer a single context but many.

Read critically, these concepts are important not only for what they say, but for what they don’t say. As the overarching operating concepts for the Marine Corps, they necessarily don’t address every single aspect, activity, or organization within the MAGTF. They need to be read, discussed, dissected, rebuilt, challenged, analyzed, and most of all, added to. Whether the ideas in these pages are proven or disproven is not the point – the act of thoughtful engagement in response to them is what matters. As steel sharpens steel, ideas can – and should – do the same.

G. J. FLYNN
Lieutenant General
U. S. Marine Corps
Contents

Chapter 1: Overview..................................................................................1
  USMC’s Role in Implementing Our National Security Policy
  Evolution of the Marine Corps
  The Marine Corps’ Uniqueness
  Strategic Concept of the Marine Corps
  Characteristics of the 21st Century Marine Corps
  Marine Corps Core Missions
  MOC Purpose
  The Operating Concepts

Chapter 2: Mission Command...............................................................15
  Introduction
  Purpose
  Defining Mission Command
  Describing Mission Command
  Leadership
  Institutionalizing Mission Command
  Operationalizing Mission Command
  Achieving Operational Advantage
  Characteristics of Mission Command
  Senior Leadership Traits
  Risk as Military Virtue
  Conclusion

Chapter 3: Enhanced MAGTF Operations.........................................29
  Introduction
  Description of the Military Problem
  Central Idea
  What are Enhanced MAGTF Operations
  Fundamentals of EMO
  MAGTF Refinements
  Warfighting Functions
  EMO Capabilities
Chapter 4: Engagement

Introduction
Description of the Military Problem
Marines Afloat
Regionalization
Blend Enhanced and Specialized Capabilities
Supporting Establishment Organizations
Engagement Conducted by General Purpose Forces
Rotational Models
Combat Development Implications
Conclusion

Chapter 5: Crisis Response

Introduction
Description of the Military Problem
Central Idea
Attributes of Successful Crisis Response
Crisis Response Enabling Initiatives
Global Basing Refinements
Rejuvenated Readiness
Seabasing
Maritime Prepositioning Force Enhancements
Tethering/Modularity
Conclusion

Chapter 6: Power Projection

Background: The Joint Expeditionary Era
Opportunity and Challenge
Central Idea
Gaining and Maintaining Operational Access
Conducting Littoral Maneuver
Enabling the Arrival of Joint or Multinational Forces
Naval Expeditionary Logistics
Command and Control Enhancements
Conclusion

Chapter 7: Countering Irregular Threats

iv
Introduction
Future Conflicts and the Nature and Theory of War
The American Approach
Irregular Threats
The Security Environment and Policy Objectives
Some Precepts for Countering Irregular Threats
Description of the Military Problem
Central Idea
Campaign Components
The Lessons of History
Conclusion

ANNEX A: Functional Concept for Strategic Communication...131
Chapter 1

Overview

USMC’s Role in Implementing Our National Security Policy

The Marine Corps has long provided the Nation with a force adept at rapidly and effectively solving complex, multifaceted, and seemingly intractable security challenges—so much so that “Send in the Marines” connotes both a demand for action and a presumption of success. While the general public may not be conversant with what exactly the Marine Corps is or does, our fellow citizens display an intuitive understanding that in times of trouble the Marines stand ready to do whatever has to be done. In recent years, their confidence has been reinforced by the performance of Marines in toppling the regime in Iraq, eradicating the ensuing endemic violence within that country’s al Anbar Province, and in numerous humanitarian assistance operations worldwide. This flexibility and dependability has been captured in the expression, “No better friend, no worse enemy.” While Marine Corps forces may perform a variety of missions across the range of military operations, two stand at the forefront of what we do.

First, as part of the naval team we assure littoral access by bridging the difficult seam between operations at sea and on land. This is accomplished through a combination of activities ranging from military engagement, crisis response, and power projection (both soft and hard). This capability contributes to overcoming diplomatic, geographic and military challenges to access and assists the Nation in its strategic objectives of preventing conflict, protecting national interests, assuring access to engage partners and to defeat aggression when necessary.

Second, we fight what have historically been called "small wars," operations that require a high degree of adaptability along with versatile, comprehensive skills. We have a long track record of success in solving; spanning recently from Al Anbar province, to the Barbary Wars and suppression of the slave trade in the early 19th century. These are complex problems in which purely military solutions will not suffice—because the fundamental causes of the conflict are often a complicated combination of security, economic, political and social issues.
What assured littoral access and “small wars” have in common is that they require forces that are strategically mobile, operationally flexible, and tactically proficient. These three defining traits allow the Marine Corps to meet this standard: our naval character, our high state of mental and material readiness, and an exceptional degree of military professionalism. These capabilities and traits ensure that the Marine Corps can effectively support joint force actions to “prevail in today’s wars; … prevent and deter threats against the United States, its interests, and our allies and partners; and prepare to defend the United States in a wide range of contingencies against state and non-state actors.”

**Evolution of the Marine Corps**

The Marine Corps—in concert with our seagoing partner, the United States Navy—has continuously revised its organization, training, and equipment to fulfill its role in implementing the Nation’s evolving strategic needs. In each security era, however, the Marine Corps has also been called upon—and maintained the flexibility to—conduct a diverse set of missions. These have included: military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence to prevent conflict; crisis response and limited contingencies to contain conflict, as well as protect U.S. citizens and interests—and major operations and campaigns associated with both conventional and irregular wars. Often thought of exclusively as an amphibious assault force, the period 1942-1945 was the only time in our history that the Marine Corps was organized, trained, and equipped for that one mission and did only one mission: amphibious assault. During the subsequent Cold War the Marine Corps was optimized for sea-based crisis response. Amphibious operations—of all types—remain a Marine Corps forte but not exclusively so. For the last 65 years, Marines have operated from the sea as part of a naval team and conducted other sustained operations—principally referred to as “small wars.”

---

The Marine Corps’ Uniqueness

The historical role of the Marine Corps is unique amongst the Services. The Army, Navy, and Air Force enjoy the clarity of focusing on the domains of land, maritime, and air. Their ties to these domains have naturally led to their individual and distinctive cultures, philosophies, and doctrines. The resultant differences in concepts and capabilities have in many ways created forces optimized for each particular domain. These differences in turn provide strength to the joint force by precluding a myopic focus on a single domain. This lack of a prescribed military perspective ensures the availability of different options that are effective for each manifestation of the diverse situations that will confront the United States.

Where domain-optimized forces have experienced friction is at the seams between the domains and in responding to sudden changes from the expected character of conflict. Unlike the other Services, the Marine Corps has not relied on a single geographic domain to ensure our place in national defense and service to the Nation. This distinction has at times been an institutional vulnerability that has led to attempts to reduce or eliminate the Corps based on perceived redundancy. It has, however, also been a source of great strength that has fueled competitive innovation, strategic and operational foresight, and the ability to view the battlespace “where four map sheets intersect” with a perspective not tied to single cultural or domain bias. The Marine Corps has repeatedly demonstrated its institutional and operational adaptability by effectively bridging the nation’s most critical seams between domains. Those seams have always and will always confront a maritime power with global interests. The Corps has also shown a high degree of military competence in rapidly understanding and adjusting to the diverse and changing pattern of war we face wrought by the diverse social, geographical, political and technological threats we might face and the unconstrained creativity of a dynamic, evolving enemy. Our institutional philosophy is based on an acknowledgment that “we cannot predict with certainty the pattern of war for which must prepare ourselves,” as well as
the in final analysis “the ultimate determination in war is the man on the
scene with the gun.”²

Our unique Service culture has allowed the Marine Corps to “think outside the box” and confront conventional military wisdom. Following the Great War, many theorists believed that the Allied experience at Gallipoli had demonstrated the folly of amphibious operations in the face of “modern” weapons. Our experimentation with amphibious techniques during the 1920s and 1930s created key capabilities necessary for success in World War II, allowing the Allies to project military power across vast oceans. Without this pre-war innovation, wresting the continent of Europe from the Axis and seizing bases on the long road to Japan would have been much more difficult and costly. Since then, the Marine Corps has continually sought to exploit opportunities and overcome challenges where domains converge, leading to our development of close air support doctrine, maritime prepositioning, and vertical envelopment. A natural by-product of our trans-domain perspective is our adaptability to changing operational conditions. Such changes usually involve a high degree of uncertainty and often occur during the opening phases of a campaign and at other times when unanticipated or ambiguous conditions emerge, whether at the shoreline or deep inland. Al Anbar Province is only one recent example demonstrating our ability to adjust our mindset and approach to effectively deal with a blurred and rapidly shifting operational environment. Like all “small wars,” al Anbar was dominated by a high degree of complexity and uncertainty as well as a merger of conventional and irregular warfare tactics.

Due to our trans-domain approach, Marines do not view a given mission from the perspective of a particular tool set or domain prejudice. We consider an adversary holistically and figure out “how to get at him” in creative ways that push us to develop unique technologies, methods, and organizations suited to the trans-domain edge. While others will seek to achieve supremacy in a particular domain, we seek to identify

opportunities and create new asymmetries across domains. Along with our unique history and perspective, our tradition of institutional adaptability guides the Marine Corps to develop and maintain a broad range of critical capabilities necessary to fulfill our fundamental role in implementing national security policy. This role is best explained by examining national strategy.

As the 21st century unfolds it is increasingly evident that expanding challenges to access are making the flexible, expeditionary qualities of the Marine Corps especially relevant. The Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO) points out that:

> Diminishing overseas access is another challenge anticipated in the future operating environment. Foreign sensitivities to U.S. military presence have steadily been increasing. Even close allies may be hesitant to grant access for a variety of reasons. Diminished access will complicate the maintenance of forward presence, a critical aspect of past and current U.S. military strategy, necessitating new approaches to responding quickly to developments around the world as well as more robust exploitation of existing U.S. advantages to operate at sea and in the air, space, and cyberspace. Assuring access to ports, airfields, foreign airspace, coastal waters and host nation support in potential commitment areas will be a challenge and will require active peacetime engagement with states in volatile areas. In war, this challenge may require forcible-entry capabilities designed to seize and maintain lodgments in the face of armed resistance.³

This estimate is substantiated by recent history. In the past twenty years, U.S. amphibious forces have responded to crises and contingencies over 120 times, a response rate more than double that of the Cold War. Furthermore, during the same period, forward-postured amphibious forces continually conducted sea-based security cooperation with international partners—reflecting the philosophy that preventing war is as important as winning wars.

Strategic Concept of the Marine Corps

As a maritime nation with global interests, the United States must be capable of extending its control through influence and power via the sea. Marines operate in the domain of uncertainty and provide the necessary and critical transition of control at the point that history repeatedly demonstrates requires special and adaptable skills – at the interface between the sea, land, and air domains. The Marine Corps is organized, trained, and equipped to operate at and from the sea as part of the naval team to “engage, respond, and project.” The Service’s general purpose and highly adaptable capabilities also contribute to other missions especially “Small Wars.” In order to meet the Nation’s strategic needs, the Marine Corps possess the ability to engage with a wide set of partners in order to build capability, forge solid relationships across cultural barriers, and promote diplomatic access. At the same time, Marine Corps forces remain prepared to respond to crises—either natural or man-made. The Marine Corps will also be able to project power—either “soft” or “hard” as the situation requires—at and from the sea. Collectively, these Marine Corps capabilities contribute to preventing conflict, protecting national interests, and assuring overseas access that will enable the United States to prevail in a conflict.

As highlighted in the National Security Strategy, engagement “underpin[s] our commitment to an international order based upon rights and responsibilities.”4 Engagement is conducted at the seam between diplomacy and defense. Specifically, the ability of Marine forces to engage forward is critical in that it allows us to forge the partnerships that promote diplomatic access; reassure allies and friends; facilities building partner capacity and a collective approach to maintaining the security and stability necessary to maintain a peaceful global system of commerce and trade. Furthermore, Marine engagement contributes to reducing the sources of conflict and instability; and deters aggression. Simultaneously, our ability to respond effectively helps contain disruptions to global stability; overcomes physical challenges to access posed by distance, geography, and insufficient infrastructure; reinforces U.S. credibility, solidifying relationships with establish partners and

4. NSS, pg. 3
forging new ones; and counters extremist ideology. Both our engagement and response activities are enhanced by our close partnerships with Special Operation Forces (SOF) and other government agencies to achieve a more whole-of-government approach. In response to manifested threats, our ability to project power complements our naval and national strike power projection capabilities with a capability that can not only punish an adversary but can validly impose our will by seizing or denying something that they hold as critical. It allows us to successfully transition forces between maritime and land domains to support the rapid introduction of joint, other agency, multinational, or non-governmental resources; and enables the joint force to go anywhere to solve problems, protect U.S. citizens, defeat adversaries; contribute to deterrence; and creates access—to achieve the full range of our national strategic requirements.

Characteristics of the 21st Century Marine Corps

In order to execute the Marine Corps strategic security role, the institution embraces enduring characteristics—complemented by an ever evolving set of military capabilities that continue to make the Marine Corps especially relevant in the current and future security era. These are the Marine Corps’ naval character, our responsiveness to missions across the range of military missions, and our military professionalism. The integrated and highly tailorable organizational capabilities inherent in our Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) structure enable our critical trans-domain role. Consisting of command, ground combat, aviation, and logistical elements organized as necessary for each particular situation, the MAGTF supports the adaptability necessary in light of the uncertainty of the operational environment and the full range of military operations we must expect.

Naval Character- Often mischaracterized as land forces, the Marine Corps is actually part of the Naval Service—soldiers from the sea. Fundamentally, this is recognition of the vital strategic role the Marine Corps provides in transitioning national combat power and influence across the critical maritime, land, and air domain interface. As such, Marine Corps forces are primarily designed to be employed, supported, and sustained at and from the sea. Mobility and maneuverability constitute the Naval Service’s primary operational attributes, stemming
directly from the ability of naval forces to move long distances quickly and efficiently, and to maneuver within the maritime environment to achieve advantage in relation to an adversary.

**Responsiveness**—Forward postured sea-based forces provide a flexible response to a range of crises and contingencies, ever-ready to accomplish emerging missions singly or to facilitate the introduction of additional naval, joint, interagency, multinational, or nongovernmental organizations (NGO) resources. In order to rapidly reinforce, Marine forces can be surged from home stations or other global locations, deployed via various combinations of naval maneuver, naval movement, and strategic airlift. Readiness to achieve necessary responsiveness is the product of a number of factors. This includes our ability to organize and equip for the specific mission; which as noted is achieved primarily through the inherent adaptability of our tailorable, scalable MAGTFs. The versatility of our equipment-sets is another factor that enhances readiness of our forces for emerging missions through their mobility, deployability and adaptability. Further, the brilliance of focusing our training on core-basics serves as the foundation for both operational and mental adaptability that enables our forces to respond to varying missions in a wide range and operational and cultural environments.

**Military Professionalism**—Our maneuver warfare philosophy, decentralized approach to leadership, and “every Marine a rifleman” ethos translate into a force prepared to rapidly go anywhere and perform “such duties as the President may direct.” As noted before this “Send in the Marines” expectation is a natural by-product of our adaptability to thrive in uncertain and ambiguous operating environments. This attribute, along with our demonstrated warfighting skill on the landward side of the littorals, has leveraged repeatedly for small wars and major combined arms campaigns in support of sustained operations ashore. A significant aspect of that expeditionary agility and operational adaptability is an institutional austerity—a willingness to not only make do with less but to excel under difficult circumstances. It is worth noting that for 6.5 percent of the baseline Defense budget the Marine Corps provides 17 percent of the Nation’s active ground combat maneuver units, 12 percent of the fixed wing tactical aircraft, and 19 percent of the attack helicopters.
Marine Corps Core Missions

Within the overarching capability for the Marine Corps to conduct missions across the range of military operations, the Corps in the 21st century provides the Nation with two fundamental core missions and associated capacities: assuring littoral access and conducting highly complex and difficult multifaceted operations that are often described as “small wars.” It is organized, trained, and equipped, and continuously adjusts, to ensure that Marine forces provide the joint commanders with the forces and capabilities to effectively carry out these missions.

Assuring Littoral Access - The Navy-Marine Corps team provides joint force commanders the ability to bridge the seam between operations at sea and on land—a crucial aspect of the larger joint force effort to gain and maintain overseas access for operations in peace, crisis, or war. This mission is executed continuously through military engagement, crisis response, and power projection.

- Military Engagement involves the routine contact and interaction between individuals or elements of the Armed Forces of the United States and those of another nation's armed forces, or foreign and domestic civilian authorities or agencies to build trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities, and maintain influence.\(^5\) Our forward posture is critical to providing effective engagement, as well as ensuring responsiveness. In addition, this posture revitalizes and sustains our ability to be adaptable; assuring the many degrees of access required across the range of military operations.

- Crisis Response are operations conducted to alleviate or mitigate the impact of an incident or situation involving a threat to a nation, its territories, citizens, military forces, possessions, or vital interests that developed rapidly and created a condition of such diplomatic, economic, political, or military importance that commitment of military forces and resources is warranted to

---

5. DOD definition of “military engagement”
achieve national objectives. Marine Corps forces, leveraging their robust forward postured forces and rapid and flexible surge capabilities, can conduct immediate crisis response using a menu of standard force packages, with additional task-organized forces available on a follow-on basis.

- **Power Projection** comprises the ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power—political, economic, informational, or military—to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability. Marine Corps forces conduct power projection to create access and enable joint combat power—the artful integration of fires and maneuver—at the most dangerous and critical point of power projection, the trans-domain environment at the sea-land-air interface. These operations are conducted to overcome environmental and military challenges, most often to enable more comprehensive and decisive operations. Conducting littoral maneuver, Marine Corps forces will be capable of employing decentralized operations to assure access through multiple entry points and will selectively mass or disperse forces and fires at desired times and places. The trans-domain capabilities of the Marine Corps place the enemy on the horns of a dilemma both operationally and strategically. Strategically, the ability of a joint force enabled by Marine access capabilities compels potential enemies to make investment choices among a broader array of technologies and anti-access defenses. Operationally, Marine capabilities compel the enemy to defend the length and breadth of his coastline, or to concentrate his force. In one case they disperse their forces and risk defeat in detail, in the other they allow access and risk Marine forces maneuvering on their territory and enabling follow on Joint capabilities. In both cases Marine maneuver capabilities compel enemy movement and cause them to self optimize as a

6. This description is adapted from the DOD definition of “crisis,” because “crisis response” is not formally defined.
target set for our diverse range of reconnaissance, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and attack capabilities.

“Small Wars”- These consist of operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is applied—usually in combination with the other elements of power—in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such other interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation. The application of purely military measures may not, by itself, restore peace and orderly government because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political, or social. Based on the nature of each individual mission, the Marine Corps can task organize forces ranging from small training and advisory teams up to a full MEF to conduct the gamut of “Small Wars” activities.

**MOC Purpose**

This third edition of the Marine Corps Operating Concepts (MOC) provides a conceptual guide for current and future force development and experimentation. The ideas put forth in this volume are meant to inspire discussion, debate, and innovation during the capability identification and solution development process. It is built around the premise that sea-based Marines must be organized, trained, and equipped to “engage, respond, and project.” In order to meet the Nation’s needs, the Marine Corps must enhance its ability to engage with a wider set of partners in order to build capability, forge solid relationships, and promote diplomatic access. At the same time, Marine Corps forces must remain ready to respond to crises—whether natural or man-made. They must also be able to project power—either “soft” or “hard” as the situation requires—from the sea. Collectively, these enhancements will expand the Marine Corps’ contribution to preventing conflict, protecting national interests, and assuring overseas access.

7. Derived from the USMC *Small Wars Manual*, 1940 Edition; use of the term “Small Wars” rather than COIN, IW, or some other term de jure is an intentional reminder that we’ve excelled at these complex missions for a long time.
The Operating Concepts

Chapter 2, *Mission Command*, and Chapter 3, *Enhanced MAGTF Operations* describe how the Marine Corps will promote flexibility and effectiveness across the range of military operations. Chapter 4, *Engagement* addresses how the Marine Corps will increase its capacity and capability to engage forward, build partners’ capabilities, develop relationships, and improve access. It suggests changes that will expand force options and capabilities the Marine Corps can provide to the geographic combatant commanders. Chapter 5, *Crisis Response* addresses how the Navy-Marine Corps team combines its capabilities with joint, international, interagency and non-governmental partners to overcome rapidly emerging contingencies. Chapter 6, *Power Projection*, addresses how the Navy and Marine Corps will overcome a variety of access challenges in permissive, uncertain, or hostile environments. Chapter 7, *Countering Irregular Threats*, provides a broad conceptual view of conflict in the 21st century as well as reinforces the understanding that much of the institutional knowledge gained in our “small wars” history will continue to shape our approach to current and future conflict. Additionally Annex A, the *Marine Corps Functional Concept for Strategic Communication* discusses a very complex aspect of all operations in the 21st century security environment; the reality that there must be a seamless alignment between the message sent and the message received in order to leverage the power of the non-kinetic to influence operations from the tactical to the strategic level—in planning, and through execution.