

# Preparing for the Future

## Marine Corps Support to Joint Operations in Contested Littorals

Gen. David H. Berger, U.S. Marine Corps

Over the last five years, the U.S. defense establishment has begun to grapple with the implications of the advent of a radically more complex and challenging strategic epoch. The return of great-power competition and the continuing threats of regional rogue states and violent nonstate actors challenge our Nation's interests amid an ongoing "revolution in technology that poses both peril and promise."<sup>1</sup>

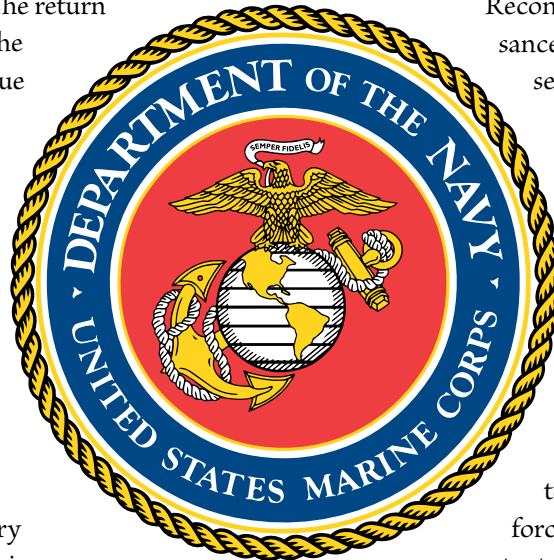
Consideration of the challenging future these changes are likely to produce has sparked an energetic focus on developing new operating concepts, technologies, and force structures in all the military services. The U.S. Marine Corps is no exception. In close partnership with the U.S. Navy, our thought in recent years has converged around the concepts of *littoral operations in contested environments* and *expeditionary advanced base operations*, and their implications for the full range of Title 10 service functions in organizing, training, and equipping the forces necessary to execute them. During my predecessor's tenure as commandant, the U.S. Marine Corps embarked upon a campaign of learning to draw out these implications, a campaign that has continued and accelerated on my watch. Our learning to this point has led us to some interesting initial conclusions and hypotheses. One of the most interesting is *the possibility that a major role for Marine Corps forces in*

*critical future scenarios may revolve around enabling naval and joint force commanders as a dedicated multi-domain reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance force.*

Reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance are precisely defined in joint and service doctrine. Reconnaissance operations, in any domain, use the full range of available "detection methods to obtain information about the activities and resources of an enemy or adversary."<sup>2</sup> Counterreconnaissance seeks to prevent adversaries from doing the same to us; it comprises "all measures taken to prevent hostile observation of a force, area, or place."<sup>3</sup> In the maritime context, it is wise to marry these current doctrinal definitions with the broader per-

spective conveyed in two "navy words of distinguished lineage": *scouting* and *screening*. The distinguished naval tactician Capt. Wayne P. Hughes Jr. defined scouting as "reconnaissance, surveillance, code-breaking, and all other ways to obtain and report combat information to commanders and their forces," and screening as "all measures used to frustrate the enemy's scouting effort ... includ[ing] the possibility of attacking a threatening enemy."<sup>4</sup> This broader naval understanding of the mission informs my understanding of reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance in the pages that follow.

The most recent phase of the U.S. Marine Corps' learning process began with my *Commandant's Planning*



*Guidance* of July 2019, amplified by a June 2020 article articulating “The Case for Change,” in which I laid out my assessment of the major features of the operating environment for which we now have to plan.<sup>5</sup> Nesting within the 2018 *National Defense Strategy’s* threat analysis, I observed that U.S. military responses to the



## Commandant’s Planning Guidance

38th Commandant of the Marine Corps



To view the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps*, visit <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/%2038th%20Commandant%27s%20Planning%20Guidance%202019.pdf?ver=2019-07-16-200152-700>.

challenges posed by revisionist powers, rogue states, and technologically advanced nonstate actors must contend with the realities of an increasingly mature precision strike regime. Several of these actors also make use of a sophisticated toolkit of coercive behaviors below the threshold of violence that some describe as gray-zone strategies. I also noted the obvious facts of geography—the intersection of threat and U.S. interests means that our interaction with several of our most formidable challenges will largely occur within the maritime domain. Sharing my predecessor’s conclusion that “the Marine Corps is not organized, trained, equipped, or postured

to meet the demands” of this rapidly changing operating environment, I have been deeply engaged over the last eighteen months with the challenge of formulating appropriate responses to those demands.<sup>6</sup>

A major part of the Marine Corps’ response to this challenge is the program of development and learning that we call Force Design 2030 (FD 2030). We have already executed some of the less controversial elements of this program—for example, my decision to divest the entire Marine Corps inventory of M1A1 Abrams tanks. The more consequential elements of the program are still underway, and among these are significant changes to a major portion of our ground combat element: fielding the Marine Littoral Regiment, restructuring our infantry battalions, and eliminating much of our existing towed cannon artillery in favor of longer-range rocket and missile systems. The latter will be able to launch a wide range of containerized munitions, including antiship missiles. Accompanying these changes are shifts in supporting aviation and logistical capabilities. The overall thrust of our FD 2030 program is to produce a Marine Corps that is “prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations” that are themselves nested within overarching joint campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

These initial changes are the early stages of a much longer campaign. They will allow us to free resources and field experimental capabilities for the sustained period of innovation that the operating environment demands. As FD 2030 is at its heart a campaign of learning, it is not surprising that after a bit more than a year of work, we have learned some things. The wargaming and experimentation we have done thus far, culminating in the annual Naval Services Wargame in October 2020, suggests that the basic proposition of FD 2030 remains valid. Given the realities of geography and the proliferating precision strike regime, the Navy and the joint force will need an “inside” or “stand-in” force that can

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operate persistently within the weapons engagement zone (WEZ) of a peer adversary. Such a capability is particularly critical in the “contact” and “blunt” layers of the Global Operating Model, when joint forces must “compete ... below the level of armed conflict” and should that competition escalate to armed conflict,

need most from the Marine Corps. The answer to the question of how we may best support the broader effort, it seems increasingly likely, is not lethal fires as an end in themselves but rather *reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance* applied in all domains and across the competition continuum.<sup>10</sup>

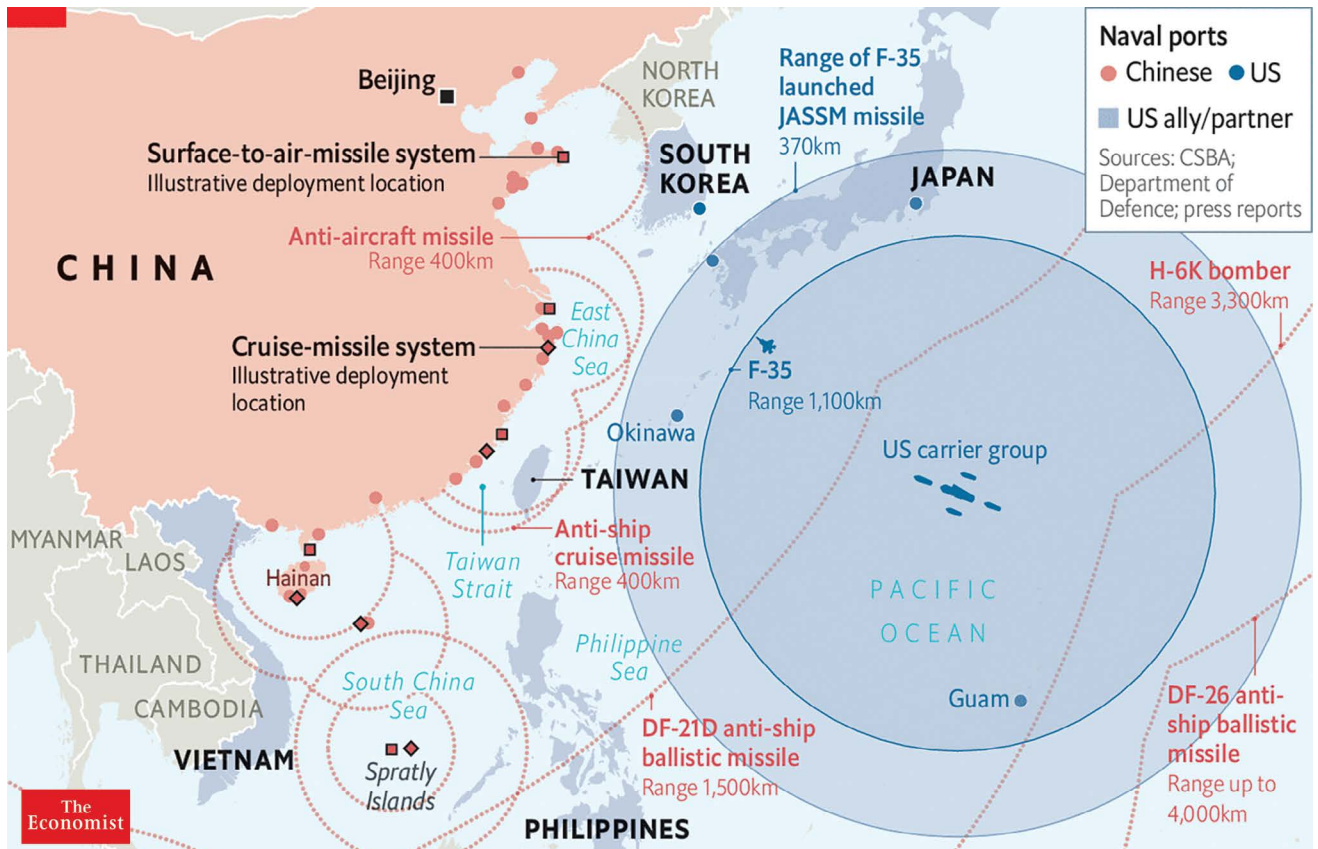
“Given the realities of geography and the proliferating precision strike regime, the Navy and the joint force will need an ‘inside’ or ‘stand-in’ force that can operate persistently within the weapons engagement zone (WEZ) of a peer adversary.”

“delay, degrade, or deny adversary aggression.”<sup>8</sup> Stand-in forces will be constantly present in key maritime terrain during periods of competition below the threshold of violence, deterring and countering nonlethal coercive behavior and other malign activity directed at U.S. allies, partners, and other interests. These same forces will remain inside an adversary WEZ to provide necessary support to naval and joint campaigning should competition escalate to war. Critically, given the vulnerability of large, fixed bases and shore-based infrastructure to long-range precision strike and the challenges of adequately defending that infrastructure, the stand-in force must be able to perform these functions from a strictly expeditionary and highly mobile posture.

These broad conclusions are well supported by the wargaming and analysis we have done thus far. Our ongoing learning from these tools as well as from experimentation and large-scale exercises is steadily generating answers to the question of *how* the Marine Corps can most usefully contribute to solving naval and joint force commanders’ problems as a stand-in force. Based upon our evolving understanding of expeditionary advanced base operations, we initially envisioned supporting fleet commanders by providing lethal antiship fires from mobile ground units operating from dispersed, austere expeditionary advanced bases (EABs) and from STOVL fifth generation strike fighters likewise operating from or enabled by specialized EABs.<sup>9</sup> What is now becoming clearer is a critical enabling role of the stand-in force—what the Navy and joint force might

The logic of this requirement is clear. With the proliferation of the precision-strike regime, the ability of the naval and joint force to retain the initiative and ultimately to conduct effective offensive action to reverse adversary aggression will depend critically on the ability to win the “hider-finder” competition. Given the rapidly advancing capabilities of our pacing threat, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the joint force’s historically dominant capability to sense and understand its operating environment will be vigorously contested or denied in every domain. At least initially, as wargame after wargame suggests, fixed land bases and high-signature land forces will be vulnerable to long-range precision weapons. Large naval vessels will likewise initially face considerable risk operating within the range of a peer adversary’s long-range precision strike capabilities, including DF-21 and DF-26 antiship ballistic missiles.<sup>11</sup> Given our pacing threat’s capabilities in the space and information domains, reliable tracking and cuing of naval targets through the use of national technical means will be challenged, and our links among command and logistical nodes may also be targeted.

Within this highly contested environment, as simulated in the wargames, analysis, and experimentation we have conducted to date, the utility of the stand-in force in a reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance role becomes clear. A light, self-reliant, highly mobile naval expeditionary force postured forward in littoral areas within the adversary’s WEZ would provide naval



(Figure by The Economist)

## Aircraft Carrier Combat Range

Increasing quantities of more capable area denial systems based on mainland China and on artificial islands built by China have made U.S. naval operations increasingly risky in and around the South China Sea and Taiwan. China has also vastly extended its weapons ranges eastward and now poses a direct threat to U.S. forces based in Guam and naval forces operating in the central Pacific.

and joint force commanders the ability to identify and track high-value targets including key reconnaissance platforms, scouting units, and other elements of the adversary's command, control, communications, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting (C5ISR-T) complex. The force could hold these targets at risk with its own organic fires capabilities and, perhaps more importantly, provide critical links for highly lethal naval and joint fires kill chains. With the right investments and doctrine for our own joint and combined C5ISR-T, this capability broadens to encompass the possibility of highly resilient "kill webs" able to link available sensors and shooters even in the face of adversary disruption of the information

domain.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, since the stand-in force would operate in continual motion from a variety of low-signature maritime platforms and austere, temporary EABs ashore, it would be fiendishly difficult for the adversary to locate, track, and effectively target. Its constant, distributed presence will introduce significant uncertainty into an adversary's decision-making calculus. Even in steady-state, day-to-day competition below the threshold of violence, this widely distributed mobile presence will greatly expand the depth and fidelity of the joint force commander's understanding of the full range of adversary and other activity within the area of operations. In close cooperation with local allies and partners, this expanded understanding will help discourage



Marines assigned to the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit conduct call-for-fire missions 12 September 2018 during Theater Amphibious Combat Rehearsal (TACR) 18 in Djibouti. Led by Naval Amphibious Force, Task Force 51/5th Marine Expeditionary Expedition Brigade, TACR integrated U.S. Navy and Marine Corps assets practiced a range of collective critical combat-related capabilities that would support an expanded reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance role for the Marine Corps. (Photo by Staff Sgt. David Proffitt, U.S. Marine Corps)

an adversary's nonlethal coercive behavior and contribute directly to "deterrence by detection."<sup>13</sup>

All of this, it must be emphasized, will be accomplished by naval expeditionary forces operating in international waters and periodic light footprints ashore on the territory of local allies and partners. It does not require the sustained presence of heavy ground forces or the regular deployment of large, land-based aviation elements. The use of the stand-in force in this maritime reconnaissance and security role will be a good fit for scenarios in which regional allies or partners are unwilling or unable to host substantial numbers of U.S. personnel ashore. While it may be infeasible for heavy land-based joint forces to establish a permanent presence forward in such scenarios, the sustained operations of lighter Marine Corps stand-in forces in the contact and blunt layers can set the conditions for

their later introduction in the surge layer. The stand-in force's persistent presence will help build partner and ally confidence in U.S. reliability and commitment. At the same time, its contribution to establishing and maintaining reliable combined and joint C5ISR-T within the WEZ will provide critical enablers for the introduction of follow-on forces.

The notion that maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance might become a major role or mission for the Marine Corps has predictably generated some counterarguments. One of these, heard frequently both within and outside the Marine Corps, is the idea that our service's identity is tied to the forcible entry mission or the amphibious assault. Closely related to that criticism is the notion that our service must maintain a strictly offensive character—that our tradition as "amphibious shock troops" is one to which

we are somehow immutably bound. Finally, there is the idea that recasting that part of the Marine Corps that will source the stand-in force to focus on maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance will focus us exclusively on the demands of a single threat in a single theater and compromise our ability to perform our broader enduring role as a globally employable naval expeditionary force in readiness.

These critiques are serious. Taking on the maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance mission

point, conservatism can crystallize into a static mentality that becomes an obstacle to necessary change. Our service identity is inextricably linked to our historical record of innovation and adaptation. At several points in our history, the Marines have managed to develop a vision of future war accurate enough to allow the timely development of capabilities that proved to be essential enablers to the prosecution of naval and joint campaigns. We did not, for example, conduct the iconic amphibious operations of the Second World

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would entail an adjustment for the Marine Corps, with implications for certain aspects of our doctrine, force structure, and associated budget. The critics deserve equally serious answers to their concerns, which I will try to provide here in brief.

The issue of “service identity” is particularly troubling, as it can become an obstacle to the kind of innovative thinking we need to keep pace with a changing world. Marine Corps roles and even basic force structure are codified in law; 10 U.S.C. § 5063 prescribes a Marine Corps focused primarily on the “seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign” and structured as “forces of combined arms” organized in three combat divisions and three aircraft wings.<sup>14</sup> Statutes, however, codify what *has been*, and they evolve as new situations and requirements present themselves. The Marine Corps has traditionally been quite agile in navigating such change, and we are consequently fond of referencing our historical role in major military innovations such as the development of amphibious doctrine in the interwar period and of heliborne vertical envelopment in the early Cold War.<sup>15</sup> We are justifiably proud of our historical accomplishments, and a certain amount of conservatism in military thinking helps counter the risk of infatuation with overly deterministic or otherwise misguided visions of future war. But at a certain

War purely for the sake of conducting amphibious operations—those operations enabled naval forces to secure land bases or eliminate those of the adversary in support of an overarching naval campaign. Ultimately, as we neared the home islands of Japan, the rationale for the seizure of bases in the Marianas, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa became directly linked to a larger joint campaign; airfields on these islands were essential to the Army Air Corps in their campaign against Japanese war industry. We should keep this history in mind as we think about amphibious operations or any other form of maneuver. These concepts are tools in a kit that we must be willing to adjust over time.

Closely related to critiques based on service identity is a concern that focusing on maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance might somehow compromise our essentially offensive service ethos. As our basic doctrine for warfighting reminds us, a general bias toward action is essential, and at the appropriate level of war, a bias for the positive aim, the offensive action, is warranted. The maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance mission, as the naval concept of “screening” suggests, is in no sense a matter of merely passive sensing or observation. The purpose of a reconnaissance and security force is to fight for information. Successful accomplishment of that mission has always required an operationally sophisticated balance of prudent observation and savagely aggressive action

to force enemy commitment and reveal disposition. Performing this function for the Navy and the joint force is entirely consistent with a warfighting philosophy that counsels us to “orient on the enemy,” uncover their “surfaces and gaps,” to disrupt their decision-making cycle, gain dominance in operational tempo, and ultimately “penetrate the system, tear it apart, and ... destroy the isolated components.”<sup>16</sup> The ability to do this, which a well-designed stand-in force will be well postured to provide, is an essential enabler for naval and joint force commanders in multi-domain competition in the contact and blunt layers.

Finally, the idea that a maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance role for the Marine Corps reflects a myopic focus on a single threat or theater; in this case, the PRC in the western Pacific is rooted in a concern that commitment to this role could render us unready for the range of demands we may face as a forward-deployed naval expeditionary force. This is a legitimate concern, and we need to guard against it. There is no question that as a naval expeditionary force in readiness, the Marine Corps is a key element of the Nation’s ability to manage the risk of crises and contingencies involving the full global range of expected and unexpected threats. It would indeed be foolish to overspecialize to a degree that would compromise that capability. I am confident that we are managing that risk effectively. A portion of the risk has been assumed by higher authority given the basic conclusions of current strategy regarding great-power competition. This guidance identifies the PRC as the pacing threat and directs the Marine Corps to take certain actions in response. Service action in response to such prioritization is in no sense optional, and I have guided our actions accordingly. Additionally, given the long-standing trends and realities of the twenty-first-century operating environment, it is likely that military operations in general will be increasingly subject to the constraints imposed by the rapidly

proliferating precision strike regime. A stand-in force able to persist inside an adversary WEZ and perform reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance tasks in the contact and blunt layers will be useful to naval and joint commanders in a wide variety of theaters. Winning the hider-finder contest will be critical, no matter where we are on the globe.

Some assert that the security environment we now confront is the most complex, the most dangerous our Nation has ever faced. These claims can sometimes gloss over the significant lethal challenges our predecessors confronted throughout history. Still, the challenges we face now are real, they are many, and they are growing. We cannot afford to double down on traditional or preferred ways of doing business simply *because* they are traditional or preferred; we must retain the flexibility to innovate in response to the demands of *today’s* operating environment to produce the enabling capabilities that *today’s* naval and joint force commanders require. Even more critical is our ability to anticipate the challenges of tomorrow’s environment and invest now in capabilities we will need going forward. This mental and institutional flexibility—the ability to adjust and adapt the specific capabilities and forms of maneuver by which we perform our enduring role as the Nation’s naval expeditionary force in readiness—is the essence of the Marine Corps’ service identity. While the maritime reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance role is in early stages of concept development, it already shows great potential for helping the joint force gain and maintain relative advantage. Wargaming, experimentation, and practical exercising by Fleet Marine forces will help determine just how great that advantage might be. ■

*Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow.*

—C. William Pollard<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 8.

2. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 26 July 2017), 6-4.

3. *Ibid.*, Glossary-10.

4. Wayne P. Hughes Jr. and Robert P. Girrier, *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations*, 3rd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 3-4.

5. United States Marine Corps (USMC), *Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps* (Quantico, VA: Headquarters, USMC, 2019); David H. Berger, "The Case for Change," *Marine Corps Gazette* 104, no. 6 (June 2020): 8–12.

6. USMC, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, 1.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2018), 7.

9. In February 2021, we codified our present understanding of this core concept in the "Tentative Manual for Advanced Base Operations," available at <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/2495507/publication-and-availability-of-the-tentative-manual-for-expeditionary-advanced/> (CAC enabled).

10. MCDP 1-4, *Competing* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 2020), 1-6. Marines think of interaction with adversaries below the level of armed conflict, as well as all forms of violence including open warfare, as residing at various points along a continuum of competition.

11. Steven Stashwick, "Chinese Ballistic Missiles Fired into South China Sea Claimed to Hit Target Ship," *The Diplomat* (website), 17 November 2020, accessed 8 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/chinese-ballistic-missiles-fired-into-south-china-sea-claimed-to-hit-target-ship/>.

12. Compelling thoughts on this have been advanced by Bryan Clark, Daniel Patt, and Harrison Schramm, *Mosaic Warfare: Exploiting Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Systems to Implement Decision-Centric Operations* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 11 February 2020), accessed 8 April 2021, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/mosaic-warfare-exploiting-artificial-intelligence-and-autonomous-systems-to-implementation-decision-centric-operations>.

13. Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp, and Grace B. Kim, *Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 14 April 2020), accessed 8 April 2021, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/deterrence-by-detection-a-key-role-for-unmanned-aircraft-systems-in-great-power-competition>.

14. 10 U.S.C. § 5063, accessed 8 April 2021, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2010-title10/pdf/USCODE-2010-title10-subtitleC-part1-chap509.pdf>.

15. Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), loc. 1600-1619, Kindle.

16. MCDP 1, *Warfighting* (Quantico, VA: Headquarters, USMC, 1997), 73–76, 92.

17. C. William Pollard, *The Soul of the Firm* (New York: Harper Business; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 114.