

Concept Without Precondition

Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, The 2026 Iran War and The Institutional Readiness Problem

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Executive Summary

Between February and June 2026, the United States fought a war in the one maritime environment that most closely resembles the conditions for which the Marine Corps rebuilt itself under Force Design 2030: a distributed, low-signature, shore-based adversary denying a contested strait at a fraction of the cost of the force sent to contest it. The concept built for exactly this problem — Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and the Stand-in Forces that execute it — was employed only at its margins. The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted boardings, postured for an island seizure and, as the Corps disclosed in September, ran forward arming, refuelling and sensing sites ashore. It did not, even experimentally, position sea-denial fires inside the adversary's weapons engagement zone, and no Marine Littoral Regiment was deployed. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy, meanwhile, did precisely what EABO describes: they held the Strait of Hormuz with mines, drones, shore-based missiles and pre-delegated command, and they forced the United States into an exchange in which every intercept cost between eighty and two hundred times what it destroyed.

Recommendations

- 1 Designate a concept-level full operational capability evaluation as the EABO readiness standard.** *Nothing currently measures Landing Ship Medium delivery, the cut from three regiments to two, or stern landing vessel bridging against the date a full-system evaluation becomes possible, so a slip in any of them triggers no institutional response.*
- 2 Wargame access denial as a starting condition, and publish the result.** *No published wargame begins from host-nation refusal at H-hour; without one, allied planners cannot design their contributions around a failure they have never seen modelled, and the finding informs a staff paper rather than a budget.*
- 3 Treat logistics survivability as an operational problem, not a procurement one.** *A better platform reduces each resupply signature but cannot eliminate the pattern a sustainment cycle generates over time, and the pre-positioning being built sits on fixed, publicly mapped nodes under the same access agreements that govern insertion.*
- 4 Establish a coalition planning cell below treaty level.** *AUSMIN commits posture, AUKUS develops technology and Talisman Sabre exercises formations, but none of them defines what each allied force can contribute independently, or what coalition access must exist before a contingency develops.*

This paper argues that the gap between the concept and its employment is not explained by circumstance — restricted Gulf access, the absence of an MLR, geography unlike the First Island Chain — but by three structural failures in the concept's institutional readiness that existed before the war and persist after it.

Institutional Reversion. Under operational pressure, commanders reverted to the certified ARG-MEU because EABO was not a reachable option. It cannot become one until the formation can be evaluated as a full system — regiment, Landing Ship Medium, naval integration, and logistics architecture together. The institutional unreadiness window is therefore open today, it cannot begin closing before 2029, and even then, it could take a decade or more to close — overlapping with the period in which Indo-Pacific risk is expected to peak.

The Access Assumption. EABO assumes host-nation access at H-hour. In the Gulf, partners with extensive US basing initially refused to host strike operations. This reflects a rational assessment of their own exposure rather than a failure of alliance management. Yet no published wargame has modelled access denial as a design condition. First Island Chain governments face the same calculation, with less warning and higher stakes.

Logistics Survivability. Pre-positioning does not solve the signature problem; it shifts it to fixed nodes that an adversary can map and a host government must politically defend.

The same vulnerabilities also appear in allied concepts, and while allies can contribute, they cannot substitute.

Four recommendations follow: designate a concept-level full-operational-capability MCCRE as the EABO readiness standard, with allied participation; commission and publish unclassified INDOPACOM wargames treating access denial as a design condition; publish a summary-level pre-positioning assessment and treat the LSM as the critical-path item; and establish a coalition littoral planning cell under the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, modelled on the Multinational Planning Augmentation Team, to produce the shared operational concept that no existing framework currently generates.

The Iran war did not reveal new problems; it confirmed known ones while their consequences remained manageable. A concept that cannot be employed when needed is not a concept; it is a hope.