



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Thinking About Seabasing: All Ahead, Slow

March 1, 2006

“Seabasing” is a new defense buzzword of growing importance and prominence in both joint and naval circles. Unfortunately, despite the increasingly common use of the term by both joint and naval planners alike, there still remains much mystery and misunderstanding about this important “new” concept. Indeed, one of the key problems that has hindered meaningful debate and discussion about seabasing—and especially the priorities revealed in its associated plans and programs—is that its contemporary definition and the important ideas that support it are poorly understood except among the relatively small group of officers and planners who have been intimately involved with their development.

To make matters worse, since its grand unveiling by the Department of the Navy (DoN) in 2002, the concept’s definition has constantly changed. For example, in August 2005, the Seabasing Joint Integrating Concept (JIC) defined seabasing as “the rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and re-employment of joint combat power from the sea, while providing continuous support, sustainment, and force protection to select expeditionary joint forces without reliance on land bases within the Joint Operations Area (JOA). These capabilities expand operational maneuver options and facilitate assured access and entry from the sea.” However, in the very month the Seabasing JIC was published, The DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, amended through August 31, 2005, defined seabasing as, “in amphibious operations, a technique of basing certain landing force support functions aboard ship which decreases shore-based presence.”

Moreover, as is explained in this report, both of these definitions—and others like them— are unduly restrictive, incomplete, confusing, or all of these things.

Partly as a result, there remains much uncertainty over exactly what seabasing is, and over the current programmatic and budgetary direction of joint seabasing programs. As the Naval Studies Board of the National Research Council of the National Academies wrote in 2005: Planning for the sea base (sic) is still in its infancy. Coordination across the Services is just beginning, with discussions between the Navy, the Army, and the Marine Corps, and in response to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) initiatives. As a consequence, the details have yet to emerge, especially with respect to joint operations and with respect to the availability and needed development of technology to perform the tasks that are envisioned for the sea base.

Juxtaposed against this lingering confusion about what seabasing is or should be are the associated material solutions being so aggressively developed and pursued by the Department of the Navy. While these plans now have a joint stamp of approval, this report argues that the programs are being conceived of and pursued long before the full range of desired and possible joint seabasing capabilities have been adequately explored and debated. The end result: current seabasing plans are rather narrowly focused on two rather limited capabilities—landing a single brigade on a hostile shore in 11 to 17 days from the “go” order, and thereafter providing seabased logistical support for two early entry brigades until follow-on joint forces arrive.

It is true that these two key capabilities reflect the “top level requirements” identified in the aforementioned Seabasing JIC. However, these two capabilities reflect a view of seabasing that rests upon questionable assumptions and analysis.