

The background image is a dramatic, low-angle shot looking down a ship's deck towards a submarine being launched. The deck is wet and reflects the light. The submarine is positioned in the center, with its conning tower and various equipment visible. The ship's structure, including railings and overhead pipes, frames the scene. The overall tone is dark and industrial.

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Concept Without Precondition

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

By Levente Bartha & Julian McBride

TITAN · RESEARCH PAPER

Concept Without Precondition

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

October 2026

AUTHORED BY

Levente Bartha & Julian McBride

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Cover Image: 11th MEU Marines, Sailors Conduct Ship to Shore Movement, Pacific Ocean, 3 December 2025.

Photo Credit: Corporal Oliver Nisbet

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Disclosure. Julian McBride's prior service includes a deployment with a formation this paper examines. That service predates every programme discussed here. The paper's evidence is entirely open-source, and deliberately so; the argument that these failures were knowable before the Iran war rests on them having been visible to any reader without access to the institutions. Neither author has any current affiliation with the Department of Defense or with defence contractors involved in the programmes discussed.

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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.

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 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.

Keywords: Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, Stand-in Forces, FD2030, USMC, Iran War 2026

Prefatory Note

This paper makes a specific argument about a specific problem: that the institutional readiness required for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) to be employable did not exist at the time of the 2026 Iran war, that this was knowable before the war began, and that the implications for the Indo-Pacific are more serious than the current discourse acknowledges.

This paper will not attempt to produce a comprehensive operational account of Operation EPIC FURY, a verdict on Force Design 2030's (FD2030) strategic direction, or a full assessment of IRGC-N doctrine. These are legitimate subjects, but they are not this paper's subject.

The analysis covers the period from the opening of Operation EPIC FURY on 28 February 2026 to early June 2026 — spanning major combat operations (28 February to 7 April), the ceasefire announced on 7 April, and the naval blockade of Iranian ports imposed on 13 April — the window for which open-source reporting is sufficiently available to support the claims made here.¹ Hostilities continued after the April ceasefire — the blockade ran until 18 June before being reimposed on 14 July — and fighting continues at the time of writing; developments after early June are noted where they bear directly on the argument but are not analysed systematically. This paper is current as of late September 2026; the structural argument is not expected to be affected by developments after that date, though specific figures and operational details may be superseded. This boundary does not limit the paper's central argument, which concerns institutional failures that predate the conflict. Specific data points may be revised by subsequent developments; the structural findings will not.

¹ Lead Inspector General, *Operation Epic Fury: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2026–June 30, 2026* (Washington, DC: Department of War Office of Inspector General, 2026), https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/oef_q3_jun2026_final_508-secure.pdf.

Section 1

Introduction

The 2026 Iran war produced an operational irony that deserves more analytical attention than it has so far received. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) — a force without a formally published doctrine, without a six-year institutional redesign, and without the procurement investment the United States Marine Corps (USMC) has directed toward distributed maritime denial operations since 2020² — executed, at operational scale, a recognisable approximation of what the Marine Corps calls Stand-in Forces (SIF). Low-signature, distributed, logistically austere, and asymmetrically cost-effective, Iranian maritime denial achieved strategic effects disproportionate to its material inputs: the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed, commercial traffic halted, oil prices spiked, and US carrier strike groups were constrained by the threat environment Iran's denial posture created.³

Meanwhile, the 2,200 Marines of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) were present in theatre, embarked in the conventional Amphibious Ready Group-MEU (ARG-MEU) configuration, conducting maritime boarding operations, amphibious posturing, and forward aviation support in roles the Corps has executed since the Second World War. The concept designed to contest maritime environments of this character was employed only at its margins — forward arming and refuelling points and sensing sites — and not in the sea-denial fires and littoral manoeuvre that define it.⁴

² Distributed maritime denial is used in this paper to denote achieving sea denial — preventing an adversary's use of a contested maritime area — through dispersed, low-signature forces operating from shore positions within or proximate to the adversary's weapons engagement zone, rather than through platform mass or conventional naval superiority. The term is distinct from the US Navy's Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO), which describes the distribution of naval forces at sea. It draws on Vego's formulation of sea denial as preventing an adversary's use of the sea without necessarily using it oneself, and on CSBA's "Inside-Out" concept (Tightening the Chain, Clark et al., 2019).

³ "Tracking US Military Assets in the Iran War," Atlantic Council, Trackers and Data Visualizations, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/trackers-and-data-visualizations/tracking-us-military-assets-in-the-iran-war/>.

⁴ Howard Altman, "USMC Used Its Expeditionary Operations Playbook in Combat for First Time During Epic Fury," *The War Zone*, September 17, 2026, <https://www.twz.com/sea/usmc-used-its-expeditionary-operations-playbook-in-combat-for-first-time-during-epic-fury>.

The standard explanation for this gap has three parts. The geography was wrong: EABO was designed for the island-chains of the Western Pacific, not the confined waters of the Persian Gulf, so its non-employment is unsurprising. The concept was immature: the Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) are mid-fielding, and the Landing Ship Medium (LSM) — EABO's primary connective platform — will not be delivered until 2029. The necessary basing was unavailable: Gulf states refused to permit offensive strike operations from their territory or airspace before Operation EPIC FURY commenced, constraining the forward positioning the concept requires. Each of these explanations is partially true. Taken together, however, they are insufficient — because they treat the non-employment of EABO as a situational accident, a product of circumstances that happened to be unfavourable in February 2026. This paper argues that this reading is wrong.

The argument advanced by this paper is specific. The gap between EABO's doctrinal ambition and its operational employment in the Iran war was not primarily produced by geographic mismatch or situational constraints. It was produced by three structural, pre-existing institutional failures — an institutional reversion to certified models, an access assumption that has not been stress-tested adequately, and a logistics survivability gap which has not been narrowed — that were identifiable before the war began. The Iran war did not reveal new problems. It confirmed known ones at a moment when the consequences, significant as they are for global commerce and regional stability, remained — during the period studied — strategically manageable. The Taiwan contingency for which EABO was designed may not offer the same margin.

Three things this paper does not argue deserve equal clarity. It does not argue that EABO is conceptually wrong. The distributed maritime denial logic that underlies Stand-in Forces is sound, and the Iran war's operational evidence — the cost-imposition asymmetry the IRGC-N achieved — vindicates that logic rather than challenging it. It does not argue that the Marine Corps performed poorly in the Iran war. The 31st and 11th MEUs were employed appropriately given the operational circumstances. And it does not argue that those who have criticised Force Design 2030 — especially regarding divestiture choices — have been vindicated by events. This paper's position is that the direction is defensible but the implementation gap is structural, unresolved, and more consequential than has been acknowledged.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the operational minimum — only the facts about the Iran war that the paper's analysis requires. It characterises the IRGC-N's operational model as a revealed-preference data point, describes USMC employment in theatre, and poses the analytical question the remainder of the paper answers. Section 3 presents the three structural failures in sequence — institutional reversion, access assumption, logistics survivability — each examined through a common analytical structure: what the concept assumes, the operational evidence from the Iran War, the pre-war signals that should have prompted action, and the implications for the Indo-Pacific. Section 4 applies the same framework to the Royal Marines' Future Commando Force (FCF) and Australia's Littoral Manoeuvre Group (LMG), making the case that the institutional readiness problem is not uniquely American and that its partial resolution requires a formalised coalition architecture that does not currently exist. Section 5 draws four specific recommendations from the paper's findings. Section 6 concludes.

Section 2

The Iran War: An Operational Minimum

This section covers only what the paper's argument requires; it is not an operational survey of EPIC FURY. Three sub-sections follow. The first considers what the IRGC-N did to achieve distributed maritime denial. The second records what the US did during the operational period — without evaluation. The third poses the question that this juxtaposition generates, and which Section 3 then answers.

2.1 The IRGC-N as an Operational Baseline

This sub-section will not provide a comprehensive account of Iranian naval doctrine or a full assessment of the IRGC-N's operational performance during the 2026 conflict. It will focus on four specific parameters — logistics footprint, signature management, command and control architecture, and cost imposition — which will be used to examine EABO's institutional readiness in Section 3. The IRGC-N is considered as a revealed-preference data point: the most recent available evidence of what a functioning distributed maritime denial force looks like when it is operating in a contested environment.

Logistics Footprint

The IRGC-N's distributed operations were sustained by a land-based logistics network: fuel, ammunition, and replacement components all moved through a dispersed network along Iran's coastline — a network developed over decades, hardened against air attack, and distributed across multiple sites.⁵ The operational consequence is that the IRGC-N's logistics signature is generated ashore, distributed, and intermittent — which means it is background noise rather than a detectable event.

⁵ "US–Iran War 2026: Operation Epic Fury, the Strait of Hormuz Crisis," Quwa, 2026, <https://quwa.org/iran/military-news-iran/us-iran-war-2026-operation-epic-fury-the-strait-of-hormuz-crisis-and-the-limits-of-american-air-power/>.

Signature Management

Within hours of the initial US and Israeli strikes, the IRGC-N transmitted warnings via VHF radio to vessels in the strait and began systematic signature management operations.⁶ Fast-attack craft began operating among commercial maritime traffic, exploiting the strait's density to complicate targeting. Shahed-family drones provided persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) across the waterway without the electromagnetic signature of conventional radar systems, enabling real-time coordination of missile and drone swarm attacks without generating significant communications traffic.⁷ That indistinguishability held for the initial phase rather than for the sustained campaign: by 11 March the Pentagon reported destroying 16 boats engaged in mine-laying, and open-source tallies by mid-March put damaged or destroyed minelayers at around 30.⁸ Even so, the IRGC-N was able to minimise and mask its detectable signature and therefore it was able to conduct localised manoeuvres in the Strait of Hormuz.

Command and Control Architecture

The IRGC-N's most operationally significant characteristic is its command and control (C2) model. The IRGC-N's C2 architecture is designed for resilience rather than efficiency. Pre-authorised engagement parameters, decentralised command, and minimal real-time communication allowed operations to continue despite the US aerial campaign targeting Iranian command nodes and parallel Israeli decapitation strikes.⁹

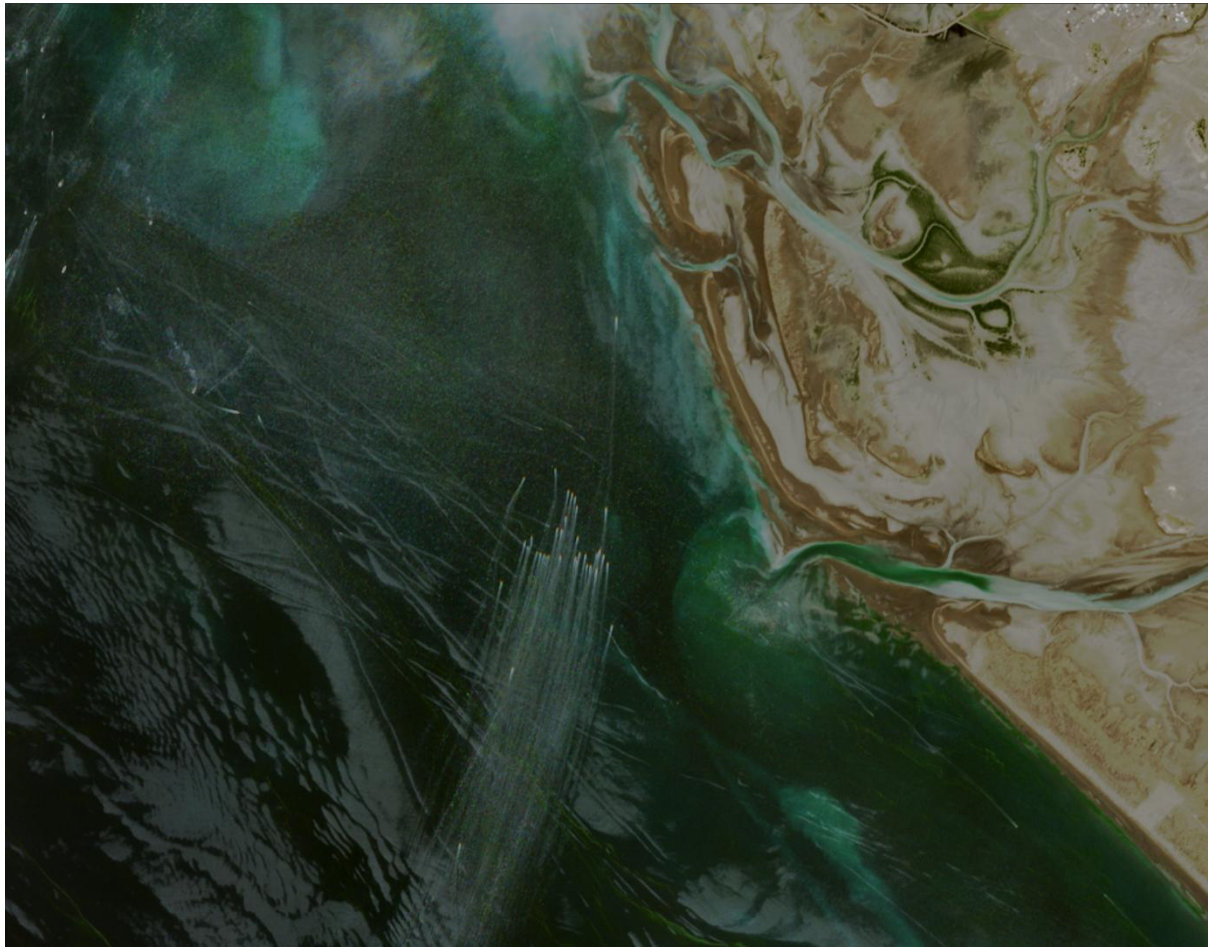
⁶ The speed of IRGC operational deployment indicates that forces were pre-positioned and engagement parameters were pre-authorised.

⁷ "IRGC Navy's Long-Term Strategy: Asymmetrical Warfare," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Notes, 2024, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/irgc-navy-s-long-term-strategy-asymmetrical-warfare-2024>.

⁸ Satellite spoofing and GNSS jamming makes navigation harder. These methods are easy to use and difficult to oppose, and drastically increase insurance cost, preventing most shipowners from taking the risk of sailing through for a long time. The combination of physical mining, drone ISR, and electronic warfare constitutes a layered denial system whose individual components are each low-cost and whose combination is operationally decisive.

⁹ Rifat Rupok, "The 2026 US-Israel-Iran War: Divergent Strategies, Information Warfare, and a Fractured West Asia." (working paper, SSRN, 2026), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6447919.

Figure 1: IRGC-N small fast-attack craft near Kargan, off the coast of Iran, 22 April 2026.



Source: Copernicus Sentinel-2

The IRGC-N's decentralised C2 architecture was reinforced by the structural changes Iran implemented following Israeli decapitation strikes during the preceding 12-Day War.¹⁰ Israel's strikes eliminated high-level IRGC commanders and disrupted centralised missile and air defence coordination.¹¹ ¹² In response, Iran activated its 'mosaic defence' doctrine — distributing command authority across 31 IRGC provincial commanders with pre-authorised autonomy to act independently if central

¹⁰ "Humiliation and Transformation: The Islamic Republic After the 12-Day War," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/10/humiliation-and-transformation-the-islamic-republic-after-the-12-day-war/>.

¹¹ "Israel Secretly Recruited Iranian Dissidents to Attack Their Country From Within," ProPublica, <https://www.propublica.org/article/israel-iran-war-mossad-iranian-recruits>.

¹² "By Fusing Intelligence and Special Operations, Israel's Strikes on Iran Are a Lesson in Strategic Surprise," Atlantic Council, New Atlanticist, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/by-fusing-intelligence-and-special-operations-israels-strikes-on-iran-are-a-lesson-in-strategic-surprise/>.

leadership is eliminated.¹³ With Ali Khamenei assassinated in the opening hours of the war, and his son and successor also temporarily incapacitated, the mosaic doctrine moved from contingency to operational reality. The decentralised commanders executed missile launches and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as pre-delegated contingency orders.¹⁴ It was decentralised commanders who turned the strait into a kill zone.¹⁵

The assassination of IRGC-N commander Alireza Tangsiri, the naval officer overseeing the Hormuz blockade, disrupted but did not halt IRGC-N maritime operations — a demonstration that the force's C2 architecture had sufficient redundancy and pre-delegation to sustain operations.¹⁶ A C2 system that does not require regular communications cannot be located and targeted through its communications. The IRGC-N accepted reduced efficiency in exchange for a reduced signature. This C2 characteristic is central to the IRGC-N's operational resilience: a force whose command architecture does not depend on continuous central direction and cannot be neutralised by targeting that direction.

Cost Imposition

During the first few weeks of the war, Iranian Shahed drones were intercepted by Patriot missiles. Shahed drones are quickly manufactured and cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per unit; the average Patriot PAC-3 MSE interceptor costs approximately \$4 million.¹⁷ The ratio is asymmetric by a factor of around 80:1 to 200:1. The scale of exchange is now on the official record: the regional air and missile defence network intercepted more than 6,000 one-way attack drones and more than 1,500 ballistic missiles. The Department of Defense estimated the campaign's cost at approximately \$33.4 billion as of 29 June — \$22.3 billion in expended munitions, \$7.4 billion in

¹³ "Iran's 'Mosaic Defense' Strategy: Decentralization as Resilience Factor" Soufan Center, March 9, 2026, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2026-march-9a/>.

¹⁴ "A Conflict of Attrition: Iran's Bet on Asymmetric Warfare," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/2026/04/a-conflict-of-attrition-irans-bet-on-asymmetric-warfare/>.

¹⁵ "Strait of Hormuz: About the Strait," Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law, University of Texas at Austin, <https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-about-the-strait/>.

¹⁶ "The US–Israel Campaign in Iran," International Institute for Strategic Studies, online analysis, February 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/02/the-us-israel-campaign-in-iran/>.

¹⁷ "Burning Patriots, Borrowing Lessons: How the Iran War Is Costing Ukraine," *Small Wars Journal*, March 16, 2026, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/03/16/burning-patriots-borrowing-lessons-how-the-iran-war-is-costing-ukraine/>.

incremental obligations and \$3.7 billion in equipment losses — a level of expenditure its acquisition office acknowledged had produced strategic inventory shortfalls.¹⁸

The same imbalance drove a separate response. Within weeks of the war's start, Gulf states facing the same Shahed-style drones that Ukraine had spent four years learning to counter began turning to Kyiv directly. Ukraine deployed 201 counter-drone specialists to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Jordan, and by 20 March had outlined further steps toward long-term security cooperation with each, offering interceptor drones priced in the low thousands of dollars against the Patriot interceptor's several million.^{19 20}

Beyond drone and missile exchanges, the IRGC-N was able to maintain the blockade at minimal cost through sporadic mortar and anti-ship missile fire that deterred commercial shipping without exhausting Iranian inventories. The demonstration transit of 11 April, intended to establish a route for merchant shipping, required two US Navy destroyers, and mine-hunting depended on a dedicated littoral combat ship (LCS) and uncrewed underwater vehicle assets.²¹ The blockade enforced from 13 April required more than a dozen warships and more than 10,000 service members in sustained operation.²²

The Iranian military response exposed significant weaknesses in the American defensive posture. US Central Command reported that Iranian attacks damaged or destroyed hundreds of buildings and structures at American bases across eight countries — Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman and Jordan. The losses fell heavily on the high-value enablers parked on those bases: Five KC-135 aerial refuelling tankers were damaged or destroyed on the ground in Saudi Arabia by Iranian munitions, and an E-3 Sentry airborne early-warning and

¹⁸ Lead IG, *Operation Epic Fury*.

¹⁹ "Ukraine sends 201 military experts to counter Iranian drones in the Gulf," Al Jazeera, March 18, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/18/over-200-ukrainian-military-experts-in-gulf-region-to-counter-irans-drones>.

²⁰ "Ukraine looks to leverage its help to Arab Gulf states fighting off Iranian drones in exchange for interceptors against Russian missiles," *Fortune*, March 28, 2026, <https://fortune.com/2026/03/28/ukraine-zelenskyy-arab-gulf-iranian-drones-interceptors-russian-missiles/>

²¹ "Cost and Value of Air and Missile Defense Intercepts," Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cost-and-value-air-and-missile-defense-intercepts>.

²² U.S. Central Command, "U.S. to Blockade Ships Entering or Exiting Iranian Ports," press release, April 12, 2026, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4457255/us-to-blockade-ships-entering-or-exiting-iranian-ports/>.

control aircraft was damaged on the ground there as well. Uncrewed aircraft absorbed the heaviest attrition of the campaign — as many as 30 MQ-9 Reapers were destroyed, more than crewed aircraft losses combined.²³ The air defence architecture itself was targeted directly. In the opening days of the campaign, the AN/TPY-2 radar for the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan was destroyed; buildings housing comparable radars were hit at two locations in the United Arab Emirates.²⁴ Without its AN/TPY-2, a THAAD battery cannot independently search for or track targets — a single strike on a radar costing close to half a billion dollars also removed an air defence battery from the fight.

The strain placed on US naval assets is illustrated by a single platform, USS Gerald R. Ford. Initially deployed to Europe, it was first diverted to the Caribbean and then to US Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility as the Iran war developed; the Ford did not return home until 16 May 2026 — 326 days at sea, the longest carrier deployment since the Vietnam War.²⁵ ²⁶ The episode is a data point for the cost-exchange argument from the other direction: distributed, low-cost Iranian maritime denial did not only impose direct attritional costs through intercepted drones; it also imposed costs through the sheer duration for which high-value, scarce US naval assets had to remain committed to sustain the fight.

Iranian strikes also targeted Gulf civilian and economic infrastructure — a coercive instrument distinct from the direct military cost-exchange described above. Desalination plants in Bahrain and Kuwait were struck, causing significant damage to water supplies in countries where desalinated water accounts for between 70% and

²³ Lead IG, *Operation Epic Fury*.

²⁴ "Iranian Strikes Target the Infrastructure Behind US Airpower," *Air Force Times*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2026/04/01/iranian-strikes-target-the-infrastructure-behind-us-airpower/>.

²⁵ Mallory Shelbourne, "USS Gerald R. Ford Now in the Red Sea; USS George H.W. Bush Wraps Pre-Deployment Exercises," *USNI News*, March 6, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/03/06/uss-gerald-r-ford-now-in-the-red-sea-uss-george-h-w-bush-wraps-pre-deployment-exercises>.

²⁶ "Maintenance, morale and money: USS Gerald R. Ford's record-setting deployment presents many questions," *Stars and Stripes*, May 16, 2026, <https://www.stripes.com/branches/navy/2026-05-16/ford-return-repair-maintenance-cost-21688339.html>.

90% of total consumption.^{27 28 29} Energy infrastructure in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait was also struck. For states dependent on this infrastructure for basic habitability — not merely economic output — the threat was not abstract.³⁰

Tehran compounded the economic pressure by imposing a \$2 million transit toll on vessels wishing to navigate the waterway — intimidating commercial shipping companies while reinforcing Iranian geographic dominance over the strait.³¹ Brent crude reached \$118-120 per barrel in March, and it eventually reached a four-year high of \$126 at the end of April. Tehran had imposed a collective form of punitive economic warfare against the Gulf states.³²

By mid-May 2026, the IRGC-N had conducted more than a dozen confirmed attacks on merchant shipping and reduced vessel transits through the strait to near zero — down from over 100 ships per day before the crisis. The combination of low-cost harassment, geographic advantage, and economic coercion produced a cost-imposition dynamic structurally unfavourable to any conventional force attempting to contest it.³³

Across all three dimensions — interceptor asymmetry, attritional burden, and economic coercion — what the IRGC-N invested to deny the strait was outweighed by what the United States invested to contest that denial.³⁴ This is precisely the cost-

²⁷ "How Targeting of Desalination Plants Could Disrupt Water Supply in the Gulf," Al Jazeera, March 8, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/8/how-targeting-of-desalination-plants-could-disrupt-water-supply-in-the-gulf>.

²⁸ "Kuwait Desalination Plant, Oil Refinery Hit by Missile and Drone Strikes," Al Jazeera, April 3, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/3/kuwait-desalination-plant-oil-refinery-hit-by-missile-and-drone-strikes>.

²⁹ "Could Iran Disrupt Gulf Countries' Desalinated Water Supplies?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/could-iran-disrupt-gulf-countries-desalinated-water-supplies>.

³⁰ "Attacks on Desalination Plants in the Iran War Forecast a Dark Future," Atlantic Council, Dispatches, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/attacks-on-desalination-plants-in-the-iran-war-forecast-a-dark-future/>.

³¹ "Explainer: Why is Oman proposing a new plan to manage the Strait of Hormuz?," Reuters, April 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/can-iran-charge-fees-ships-transit-strait-hormuz-2026-04-07/>.

³² "'They Have Been Exposed': The Iran War Upends Gulf States' Security and Business Model," Atlantic Council, MENA Source, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/they-have-been-exposed-the-iran-war-upends-gulf-states-security-and-business-model/>.

³³ "The Grounded Gallipoli Tehran Wants," Atlas Institute, 2026, <https://atlasinstitute.org/the-grounded-gallipoli-tehran-wants/>.

³⁴ David Levy, Eyal Pinko, and Eitan Shamir, "Asymmetric war at sea: The doctrine of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN)," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2025.2598757>.

imposition dynamic that distributed maritime denial concepts, including EABO, are designed to produce against an adversary. The IRGC-N produced it against the United States.^{35 36}

The Baseline

Taken together, the four parameters examined above — logistics footprint, signature management, C2 architecture, and cost imposition — constitute a coherent operational model for distributed maritime denial. The IRGC-N did not stumble into this model; it is the product of decades of asymmetric adaptation to a conventionally superior adversary. It is this model, not any specific Iranian capability, that Section 3 uses as the analytical baseline against which EABO's institutional readiness is assessed.

2.2 The ARG-MEU in Operation EPIC FURY

The geographic character of the Strait of Hormuz shaped the operational environment before the first US Marine arrived in theatre. With strategic terrain along the Iranian coastline and IRGC units embedded within the Zagros Mountains, the strait offered Iran a layered denial environment: all surface movement within direct line of sight of coastal units armed with anti-ship missiles, mortars, and drones, with sea mines already laid and continuous drone and missile harassment.^{37 38} A forced opening of the strait by amphibious assault would have been prohibitively costly under any configuration of forces.

During the first several weeks of strikes on Iran, no ARGs or MEUs were located in the Middle East. The three mine-countermeasure-equipped LCSs assigned to Fifth Fleet — USS Santa Barbara, USS Tulsa, and USS Canberra — put to sea from Manama ahead of the 28 February strike as a force-protection measure and then left the theatre altogether; Tulsa and Santa Barbara were photographed in Penang on 15 March,

³⁵ CSIS, "Cost and Value of Air and Missile Defense Intercepts."

³⁶ Amy Zegart, "Cheap Fights, Credible Threats: The Future of Armed Drones and Coercion" (working paper, SSRN, 2017), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3050228.

³⁷ Can Kasapoglu, "Examining US Military Options for Kharg Island and the Strait of Hormuz," Hudson Institute, 2026, <https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/cutting-gordian-knot-us-military-options-kharg-island-strait-hormuz-can-kasapoglu>.

³⁸ "Two U.S. Warships Sail Through Strait of Hormuz to Establish New Route for Merchant Ships," *USNI News*, April 11, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/04/11/two-u-s-warships-sail-through-strait-of-hormuz-to-establish-new-route-for-merchant-ships>.

leaving CENTCOM without dedicated surface minesweeping capability in the middle of an Iranian mine-laying campaign.³⁹

The Tripoli ARG, with the 31st MEU embarked, departed Okinawa in mid-March 2026 and arrived in CENTCOM's area of responsibility on 27 March with approximately 2,200 Marines — part of an ARG-MEU total of around 3,500 sailors and Marines, F-35B aircraft, MV-22 Ospreys, and amphibious landing craft.⁴⁰ 41 USS Boxer with the 11th MEU departed San Diego as a potential reinforcement or replacement. The 3rd MLR, at initial operational capability (IOC) in Hawaii, was not deployed to the theatre.⁴²

The 31st MEU's employment after its arrival on 27 March fell into three phases: amphibious posturing for potential island seizure from late March; maritime boarding operations from 13 April following the imposition of the naval blockade; and, from at least late May, the establishment of forward arming and refuelling points (FARPs) and sensing sites ashore in support of joint air operations.⁴³

From 9 March — before the 31st MEU arrived — Army and Marine ground-based fires, principally Army High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers firing Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) and Precision Strike Missile (PrSM) munitions, were employed in long-range fires support of joint strike operations, striking IRGC missile batteries, radar installations, command nodes and naval vessels along the Gulf coastline.⁴⁴ Using HIMARS in a long-range fires support role — as distinct from the EABO employment logic of positioning fires within the adversary's weapons engagement zone (WEZ) for sea denial — is analytically significant: these were fires used in the conventional joint fires support role, not in the distributed maritime denial role that FD2030 envisages, and ground-based long-range fires were

³⁹ "Middle East-Based U.S. Mine Countermeasure Ships Spotted in Malaysia," *USNI News*, March 16, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/03/16/middle-east-based-u-s-mine-countermeasure-ships-spotted-in-malaysia>.

⁴⁰ Atlantic Council, "Tracking US Military Assets."

⁴¹ "USS Tripoli Operating in CENTCOM, USS Gerald R. Ford in Croatia," *USNI News*, March 28, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/03/28/uss-tripoli-operating-in-centcom-uss-gerald-r-ford-in-croatia>.

⁴² "Trump wants to seize Iran's key oil terminal. Doing so would come with risk, experts say," *Stars and Stripes*, March 31, 2026, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/2026-03-31/kharg-island-iran-ground-invasion-21226037.html.

⁴³ "How a US Assault on Kharg Island Would Unfold," *Australian Financial Review*, March 26, 2026, <https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/how-a-us-assault-on-kharg-island-would-unfold-20260326-p5ziw4>

⁴⁴ "Epic Fury Update – Mar 15, 2026," *SOF News*, March 15, 2026, <https://sof.news/middle-east/epic-fury-update/>.

demonstrably available in theatre for the duration of the campaign. Separately, in a development the Marine Corps disclosed only in September 2026, the 31st MEU established FARPs and sensing expeditionary advanced bases at undisclosed locations, refuelling more than 300 aircraft ashore and underway, including Army helicopters and uncrewed aircraft.

The amphibious posturing phase centred on Kharg Island — Iran's primary oil export terminal and the most discussed seizure option of the conflict. The option was not executed; the posturing served a coercive signalling function rather than an operational one.^{45 46}

Following the formal imposition of the naval blockade of Iranian ports, the 31st MEU conducted maritime boarding operations as part of the interdiction effort. On 19 April, Marines boarded and seized the Iranian-flagged Touska cargo ship after the vessel attempted to bypass the blockade — a concrete instance of direct Marine employment during the operational period. Visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations of this kind continued as the blockade expanded across the region.

The 31st MEU performed recognisable ARG-MEU tasks throughout. Amphibious posturing for island seizure, maritime boarding operations, and forward aviation support are missions the Marine Corps has conducted in every major contingency since the Second World War.⁴⁷ They are the missions for which the ARG-MEU configuration is designed, certified, and rehearsed. They are not EABO missions. The distinction between what the 31st MEU did and what EABO would have required is not a performance criticism. It is a structural observation about the employment model that was reached for when the contingency arrived.

⁴⁵ "This is what we know about the Maritime Raid Force used to seize Iranian vessel," Task & Purpose, 2026, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marines-sea-raids/>.

⁴⁶ "Marines Seize Cargo Ship," Task & Purpose, 2026, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marines-seize-cargo-ship-iran/>.

⁴⁷ "The Folly of Seizing Kharg Island," War on the Rocks, 2026, <https://warontherocks.com/the-folly-of-seizing-kharg-island/>.

2.3 The Question

The basic operational logic of EABO and SIF was recognisable in the IRGC-N's conduct: distributed, low-signature, shore-based maritime denial, designed to complicate adversary targeting and impose disproportionate cost on high-value platforms. Meanwhile, the US Marines focused on blockade-enforcement boarding, amphibious posturing for an island seizure, and FARPs in support of joint air operations — recognisable ARG-MEU tasks.^{48 49}

Given that the IRGC-N was executing distributed maritime denial at operational scale; that the US Marine Corps has spent years developing a distributed maritime denial concept; and that two MEUs were present in or deploying to theatre — what explains the gap between the concept's availability and its non-employment?

The standard explanations for this gap — geographic mismatch, concept immaturity, basing constraints — are not wrong. The Persian Gulf is not the First Island Chain. The Marine Littoral Regiments are mid-fielding. Gulf states restricted access before the war began. But these situational explanations miss the underlying structural problem. Section 3 argues that the gap was not produced by the Gulf's geographic or political specificities — it was produced by structural characteristics of the concept's current institutional state.

⁴⁸ "U.S. Marines Board Containership Blue Star III in Arabian Sea Under Blockade Regime — Vessel Cleared and Released," Maritime Optima, 2026, <https://maritimeoptima.com/maritime-news/u-s-marines-board-containership-blue-star-iii-in-arabian-sea-under-blockade-regime---vessel-cleared-and-released>.

⁴⁹ SOF News, "Epic Fury Update" (March 15, 2026).

Section 3

The Three Failures

The three failures examined in this section are not explanations for what happened in the Iran war; they are failures in the concept’s institutional readiness that the war made visible. The framing matters: these are problems the war confirmed, not problems it created.

Each failure is examined through a common analytical structure: what the concept assumes; the evidence that the assumption is not reliably met; the pre-war signals that should have prompted action; and the implications for the Indo-Pacific. The three failures are institutional reversion, access assumption, and logistics survivability. All three were knowable before February 2026. None are resolved by the Indo-Pacific’s different geography or political configuration, where the margin for the same failures is considerably narrower.

Figure 2: The Three Failures

Failure	What the Concept Assumes	Iran War Evidence	Indo-Pacific Stakes
The Institutional Reversion Problem	An EABO-ready formation is instinctively reachable under pressure	31st MEU employed in legacy ARG-MEU roles	ARG-MEU under PLA fires is not survivable the way it was under the IRGC-N. Reversion is fatal, not costly
The Access Assumption	Regional partners grant access inside the adversary’s WEZ at H-hour	GCC denied access before the war began. Spain, Italy refused basing. UK reversed only after being struck	PLA coercion is faster and more direct. No fallback posture from Guam
The Logistics Survivability Assumption	Stand-in Forces can be resupplied reliably without generating an large and targetable ISR signature	No SIF deployed. IRGC-N sustained via sovereign land-based network. No maritime resupply signature	PLA ISR more capable. No sovereign logistics network available to EABO

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN

3.1 Failure One: The Institutional Reversion Problem

The institutional reversion argument does not claim that the concept failed or that the force performed poorly. It argues that when the Iran war began and operational speed compressed decision cycles, commanders reached for what was available rather than what was doctrinally intended — and that this was not a failure of will or judgment but a structural outcome of the concept's incomplete institutional embedding.

The argument advanced here is narrower than it may first appear. This paper does not argue that EABO should have replaced the ARG-MEU's missions in the Gulf, or that the blockade enforcement, boarding operations, and forward aviation support the 31st MEU conducted were the wrong choices. They were appropriate for the contingency. The argument is instead that the operating environment the IRGC-N created — distributed, low-signature, shore-based maritime denial inside a contested littoral — closely resembled the threat conditions EABO was designed for. This was, by a wide margin, the closest real-world approximation to EABO's design environment since the concept's inception. Had the Marines been fully committed to combat operations in this environment, the ARG-MEU configuration's outer ambition would have been an amphibious raid force against Iranian islands in the strait, or an attempt to secure beachheads on Iran's coastline to disable IRGC-N anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities — missions that would have required the Battalion Landing Teams of the MEUs and represented the operational ceiling of what the ARG-MEU configuration could deliver in this theatre. EABO was not a more ambitious version of that ceiling. It was a different instrument entirely — distributed, low-signature, and positioned inside the threat envelope rather than arriving to break through it.

The Gulf was an opportunity to employ elements of the concept experimentally — a SIF detachment conducting low-signature ISR or fires from a position near the contested littoral, alongside the ARG-MEU's primary missions — and thereby generate the operational data that no MCCRE or exercise can produce. That opportunity was taken only at the concept's margins. The FARPs the 31st MEU established are the aviation-support and reconnaissance functions of the concept, and the functions that most closely resemble an ARG-MEU's ordinary business. What was not attempted, even experimentally, was the concept's defining element: sea-denial fires from a stand-in formation positioned inside the WEZ. The conditions for a full test were absent — access was restricted, no MLR was present, and the LSM did not exist — but the

operational threat environment was unusually representative of the conditions the concept was designed to address. The gap between the portion of EABO that was employed and the fires-and-manoevre core that was not is the measure of how far the concept remains from being a reachable option.

The Reachability Assumption

EABO and SIF assume that when a maritime contingency arises in a contested littoral, the joint force will have a distributed maritime denial capability that is operationally ready and institutionally familiar. The Tentative Manual for EABO (TM-EABO) describes this capability as mobile, low-signature, persistent, and easy to sustain.^{50 51} The concept assumes not just that the formation exists and has reached IOC, but that a commander under pressure — with limited time and high uncertainty — would reach for it as confidently as for any other certified model.

That assumption requires a distinction the paper makes explicitly. IOC is a capability declaration — it certifies that a formation has the minimum required personnel, equipment, and training to perform its assigned mission in principle. It is a threshold, not a standard of readiness for combat employment. The Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation (MCCRE) is the institutional mechanism designed to produce that higher standard — a formal evaluation of a unit against its Mission Essential Tasks (METs) under realistic operational conditions, conducted as the minimum requirement before deployment.⁵² The 3rd MLR has completed two MCCREs — the first in February 2025,⁵³ and the second in February 2026, explicitly built around EABO and distributed maritime operations concepts.⁵⁴ The institution is not failing

⁵⁰ David H. Berger, "A Concept for Stand-in Forces," *Proceedings* 147, no. 11 (November 2021),

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/november/concept-stand-forces>.

⁵¹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2nd ed. (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, May 2023), <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/230509-Tentative-Manual-For-Expeditionary-Advanced-Base-Operations-2nd-Edition.pdf>.

⁵² U.S. Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Readiness Reporting Standard Operating Procedures*, Marine Corps Order 3501.1E (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps), <https://www.marines.mil/News/Publications/MCPEL/Electronic-Library-Display/Article/1780191/mco-35011e/>.

⁵³ "3d MLR Conducts Its First Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation Across Hawaiian Islands," DVIDS, February 2025, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/491419/3d-mlr-conducts-its-first-marine-corps-combat-readiness-evaluation-across-hawaiian-islands>.

⁵⁴ "Distributed Maritime Operations: 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment Certifies Its Marines During 2026 MCCRE," DVIDS, February 2026, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/559404/distributed-maritime-operations-3rd-marine-littoral-regiment-certifies-its-marines-during-2026-mccre>.

at evaluation. The MCCRE framework is being applied and the scenario design is improving.

The problem is not the quality of the evaluation. It is the structural incompleteness of what is being evaluated. The ARG-MEU's reachability is not primarily the product of well-designed MCCREs. It is the product of repeated evaluation of a Full Operational Capability (FOC) state — formation, platform, naval integration, logistics — across decades and multiple generations of commanders, until employment is not a choice that requires deliberation but an instinct.

A terminological precision is necessary here, because the term FOC already has an established meaning within the Marine Corps' own programme documentation, and that meaning is not the one this paper uses. Congressional Research Service (CRS) reporting on the MLR programme states the 3rd MLR was on a stated trajectory toward FOC in FY2025 — a designation referring to organic equipment fielding: the Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), MQ-9 uncrewed aircraft, the Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS), and the Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR) reaching their programmed levels for the formation.⁵⁵ Whether that milestone has been formally confirmed as met is not established in the public record reviewed for this paper. What is established is how the programme is reported: the MLR's organic systems — NMESIS, MQ-9, MADIS, G/ATOR — each carry their own fielding-based FOC milestones, tracked as Marine Corps acquisition programmes. The LSM is reported separately, as a Navy shipbuilding programme with its own acquisition timeline, and does not appear as a criterion within the MLR's own organic-equipment FOC accounting. So, by the institution's own definition, FOC for the 3rd MLR is a function of organic equipment levels, and does not include the LSM.

The full-system standard that this paper refers to throughout — formation, LSM connectivity, naval integration, and logistics architecture, evaluated together — is a different and more demanding standard, for which no institutional designation currently exists. To avoid confusion with the organic-equipment FOC described above, this paper refers to it as Concept-Level FOC (CFOC), and to a formation that has not yet reached it as pre-CFOC. The distinction is the argument, not a footnote to it: even

⁵⁵ Andrew Feickert, *The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR)*, CRS In Focus IF12200 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated June 25, 2026), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12200>.

on the institution's own organic-equipment standard — whether or not the 3rd MLR has formally met it — that standard does not and cannot include the platform without which the formation cannot execute the concept it was designed for. A formation can be at or near organic-equipment FOC and be nowhere near CFOC, because the two standards are measuring different things. The bar the institution has set for itself is not the bar that matters for EABO employment.

EABO does not yet have a formation at CFOC to evaluate. The LSM — without which the MLR cannot execute the distributed island manoeuvre — does not exist. Construction begins in late 2026 and first delivery is projected for 2029.⁵⁶ The MLR has achieved IOC, and is on a stated trajectory toward organic-equipment FOC. It has not achieved, and cannot yet be evaluated against, CFOC — and CFOC is gated entirely by LSM delivery.

The Institutional Unreadiness Window

This creates a specific and calculable problem. The window of institutional unreadiness — the period during which EABO cannot become instinctive because CFOC cannot be rehearsed — is open now. It has a definable earliest closing point, set by the LSM programme, and an actual closing date that is uncertain: both must be read against a risk horizon that is already approaching.

The scale of that problem is visible in the only precedent the Marine Corps has for building a platform, doctrine, and institutional reflex from nothing, simultaneously: its own interwar development of amphibious doctrine, which took roughly two decades from initial concept to genuine institutional mastery — even with a dedicated Fleet Marine Force built to carry it.⁵⁷ CFOC asks the institution to repeat that feat on a narrower base: two MLRs rather than a multi-division force, and a ship class not yet under construction. Neither MLR can begin accumulating CFOC-level repetitions before 2029, and nothing in the Corps' own history suggests this kind of simultaneous build compresses into less than a decade — the scale against which the boundaries

⁵⁶ Andrew Feickert, *Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R46374 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46374>.

⁵⁷ Annette D. Amerman, *The Marines Have Landed: Eighty Years of Marine Corps Landings, 1935–2015*. (History Division U.S. Marine Corps Quantico, Virginia], 2016), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D214-PURL-gpo83508/pdf/GOVPUB-D214-PURL-gpo83508.pdf>.

below should be read. The 12th MLR formally received its NMESIS and MADIS systems in June 2026, and the 3rd MLR conducted bilateral littoral mobility training with Philippine marines during KAMANDAG 10 the same month.⁵⁸ During KAMANDAG, the 3rd MLR moved NMESIS and MADIS between island positions aboard Philippine landing craft and conducted simulated maritime fires against the Luzon Strait — the manoeuvre function the LSM exists to provide, achieved without one. It does not soften the dependency; it relocates it. Partner connectors carry a launcher between adjacent islands in permissive daylight conditions, not a formation with its sustainment inside a weapons engagement zone, and they are available on the partner's consent, at the partner's discretion, and in a contingency for the partner's own use first. Substituting allied lift for the LSM converts a materiel dependency the Marine Corps can manage into the political dependency examined in Failure Two — concentrated on the governments whose access calculus is least predictable at H-hour. A formation that manoeuvres only when Manila lends it the boats does not have organic mobility. It has a second access decision.

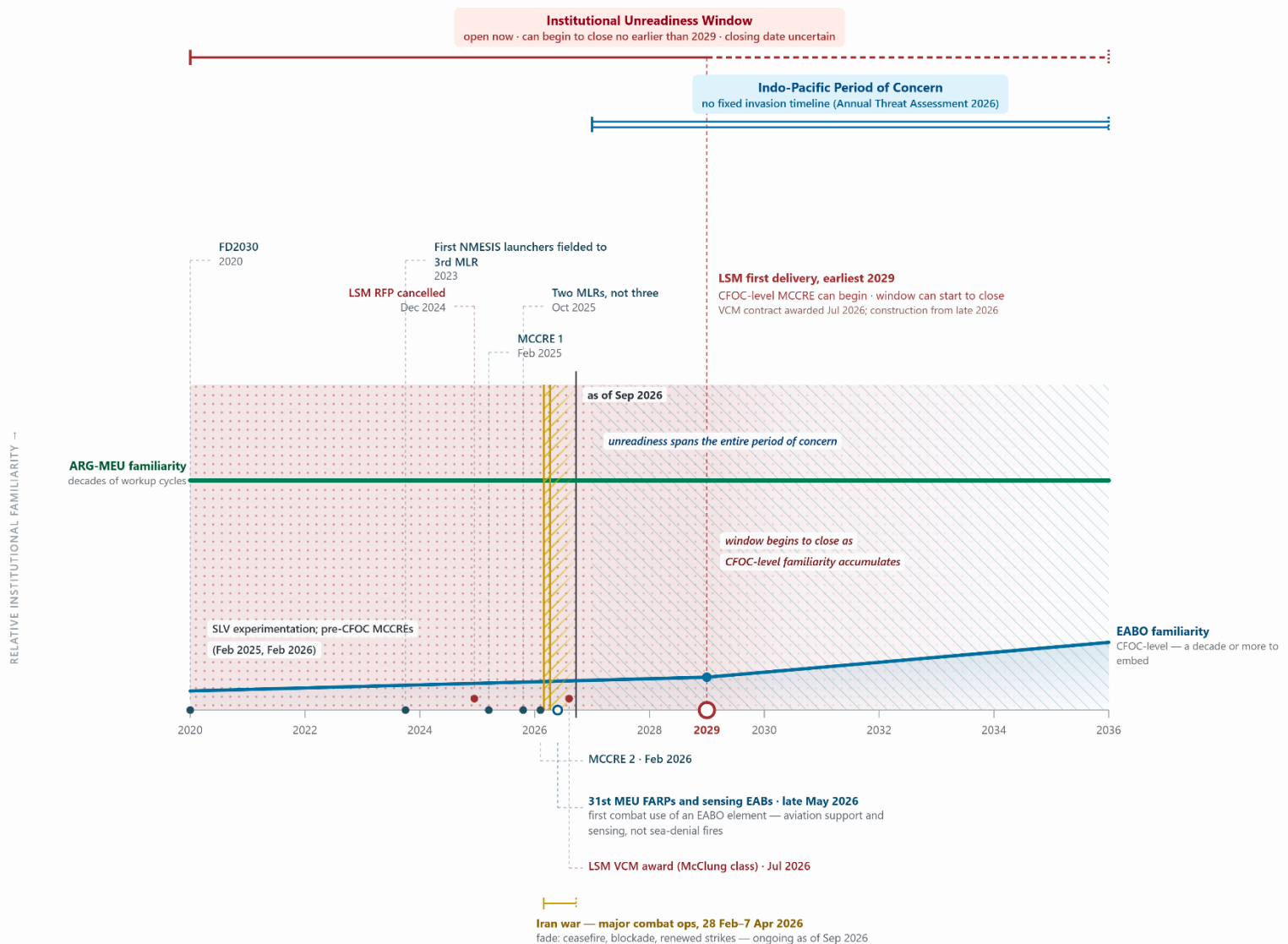
The earliest closing point is set by the LSM programme. CFOC-level MCCRE — MLR plus LSM plus naval integration plus logistics architecture — cannot begin before first LSM delivery in 2029. Before that point, no amount of effort can produce familiarity with EABO as the concept intends. The window can begin to close no earlier than 2029, and only if the LSM programme delivers on schedule. The programme's history does not inspire confidence that 2029 is a hard date, although the July 2026 award of the vessel construction manager contract and a construction start planned for late 2026 make it a more credible one than it was when the war began.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰

⁵⁸ U.S. Marine Corps, "NMESIS and MADIS Arrival on Okinawa," Marines.mil, June 26, 2026, <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/4524127/nmesis-and-madis-arrival-on-okinawa/>.

⁵⁹ "Report to Congress on Landing Ship Medium Program," *USNI News*, April 24, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/04/24/report-to-congress-on-landing-ship-medium-program>.

⁶⁰ "Marine Corps Axes Plan for Third Littoral Regiment, Ready to Move on Medium Landing Ship," *Defense One*, October 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/10/marine-corps-axes-plan-third-littoral-regiment-ready-move-medium-landing-ship/409152/>.

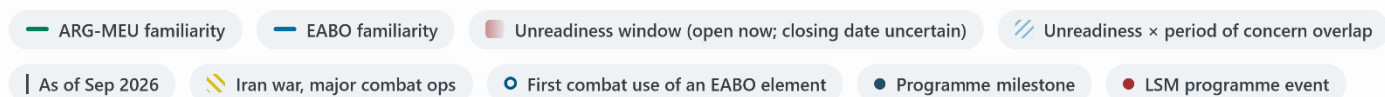
Figure 3: The Institutional Unreadiness Window



CFOC-level MCCRE — MLR plus LSM plus naval integration plus logistics architecture — cannot begin until the Landing Ship Medium exists, earliest 2029. The institutional unreadiness window is therefore already open; it can begin to close only from that point, precisely as PLA capability matures fastest. The interwar amphibious precedent suggests embedding takes a decade or more.

Curves are schematic and not to scale. Dates, boundaries and trajectories are the authors' estimates drawn from open sources; they illustrate the structure of the argument and should not be read as precise forecasts. The unreadiness band's fade indicates a closing process of uncertain duration, not a forecast. Evidence current as of September 2026.

Sources: CRS IF12200 (June 2026); USNI News, 13 July 2026; ODNI Annual Threat Assessment 2026; Lead Inspector General, Operation Epic Fury (2026); authors' analysis.



Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN

The institutional base for that CFOC-level rehearsal is also narrower than originally envisaged. In October 2025, the Commandant announced that the Marine Corps would establish two Marine Littoral Regiments rather than the three originally intended, citing field experiments, lessons from major exercises, and other analyses.⁶¹ Two MLRs rather than three means fewer formations to build CFOC-level familiarity once the LSM exists, and a reduced margin for distributing EABO employment across multiple formations with independent operational experience.⁶² The window's constraints are tighter than the original Force Design envisaged.

The Marine Corps has partly bridged the LSM gap by leasing two Stern Landing Vessels for EABO experimentation — vessels the Corps itself calls vital for SIF and EABO capability experimentation, while acknowledging they cannot fully meet mobility requirements.⁶³ The SLVs allow experimentation and concept refinement, but at a smaller scale, and they do not constitute the CFOC state the concept describes. Familiarity built on SLVs will not automatically transfer once the LSM arrives. Some elements will likely carry over — command and control under EMCON, sensor-to-fires integration, distributed sustainment under contested conditions. The element that does not transfer is the one the concept depends on most: maritime manoeuvre and repositioning via the LSM itself, which by definition cannot be rehearsed before the ship exists. Every MCCRE conducted before LSM delivery is evaluating a pre-CFOC formation. The two MCCREs so far have shown what the 3rd MLR can do without LSM connectivity.

The deadline is genuinely uncertain, and recent assessment has made it more so rather than less. The US intelligence community's most recent Annual Threat Assessment found that Chinese leaders do not currently plan an invasion in 2027 and hold no fixed timeline for unification — a finding widely read as retiring the 2027 window that has anchored Pacific force planning since 2021.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ This paper does not dispute that

⁶¹ Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond III, "U.S. Marine Corps Year in Review," *Proceedings* 152, no. 3 (March 2026), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2026/march/us-marine-corps-year-review>.

⁶² Feickert, *Marine Littoral Regiment*.

⁶³ Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond III, "U.S. Marine Corps Year in Review," *Proceedings* 151, no. 3 (March 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/march/us-marine-corps-year-review>.

⁶⁴ Lead IG, *Operation Epic Fury*.

⁶⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, 2026), <https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2026-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

assessment, and the window argument does not depend on the date it replaced. It depends on a different variable, and the same assessment identifies it. The intelligence community judges that Beijing's decision will turn in part on PLA readiness and on whether the United States would intervene militarily. Both are capability judgements rather than calendar ones, and both are observable. That inverts the significance of institutional unreadiness. A concept that cannot be employed is not only a risk to be carried into a contingency; it is an input to the adversary's assessment of whether to initiate one. The Marine Corps distributed maritime denial capability exists to complicate exactly the calculation the intelligence community says Beijing is making — and a capability that cannot be exercised at full-system level before 2029, and cannot become instinctive for years after, contributes little to that calculation in the interim. The question is therefore not whether the Corps will be ready by a particular year. It is how long a capability advertised as central to deterrence can remain unemployable before the deterrent effect it is supposed to generate is discounted by the party it is meant to deter.

It holds regardless of where the risk horizon falls — because even if the risk does not peak until 2035, a first CFOC-level MCCRE programme beginning in 2029 at the earliest leaves a tight margin for the concept to become sufficiently embedded institutionally. The margin is narrow whether the risk peaks early, mid- or late 2030s. The asymmetry between how long institutional familiarity takes to build and how little time remains before the risk horizon arrives is the structural problem — not the precision of any particular date.

The structural problem is this: the window of institutional unreadiness is open now and cannot begin to close before 2029. In the most likely scenario — LSM delivery in 2029, some slippage in the subsequent integration and CFOC-level MCCRE programme — the Marine Corps will be building institutional familiarity with the EABO formation at CFOC at precisely the point when PLA capability is furthest advanced. That is not a planning failure in the conventional sense. It is a structural consequence of institutional readiness depending on LSM delivery — a dependency the existing programme architecture does not acknowledge or account for.

The 2026 Iran War Campaign Record

The 31st MEU arrived in theatre and was employed in the ARG-MEU configuration — conventional amphibious posturing, maritime boarding, and forward arming, refuelling and sensing sites. The 3rd MLR, at IOC in Hawaii, was conducting its second MCCRE while the contingency that called for exactly those capabilities was occurring in the Gulf. The 3rd MLR was not deployed. The operational decisions made were appropriate to the circumstances. The question the campaign record generates is not whether those decisions were wrong, but why the Gulf's close resemblance to EABO's design environment did not generate a serious attempt to validate the concept under real conditions.⁶⁶

The answer is structural. A further layer of institutional complexity compounds this. Analysts have argued that the MLR and the SIF concept are not equivalent — that the MLR is more accurately understood as a joint munition provider operating within a larger naval framework than as a self-sufficient Stand-in Force in the sense the TM-EABO describes.⁶⁷ If that characterisation is correct — and the paper takes no position on adjudicating this internal debate — it introduces a second dimension to the institutional reversion problem. Commanders may have declined to reach for the MLR not only because the CFOC-level formation was unavailable, but because the MLR's specific role within EABO employment remained conceptually contested within the institution itself. An institution that has not resolved what a formation does cannot be expected to reach for it instinctively under pressure.

The 3rd MLR had completed two MCCREs and had no LSM. It had been evaluated against EABO METs in a pre-CFOC state. It had not been evaluated as a formation at CFOC. Commanders under operational pressure reached for the formation whose CFOC state they knew — the ARG-MEU — rather than the formation whose CFOC state had never been rehearsed because it did not yet fully exist. That is institutional reversion. It is not a failure of the individuals involved. It is the predictable outcome

⁶⁶ The absence of even an experimental Stand-in fires element is notable given that ground-based long-range fires — Army HIMARS with ATACMS and PrSM — were employed in theatre from early March in a conventional joint-fires role (Section 2.2), and that the 31st MEU itself established FARPs ashore. The infrastructure for forward positioning existed: it was used for aviation support and reconnaissance, not adapted for sea-denial fires.

⁶⁷ Brian Kerg, Bobby Fowler, and Anthony Johnson, "The MLR ≠ The Stand-in Force," *Proceedings* 151, no. 7 (July 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/july/mlr-stand-force>.

of a structural gap between the concept's design and the systems and platforms available to execute it.

The LSM programme compounds this directly. The 3rd MLR achieved IOC with its organic capabilities — NMESIS, MQ-9, MADIS, G/ATOR — but without the LSM that gives it operational mobility between island positions. An MLR without LSM connectivity is a fires formation that can be inserted by air or by conventional amphibious shipping — it is not the mobile, distributed, island-hopping Stand-in Force the concept describes. The gap between what the 3rd MLR can do at IOC without LSM and what EABO's operational employment requires is the physical expression of the institutional unreadiness window. When the Iran war began, the Marine Corps had a concept, a partially equipped formation, and two MCCREs against a pre-CFOC formation. It did not have a Stand-in Force at CFOC.

None of this is a claim that EABO would be unemployable in a contingency before institutional familiarity matures at CFOC. Forces are routinely committed under imperfect rehearsal conditions, sometimes successfully. The claim is narrower and about risk: a commander employing a CFOC-equivalent formation for the first time, under operational pressure, without the accumulated institutional reflex the concept's own doctrine assumes, is accepting materially higher execution risk than the “mobile, low-signature, persistent, easy to sustain” framing implies. That elevated-risk period is likely to coincide with the years current intelligence assessments treat as carrying the highest Indo-Pacific risk.

The Pre-War Signals

The institutional unreadiness window was not a surprise produced by the Iran war. Its dimensions were visible before February 2026 in four specific ways.

First, the concept's primary connective platform did not exist and its delivery timeline was already slipping. The LSM programme had missed its original FY2023 procurement target, had its request for proposals (RFP) cancelled in December 2024 after bids exceeded budget, and restarted under a commercial design approach.⁶⁸ A concept whose primary enabling platform does not exist cannot generate CFOC-level

⁶⁸ "Report to Congress on Landing Ship Medium."

institutional familiarity. The earliest point at which the window could begin to close was being pushed further right before the war began.

Second, joint integration between EABO formations and allied forces remained unresolved after Arctic exercises.⁶⁹ C2 failures documented after repeated exercises are not a signal of a concept maturing toward institutional familiarity.⁷⁰ They are a signal that the joint integration architecture — a precondition for CFOC-level rehearsal — had not been solved. Joint integration failures at the pre-CFOC stage will compound when the LSM arrives and CFOC-level rehearsal begins. They do not disappear when the platform does. The maritime targeting architecture presents a parallel institutional gap: as of June 2026, the integration of maritime sensing into targeting-quality data for joint fires within the EABO concept remained unresolved.⁷¹ Joint integration failures are not confined to allied coordination. They extend to the concept's own internal sensors-to-fires architecture.

Third, the 3rd MLR's first MCCRE, conducted in February 2025, was described by participants as an opportunity to showcase the regiment's capabilities.⁷² The second, conducted in February 2026, was more operationally sophisticated — adversary-informed, scenario-driven, explicitly built around EABO concepts.⁷³ The trajectory is the right one. But as late as March 2026, the concept was still officially characterised as in the test, refine, and develop phase.⁷⁴ Test, refine, and develop is the language of a concept building toward institutional readiness. It is not the language of a concept that has achieved it. The ARG-MEU workup cycle does not showcase — it certifies.

Fourth, institutional communications were already describing the concept as proven months before the war began. A July 2025 account of Marine Rotational Force-Darwin's (MRF-D) deployment across the First Island Chain and Australia described the rotation as having "forged the blueprint for stand-in forces in the Indo-Pacific,"

⁶⁹ Captain Magnus Bjurstedt, "Adapting Norwegian Army Support to EABO in the Arctic," *Proceedings* 151, no. 11 (November 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/november/adapting-norwegian-army-support-eabo-arctic>.

⁷⁰ Captain Magnus Bjurstedt, "Adapting Norwegian Army Support to EABO."

⁷¹ Captain Mario A. Fajardo, "EABO's Maritime Targeting Problem," *Proceedings* 152, no. 6 (June 2026), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2026/june/eabos-maritime-targeting-problem>.

⁷² DVIDS, "3d MLR Conducts Its First MCCRE."

⁷³ DVIDS, "3rd MLR Certifies Its Marines During 2026 MCCRE."

⁷⁴ "Projecting Power in Contested Regions: Marine Corps EABO Moves from Paper to Reality," *Seapower*, <https://seapowermagazine.org/projecting-power-in-contested-regions-marine-corps-eabo-moves-from-paper-to-reality/>.

citing an MCCRE conducted at Camp Pendleton, embassy-reinforcement drills, and a string of bilateral exercises as evidence. The deployment was real and the interoperability achievements were genuine. But the MCCRE cited was a rifleman-level readiness evaluation, not a CFOC-level evaluation of an MLR with LSM connectivity, and the rotation's sustainment depended on MV-22 Ospreys, KC-130J tankers, and conventional host-nation coordination — not the low-signature, contested resupply the concept's logistics survivability requirement assumes.

This is not a criticism of MRF-D's Marines or their accomplishments. It is a signal that institutional public communications were prepared to describe the Stand-in Force concept as demonstrated well before any formation existed that could be evaluated against CFOC. The gap between proof-of-concept rhetoric and CFOC-level proof is itself part of the institutional reversion problem: an institution confident enough to call something "the blueprint" has less internal pressure to ask whether the formation it is describing has actually cleared the bar the concept requires.⁷⁵ The September 2026 characterisation of the 31st MEU's forward arming and refuelling points as EABO's first combat employment extends the same pattern into the post-ceasefire period. The claim is accurate for the aviation-support portion of the concept: it says nothing about the sea-denial core.⁷⁶

None of these signals required classified access. They were in the public record. Taken together they describe a concept whose institutional unreadiness window was open before the Iran war began, whose earliest closing point is programme-dependent rather than time-dependent, and whose relationship to the Indo-Pacific risk timeline is structurally concerning regardless of how well the MCCRE programme is being executed. The Iran war did not create the window. It demonstrated its consequences at a moment when those consequences remained manageable.

⁷⁵ U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, "The New Face of Stand-in Forces," Pacific Marines Stories, 2025, <https://www.marforpac.marines.mil/Media-Room/Pacific-Marines-Stories/Article/Article/4243520/the-new-face-of-stand-in-forces/>.

⁷⁶ Altman, "USMC Used Its Expeditionary Operations Playbook."

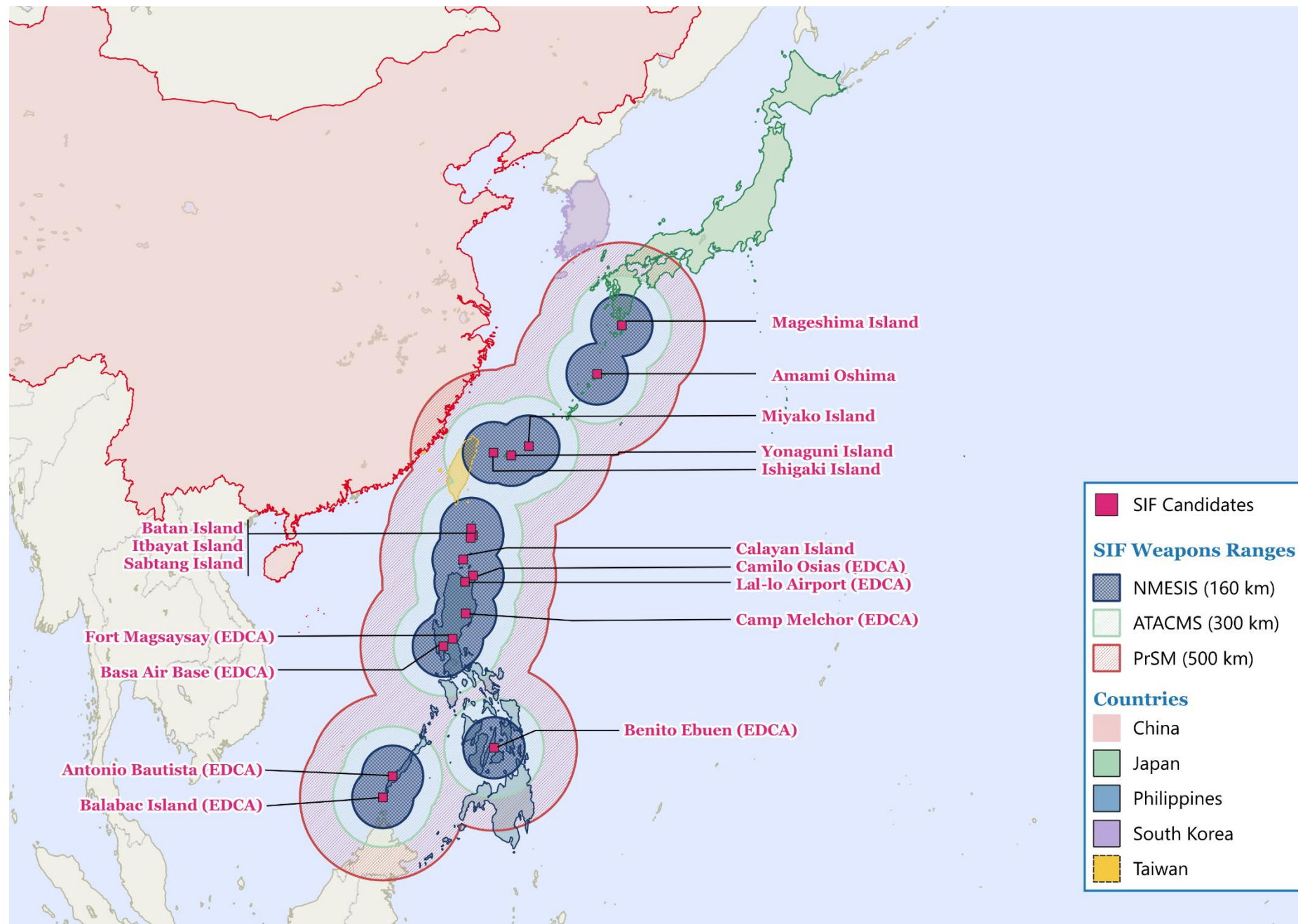
The Implications for the Indo-Pacific

The institutional reversion problem is more consequential for the Indo-Pacific than the Iran war's outcome suggests. In the Gulf, the ARG-MEU employment that was reached for in place of EABO was operationally appropriate. The missions the 31st MEU conducted were the right missions for the contingency. The reversion was costly in terms of concept validation and signalling but not in terms of operational outcomes. In the Indo-Pacific, the same reversion would carry different consequences.

A Taiwan contingency in which US Marines revert to ARG-MEU employment rather than EABO-SIF employment is a contingency in which large, signature-rich amphibious platforms — the landing helicopter assault ships (LHA), the landing platform docks (LPD) — are operating within People's Liberation Army (PLA) weapons range without the low-signature, distributed posture that makes them survivable. The PLA's anti-ship missile arsenal, its ISR architecture, and its ability to track and target high-value surface platforms are qualitatively superior to the IRGC-N's capabilities. An ARG-MEU in the Persian Gulf, under Iranian drone and missile threat, operated and conducted its missions without loss. An ARG-MEU in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea or the Philippine Sea, under PLA fires and ISR, faces a materially different threat equation. The institutional reversion that was acceptable in the Gulf is not acceptable in the Indo-Pacific.

The institutional unreadiness window gives this implication a specific and calculable dimension. If the LSM delivers in 2029 on schedule and CFOC-level MCCRE begins immediately, the Marine Corps will be building institutional familiarity with the EABO formation at CFOC during the period of greatest concern. If the programme slips further — as its history suggests is likely — the margin narrows further still. The Iran war demonstrated what institutional reversion looks like in a contingency where it was operationally acceptable. The Taiwan contingency will not offer that same margin.

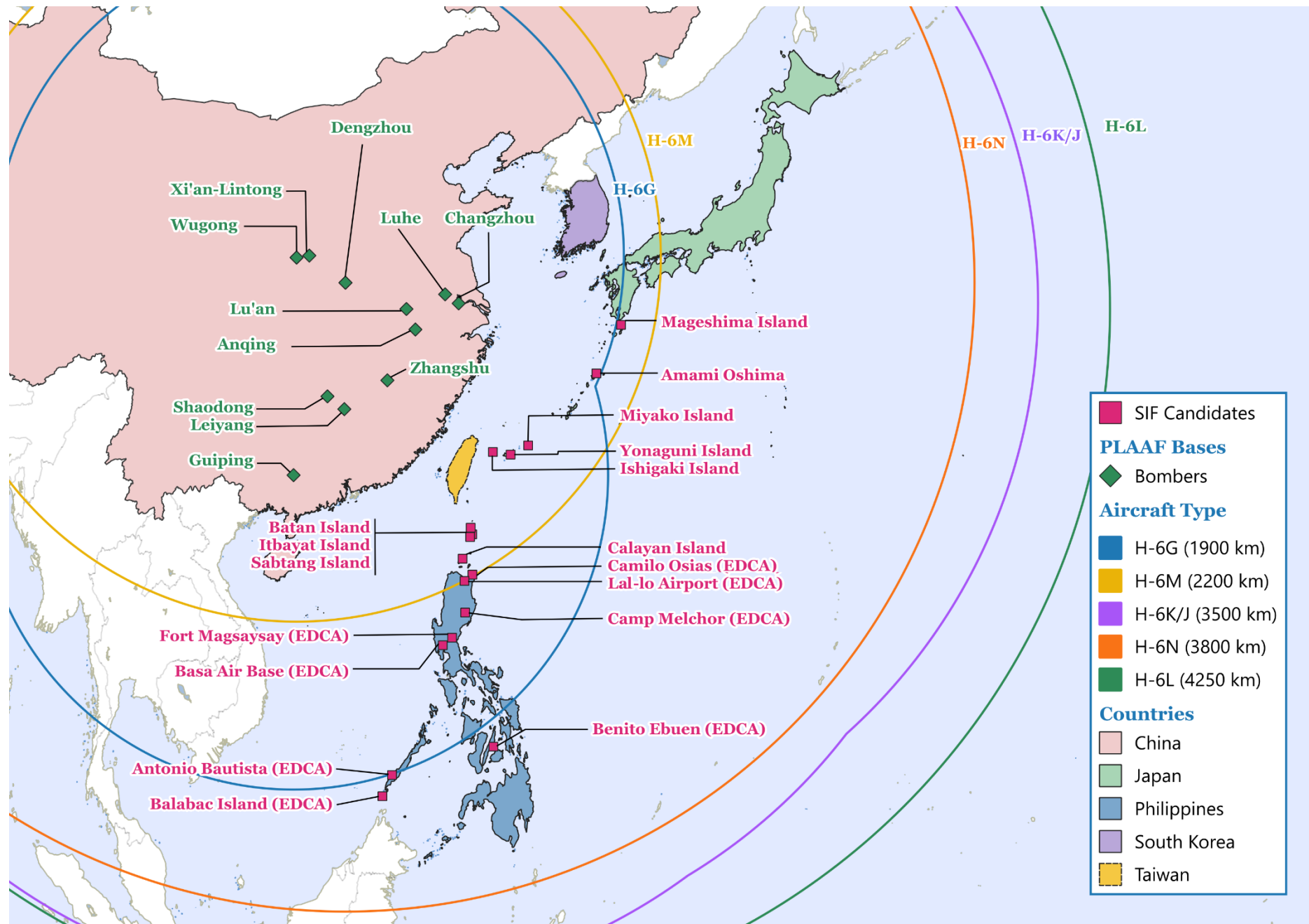
Figure 4: SIF Weapons Ranges



Note: Weapons ranges shown are approximate and intended for illustrative purposes only. They are based on publicly available estimates and may not reflect actual operational capabilities, configurations, or deployment conditions.

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN using open-source intelligence sources

Figure 5: SIF Candidate Locations



Note: Aircraft combat ranges are approximate estimates based on publicly available information and are intended for illustrative purposes only. Locations shown are based on a combination of open-source intelligence, publicly available reporting, and the authors' own analysis and assessment.

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN

3.2 Failure Two: The Access Assumption

The Access Assumption

Both the EABO and SIF concepts are dependent on allies, partners, and host nations granting access to key terrain. This is not incidental to the concept's design — it is a core component. Without access to that key terrain, there are no expeditionary advanced bases. The concept cannot function from carrier decks, from Guam, or from Hawaii. It functions from the islands, the coastlines, and the littorals of the First and Second Island Chains and Southeast Asia. Every operational element — the distribution of fires, the signature management, the sea denial and sea control support — depends on the force's physical presence inside or proximate to the adversary's WEZ. Access is not a simple operational variable; it is an absolute prerequisite.^{77 78}

EABO assumes that when a maritime contingency arises in the First Island Chain, the terrain those forces require will be accessible. Specifically, it assumes that partner governments in the Philippines, Japan, or Taiwan-adjacent territory will grant the United States access to islands or coastal positions inside or proximate to the adversary's WEZ. The concept documents acknowledge that host-nation engagement is a planning requirement.⁷⁹ This access is a political product, not an operational one: it is generated by sovereign governments making real-time calculations about their own exposure under adversary coercive pressure, and those calculations may not reliably produce the access decision the concept depends on. The Iran war demonstrated, at operational scale, the conditions under which that assumption fails — and why those conditions are not unique to the Gulf.

This is consistent with long-standing critiques in the basing-politics literature, which has recognised that host-nation access is contingent rather than guaranteed, and that this is driven by the host's own exposure calculus rather than the strength of the formal agreement.^{80 81} The Iran war confirmed this at scale: access cannot be assumed to exist at the moment of crisis.

⁷⁷ Berger, "Concept for Stand-in Forces."

⁷⁸ USMC, *TM-EABO*.

⁷⁹ USMC, *TM-EABO*.

⁸⁰ "Expeditionary Operations," War Room, U.S. Army War College, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/exp-ops/>.

⁸¹ Ben Wan Beng Ho, "Shortfalls in the Marine Corps' EABO Concept," *Proceedings* 146, no. 7 (July 2020), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/july/shortfalls-marine-corps-eabo-concept>.

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The access failure that constrained Operation EPIC FURY was not a result of inadequate pre-war basing infrastructure.⁸² The United States maintained extensive facilities across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the wider region: Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, Al Udeid in Qatar, Muwaffaq Salti in Jordan, Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain, and access arrangements with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman developed over decades. The Iran war revealed that the existence of those bases did not automatically guarantee their availability at the moment of operational need.

Multiple GCC states blocked US access to bases before Operation EPIC FURY. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait initially refused to permit US or Israeli offensive strike operations from their territory or airspace, driven by a shared calculation: hosting operations against Iran would make their own populations, infrastructure, and leadership immediate targets for Iranian retaliation.⁸³ ⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ The refusal was specific to strike operations: the same states continued to host US forces, air-defence units, logistics throughput and medical facilities, and the Lead Inspector General's account records that the regional and European partners provided significant access, basing and overflight for the campaign. What was withheld was the use of their territory to attack Iran — the operationally decisive decision — and the same official account records that host-nation uncertainty over port access for fleet resupply posed significant challenges before and during the operation. It was a rational response, not a failure of alliance management or a product of anti-American sentiment.⁸⁶

⁸² Access failure and access denial will be used interchangeably, they should be taken to mean an ally, partner or host nation refusing to allow access to US troops or assets, or prohibiting US operations from being undertaken from their territory.

⁸³ "After Iran's Salvo Hit Their Skylines, Will the Gulf States Enter the War?," Al Jazeera, March 2, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/3/2/after-irans-salvo-hit-their-skylines-will-the-gulf-states-enter-the-war>.

⁸⁴ "Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait Refuse to Let US Use Air Bases for Iran Attack," i24 News, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/the-gulf/artc-saudi-arabia-uae-kuwait-refuse-to-let-us-use-air-bases-for-iran-attack>.

⁸⁵ "The Gulf States' Offensive Options Against Iran," International Institute for Strategic Studies, online analysis, March 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/03/the-gulf-states-offensive-options-against-iran/>.

⁸⁶ Exposure calculus is used here to mean a host government's own weighing of the retaliation it would expose itself to by granting access against the benefit it expects from doing so — a calculation driven by the host's assessment of the adversary's capability, intent and likelihood of action, not by the strength of its formal agreements with the US.

The US was thus initially forced to operate from a dramatically limited basing posture. USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea and USS Gerald R. Ford, operating from the Red Sea, served as the primary strike platforms: USS George H.W. Bush arrived in late April to relieve the Ford, the two overlapping only briefly for turnover so that two-carrier coverage was continuous. Jordan permitted limited use of Muwaffaq Salti. Israel provided basing for specific mission sets. This represented a materially different basing architecture from what the US had available during previous Middle East conflicts — specifically Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm (1990-91) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003). The Iranian targeting of GCC facilities hosting US forces — Al Dhafra, Al Udeid, Fifth Fleet Headquarters — further complicated the access picture by making GCC governments acutely aware, in real time, of the cost of hosting US troops and assets. The hub-and-spoke basing architecture that the US had built across four decades was unprepared for a scenario in which partners denied access.

The Pre-War Signals

The Iran war makes visible three independent mechanisms by which access can be denied. The first is exposure calculus, illustrated by the Gulf states' refusal: the cost of hosting US strike operations — immediate Iranian retaliation against their own facilities, populations, and leadership — was certain and near-term, while the benefits of hosting were abstract and contingent on US operational success. That calculus will recur wherever the same conditions emerge.⁸⁷ Saudi Arabia's position partially shifted by late March, while the UAE, despite absorbing heavy strikes, ruled out hosting offensive operations entirely. As late as June, Gulf states were still, on balance, sitting the war out. The variation strengthens rather than undermines the point: even the one state that moved did so narrowly and short of what offensive employment would have required.

The 31st MEU's FARPs were, by the Corps' own account, disaggregated throughout the Middle East — that is, on the territory of partners who had declined to host strike operations. Access for aviation support and sensing was granted where access for

⁸⁷ Brendan McBreen, "EABO Wargame AAR," The Maneuverist, <https://www.themaneuverist.org/post/eabo-wargame-aar-by-ltcol-brendan-mcbreen-usmc-ret>.

strikes was refused. The exposure calculus operates at the level of the mission, not the alliance, and a stand-in fires element would sit at the strike end of that spectrum.

A second and analytically distinct source is domestic political volatility unrelated to the threat environment. The Philippines' Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States provides the clearest pre-war illustration. In February 2020, President Duterte unilaterally notified Washington of the VFA's termination — a decision driven not by any Chinese coercive action or by a reassessment of the basing relationship's strategic value, but by a domestic political grievance: the cancellation of a US visa for a Duterte ally. The termination notices then sat in repeated six-month suspensions, formally rescinded only after a July 2021 meeting between Duterte and the US Secretary of Defense.⁸⁸ For 18 months, the legal basis for the rotational US presence was under notice of termination, for reasons entirely unconnected to the threat environment the access arrangement was meant to address.

This is the second pre-war signal the access assumption failure generates, and it is distinct from the exposure-calculus mechanism the Gulf demonstrated. Exposure calculus describes a partner's response to adversary coercion. The VFA episode describes something else: that the legal and political basis for access can be placed at risk by domestic political dynamics that have nothing to do with the threat environment the access arrangement is meant to address. A concept that depends on access being available at H-hour is vulnerable to both mechanisms independently. Either can remove the access the concept requires, and neither requires PLA action to do so.

A third mechanism is illustrated by a first-tier treaty ally with a far more formal arrangement than either the Gulf states or the Philippines. In February 2026, the United Kingdom initially refused US requests to use Diego Garcia and RAF Fairford for offensive strikes on Iran. The refusal was grounded in international law: under long-standing agreements, the bases could only be used for military operations agreed in advance with the British government. This was neither exposure calculus nor domestic volatility. It was the agreement's own legal structure producing a refusal at the moment access was sought. The refusal did not hold: after Iran fired two missiles

⁸⁸ "The Transformation of the U.S.–Philippines Alliance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transformation-us-philippines-alliance>.

towards Diego Garcia itself, Britain expanded US permissions. Access was restored not through the pre-existing agreement or diplomatic negotiation, but because Iran's own escalation against the host changed the host's position — the UK's reversal was, in effect, exposure calculus operating on a treaty ally: the same mechanism illustrated by the Gulf states, now triggered by direct attack rather than anticipated retaliation.⁸⁹

The United Kingdom was not an isolated case. Spain refused US forces use of the jointly operated bases at Rota and Morón throughout the conflict, stating that it would not authorise their use for any operations related to the war in Iran. Italy denied US bombers landing rights at Naval Air Station Sigonella on the night of 27–28 March after the US requested authorisation only once the aircraft were already airborne, leaving no time for the consultation Italian law requires before national territory can be used in this way — a third variant of treaty conditionality: denial by procedural default under a compressed timeline, rather than a deliberate invocation of treaty terms. Three close treaty allies generated three versions of the same underlying mechanism within the same conflict — a deliberate refusal (Spain), a refusal that reversed under pressure (the UK), and a refusal produced by a compressed timeline rather than a decision at all (Italy). Treaty conditionality is what happens when alliance-level basing agreements meet a contingency the host was not consulted on — nothing about the mechanism is UK-specific.

Each mechanism produced access denial or near-denial independently, without the others. A concept whose employment depends on access surviving all three simultaneously, across every partner in the First Island Chain, has not adequately accounted for the access assumption's fragility.

There is also an institutional failure: there is no publicly available evidence that the Marine Corps or the joint force has specifically war-gamed EABO employment under conditions where a host nation denies or restricts access at H-hour. Existing unclassified EABO wargames — including Lieutenant Colonel Brendan McBreen's EABO wargame after-action report, which recommends partnering with commercial vendors in host nations to reduce resupply pressures — have tested access as a logistics or signature management challenge, while assuming the political precondition of host-

⁸⁹ "Trump, Iran, and Diego Garcia: Inside the Fight over a Remote Military Base," Council on Foreign Relations, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/trump-iran-and-diego-garcia-inside-the-fight-over-a-remote-military-base>.

nation consent.⁹⁰ What they have not addressed is the scenario in which the host nation, at H-hour, refuses to grant access.⁹¹

The Wargame for Innovation and Frontline Improvisation (WIFI) pilot came the closest to grappling with political realities. Game designers forced players to work within a set of realistic geopolitical constraints. However, the scenario still assumed an invitation from the Philippines — not a denied or restricted access situation.⁹² The Unified Pacific Wargame Series 2022, conducted at Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) level, examined host-nation capabilities and access dynamics and acknowledged a whole-of-government approach would be required to improve the likelihood of access at H-hour.⁹³ What neither series, on the basis of publicly available reporting, appears to have modelled is access denial by a partner as an H-hour design condition — the scenario the Gulf has now demonstrated is not only plausible but appears likely.

EABO wargaming has stress-tested operational variables (signature management, unit size, sustainment, fires integration, C2 architecture) while assuming the political precondition — host-nation consent. The problem has been theorised and critiqued extensively in open literature, but no publicly available wargame has modelled the consequences: when access is denied, EABO forces must either operate without it, find alternatives, or fail to execute the concept. That gap is either being addressed in classified wargaming (plausible, given the sensitivity), or it represents a genuine blind spot in the concept's public validation record. The open literature offers no way to distinguish between those two possibilities — which is itself a finding worth noting.

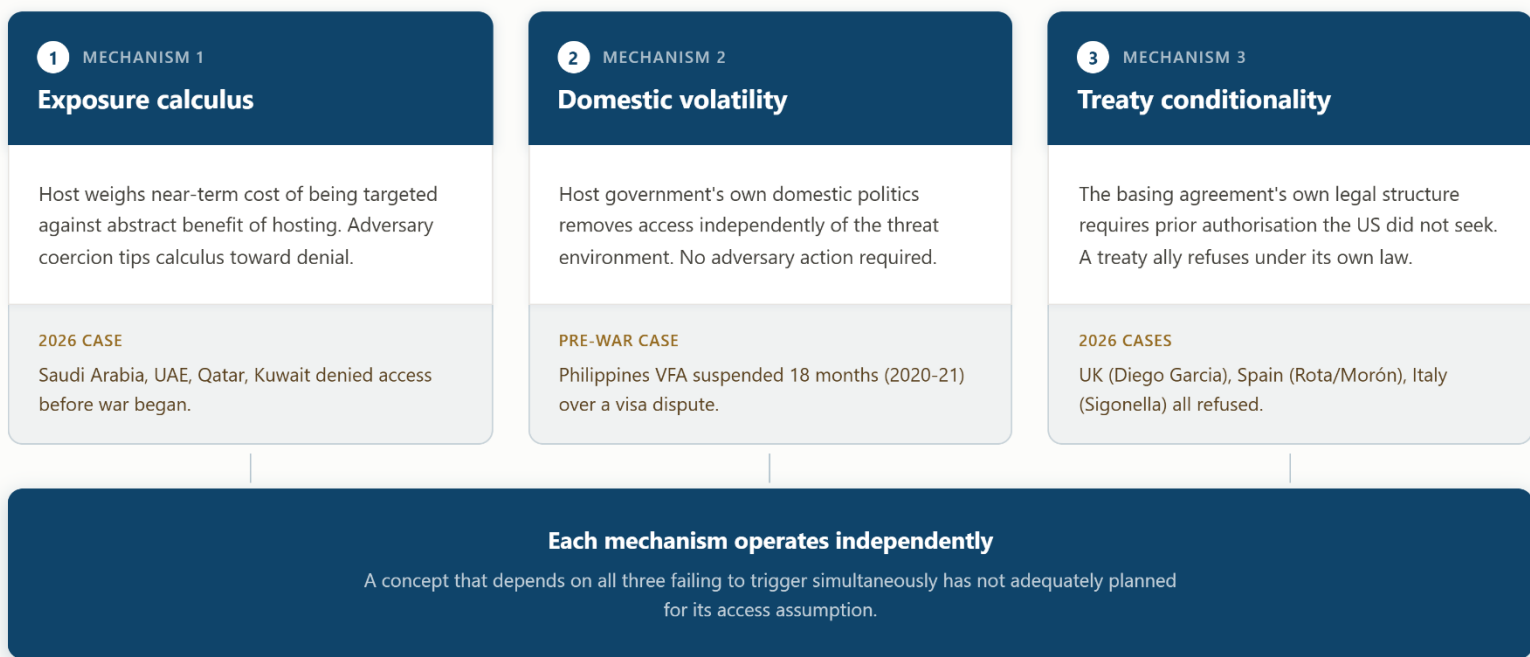
⁹⁰ McBreen, "EABO Wargame AAR."

⁹¹ Semming Rusten, Tim Russell, and Ryan Hamilton, "Agile Wargames Can Test Force Design, Part 2," *Proceedings* 148, no. 11 (November 2022), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/november/agile-wargames-can-test-force-design-part-2>.

⁹² Lesley Wilhelm, "Wargame Maritime COIN," *Proceedings* 148, no. 12 (December 2022), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/december/wargame-maritime-coin>.

⁹³ U.S. Army Pacific, *Unified Pacific Wargame Series: Unclassified Report* (Fort Shafter, HI: USARPAC), <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/Portals/113/PDF%20Files/Unclassified%20UPWS%20Report%20Final.pdf>.

Figure 6: The Three Independent Access-Denial Mechanisms



Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN

The Implications for the Indo-Pacific

The First Island Chain geography that EABO was designed for involves three types of terrain with distinct and contingency-dependent access dynamics. Philippine territory, now subject to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and its 2023 expansion to include northern Luzon sites, provides the most proximate access to the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. Japanese territory — particularly the Ryukyu island chain — provides the second tier. Finally, Taiwan-adjacent terrain presents the most acute challenge, since any EABO employment in that location would occur in a scenario involving Taiwan itself.⁹⁴

Each of these environments faces a different version of the exposure calculus. The Philippine government must weigh whether hosting EABO forces on Luzon — within PLA missile range — makes those sites and surrounding supporting infrastructure targets of the PLA. Additionally, should the US switch to commercial suppliers, civilian infrastructure that supports those suppliers could also become a target. The Japanese government faces a similar weighing for the Ryukyus: whether expanded basing reads as an escalatory signal that Beijing could use to justify pre-emption. Taiwan's

⁹⁴ Including the Pescadores, Kinmen, Matsu, Pratas and Itu Aba.

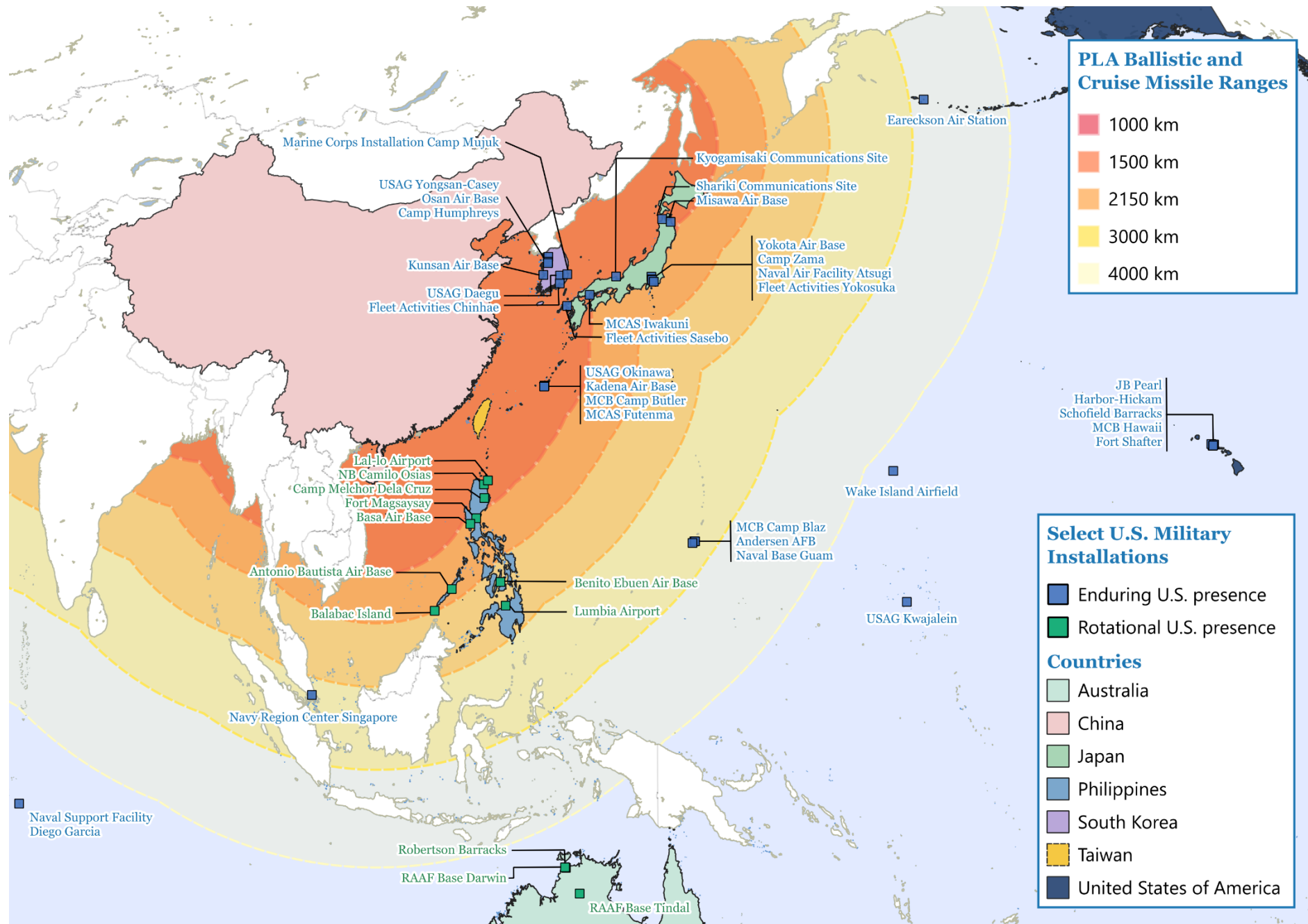
government faces the most extreme version, since its own territory is the contingency and its consent is a political decision of a different order.

The Iran war's specific lesson is not simply that partners might deny access — that proposition has been theorised extensively in the deterrence literature. The lesson is about mechanism and timing. Gulf states did not deny access as a considered strategic choice following extensive deliberation and consultations. They denied it rapidly, collectively, and before the shooting started, driven by an exposure calculus that operated faster than US alliance management could respond. In the Indo-Pacific, PLA coercive pressure against partners would be applied simultaneously with — or before — US consultation, compressing the political decision space in ways that prior agreements are not designed to handle. The Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), the EDCA, and the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement are instruments designed for peacetime facilitation and crisis consultation. They were not designed for a partner government making an H-hour decision under direct PLA pressure.

The operational fallback for when the access assumption fails has not been publicly documented. Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Hawaii are geographically available, but they sit outside — or at the outer edge of — the WEZ. Employment from those locations would constitute a materially different concept of operations: stand-off rather than stand-in, sea control support at range rather than sea denial from within the enemy's WEZ.

This is the dimension of the access assumption failure that distinguishes it from institutional reversion. Institutional reversion is a failure internal to the Marine Corps and its joint partners, and it has a solution the Marine Corps can drive on its own initiative. The access assumption failure is a result of sovereign decisions by partner governments responding to their own exposure calculus and domestic political conditions. It cannot be resolved by further investment in EABO doctrine, by accelerating the MLR fielding programme, or by the LSM delivery schedule. It can only be partially addressed by diplomatic and legal work — pre-negotiated, legally formalised, politically resilient access arrangements that account for partner exposure calculus and domestic political volatility alike — that must be completed before the contingency, not improvised during it, and that requires joint, diplomatic and congressional action no single service can compel.

Figure 7: PLA Ballistic and Cruise Missile Ranges



Note: Missile ranges shown are approximate and intended for illustrative purposes only. They are based on publicly available estimates and may not reflect actual operational capabilities, configurations, or deployment conditions.

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN using open-source intelligence sources and CSIS's Missile Defense Project

3.3 Failure Three: The Logistics Survivability Assumption

The logistics survivability failure is the most technically demanding of the three and the one the existing literature has most engaged with.⁹⁵ ⁹⁶ This paper extends those findings in three specific directions: the operational dimension of the signature problem, the pre-positioning gap the procurement framing obscures, and the section's central claim — that pre-positioning does not solve the signature problem but relocates it. Resupply during conflict generates an episodic signature; pre-positioned stocks generate a permanent one. The concept treats pre-positioning as a solution. It is better understood as a trade.

The Logistics Survivability Assumption

EABO assumes that Stand-in Forces can be sustained inside a contested maritime environment — resupplied with fuel, ammunition, and replacement systems — without that sustainment activity generating an ISR signature large enough to make the force targetable. This is a more demanding assumption than it first appears. Low signature during operations is achievable through emissions control, dispersion, and careful movement discipline. Low signature during resupply is a different problem: it requires that the platforms, personnel, and patterns involved in sustaining the force also remain undetectable, on a recurring basis, over an extended operational period. The concept documents acknowledge the sustainment challenge in general terms.⁹⁷ They do not resolve the tension between the requirement to resupply and the requirement to remain unfound. That unresolved tension is the logistics survivability assumption.

⁹⁵ Nolan Vihlen, "A Large Unmanned Logistics Aircraft Is Critical to Sustain EABO," *Proceedings* 151, no. 2 (February 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/february/large-unmanned-logistics-aircraft-critical-sustain-eabo>.

⁹⁶ Joshua E. Owen, "EABO Needs Special Forces Logistics," *Proceedings* 149, no. 7 (July 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/july/eabo-needs-special-forces-logistics>.

⁹⁷ USMC, *TM-EABO*.

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The closure of the Strait of Hormuz illustrates the same fragility at macro scale that the signature problem identifies at micro scale. The Pentagon's global energy consumption rivals that of a mid-sized nation — variously ranked in the top 35 to top 60 globally depending on the year and metric used; a single chokepoint closure was sufficient to convert fuel from a background cost into a strategic liability, forcing trade-offs between operational tempo and resource constraints across the joint force.⁹⁸ EABO's logistics architecture proposes to solve a version of this problem at the scale of a single EAB — but the strait closure demonstrates that even the macro-scale, redundant, globally sourced fuel network was not resilient to a single denial event. A distributed network of EABs, individually far less redundant than the global fuel network, inherits this fragility at a smaller and more exposed scale.

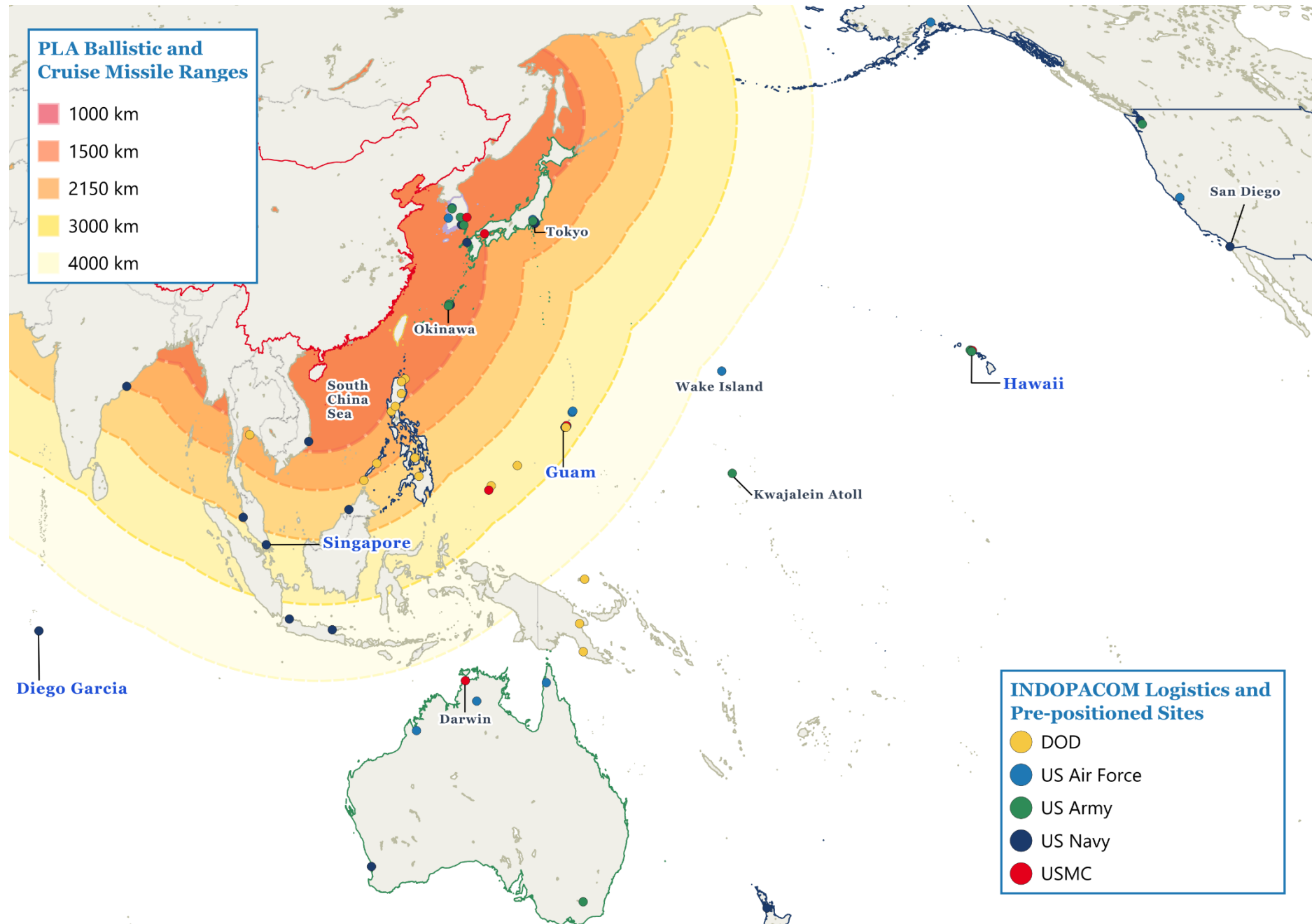
No stand-in formation was employed in the Iran war. The 31st MEU's FARPs were sustained by the MEU's own logistics element, on partner territory, against a threat far less capable than the PLA's. The logistics survivability assumption therefore has no direct operational test case from this conflict. However, a potential island seizure operation was considered during the war — the Kharg Island assessment discussed in Section 2.2 — and the Iranian drone and missile threat was identified there as one of the primary sustainment constraints.⁹⁹ That assessment implicitly acknowledges the logistics survivability problem: how do you resupply a position that the adversary is actively targeting?

The IRGC-N comparison is instructive because it shows what the logistics problem looks like when it is solved. Iranian distributed forces are sustained by a territorial land-based network. There is no maritime resupply run generating a trackable signature. There is no periodic platform aggregation that ISR systems can detect as a targeting opportunity. Stand-in Forces in the Indo-Pacific have none of these characteristics. They must be resupplied by sea or air, in a maritime environment saturated by PLA ISR. The problem is structural, not incidental.

⁹⁸ "Jet Fuel Supplies Are Sharply Affected by the Near-Closure of the Strait of Hormuz," NPR, April 15, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/04/15/nx-s1-5783973/jet-fuel-supplies-are-sharply-affected-by-the-near-closure-of-the-strait-of-hormuz>.

⁹⁹ Kasapoglu, "Cutting the Gordian Knot."

Figure 8: USINDOPACOM Logistics and PLA Missile Ranges



Note: Missile ranges shown are approximate and intended for illustrative purposes only. Locations shown are based on a combination of open-source intelligence and publicly available reporting.

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN using open-source intelligence and CSIS's Missile Defense Project

The comparison runs deeper: the IRGC-N's network is not merely territorial — it is territorial in sovereign Iranian space, and it has had decades to disperse, harden, and become background noise to ISR. Its discovery by an adversary is only a targeting problem, not a diplomatic one, because Iran requires no partner's consent to maintain it. EABO's prospective logistics network, by contrast, sits in partner territory — the Philippines, Japan, Australia — where the same network, even if it achieved comparable physical dispersal, could not achieve comparable maturity, and where its discovery would be simultaneously a targeting problem and an access problem: the same fixed nodes that an ISR system maps are the nodes a partner government must explain to its own public when the PLA identifies them as targets. The signature problem and the access assumption failure are not parallel concerns. In the pre-positioning context, they are the same problem viewed from different directions.

The Signature Problem

The signature problem has two components that the procurement framing does not adequately address. The first is the delivery signature: any platform that approaches a forward island position to deliver fuel, ammunition, or personnel generates a detectable event. A small unmanned aerial system generates less signature than a conventional landing craft, but it still generates one — and for Indo-Pacific distances, with PLA space-based ISR and over-the-horizon radar, the detection threshold is lower and the targeting response faster. The large unmanned logistics aircraft that has been proposed addresses the payload and range problem,¹⁰⁰ but not the detection problem. A low-observable unmanned aircraft delivering supplies to a forward island position at night is less detectable than a conventional aircraft. But it is not completely undetectable.¹⁰¹ The question of what happens when it is detected — whether it compromises the force's position, whether it generates a targeting opportunity the adversary exploits — is not answered in the concept or the procurement literature.

¹⁰⁰ Vihlen, "Large Unmanned Logistics Aircraft." The large ULS-A must operate at long range, with substantial payloads, and at speeds unmatched by any surface connector. The paper endorses this direction while noting the detection problem at the receiving end is not addressed by the platform's characteristics alone.

¹⁰¹ The paper does not suggest that a fully undetectable resupply platform can or should be engineered — signature reduction operates on a spectrum, not as a binary, and the realistic objective is reducing detectability and the consequences of detection. The point made throughout this sub-section is that the question of consequence-when-detected remains open, not that the answer is to chase an impossible standard of invisibility.

The second component is the aggregation signature. Resupply is not a single event. It is a recurring cycle — fuel, ammunition, food, water, battery replacements — that generates a pattern over time. Patterns are what ISR systems are designed to detect. A distributed Stand-in Force that maintains strict emissions control during operational periods but generates a regular resupply pattern has not solved its signature problem. The special forces logistics teams proposed by Gunnery Sergeant Joshua E. Owen in *Proceedings* (2023) are themselves low-signature, and his instinct to focus on low-signature logistics is the right one — but the proposal does not resolve the aggregation problem so much as distribute it across more, smaller resupply events.¹⁰²

The Pre-Positioning Gap

The second extension beyond the existing literature is the pre-positioning question. The procurement discussion focuses almost entirely on resupply during operations: how supplies reach forward positions once the conflict has begun. The harder and less-examined problem is what must be in place before the conflict begins — what pre-positioned stocks, at what forward locations, under what access agreements, would allow Stand-in Forces to operate for an initial period without resupply.

EABO-linked pre-positioning efforts are actively underway, but their scope and survivability expose rather than resolve the gap. The architecture being built is real. It is also incomplete, partially fixed, and in several critical respects not yet operational. At the missile layer, Typhon and NMESIS systems have been forward-deployed to the Philippines and left in place following exercises — a pattern of rotational permanence that is operationally significant but legally and politically distinct from pre-positioned war stocks.¹⁰³ At the fuel layer, the Defense Logistics Agency's (DLA) solicitation for a Davao Gulf fuel depot capable of holding nearly 1 million barrels of naval and aviation fuel — alongside forward refuelling development at Lal-lo in Cagayan and companion nodes in Australia and Papua New Guinea — describes a dispersed network of fixed refuelling points.¹⁰⁴ At the sustainment layer, III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) has formally planned for 45 days of pre-positioned medical and logistics stocks,

¹⁰² Owen, "EABO Needs Special Forces Logistics."

¹⁰³ "Balikatan 2026: US turns Philippines into forward base for war against China," World Socialist Web Site, May 6, 2026, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2026/05/06/vivd-m06.html>.

¹⁰⁴ "Upcoming U.S. Depot in the Philippines to Support Fueling of Navy Destroyers, Combat Logistics Force Ships," *USNI News*, June 9, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/06/09/upcoming-u-s-depot-in-the-philippines-to-support-fueling-of-navy-destroyers-combat-logistics-force-ships>.

and the Army is actively reconsidering whether its mobile afloat Army Prepositioned Stocks-3 (APS-3) should be dissolved into fixed partner-territory locations across the region entirely.

The gaps the programme reveals are more instructive than the capabilities it confirms: the forward logistics network is sparse, partially fixed, politically contingent, and behind its own schedule.

The LSM's absence is also a logistics problem. It is the platform that could move bulk supplies between dispersed positions with less signature than either fixed depots or small unmanned aircraft can manage. Without it, pre-positioned stocks are stranded — fixed where they sit, or redistributable only by the detectable means already discussed. The same gap produces an institutional failure in Failure One and a logistics failure here.

The Pre-War Signals

The logistics survivability assumption was not unexamined before the Iran war. If anything, it was the most actively examined of the three failures.

In May 2023, an analysis of III MEF requisition data found that distributed forces in the First Island Chain could face waits of over 14 days for Class IX resupply blocks, concluding that the dead-lined asset would be a target before the part arrived.¹⁰⁵ The Iran war produced the operational version of the same finding. The Lead Inspector General's account records that establishing adequate naval bases and support ports posed significant challenges before and during the operation because of uncertainty over host-nation permission to use ports for fleet resupply, and that shifting the logistics hubs away from Bahrain produced 14- to 18-day logistics cycles through Diego Garcia.¹⁰⁶ That is the access failure and the logistics failure arriving together — in the sustainment chain rather than the strike plan, and against an adversary far less capable of contesting it than the PLA. Two months later, a proposal for special forces logistics teams acknowledged that the existing approach would not survive a contested supply chain and that unconventional, low-signature logistics would be required instead.¹⁰⁷ By December 2024 and January 2025, successive Proceedings pieces were

¹⁰⁵ Robert C. German, "Contested Logistics in the EABO Environment," *Marine Corps Gazette*, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/contested-logistics-in-the-eabo-environment/>.

¹⁰⁶ Lead IG, *Operation Epic Fury*.

¹⁰⁷ Owen, "EABO Needs Special Forces Logistics."

proposing further platforms — uncrewed seaplanes, large contested-logistics uncrewed surface vessels (USVs)^{108 109} — and in February 2025 a further piece concluded that sustaining low-signature distributed forces would be an enormous challenge, proposing a large unmanned logistics aircraft as the missing capability.¹¹⁰

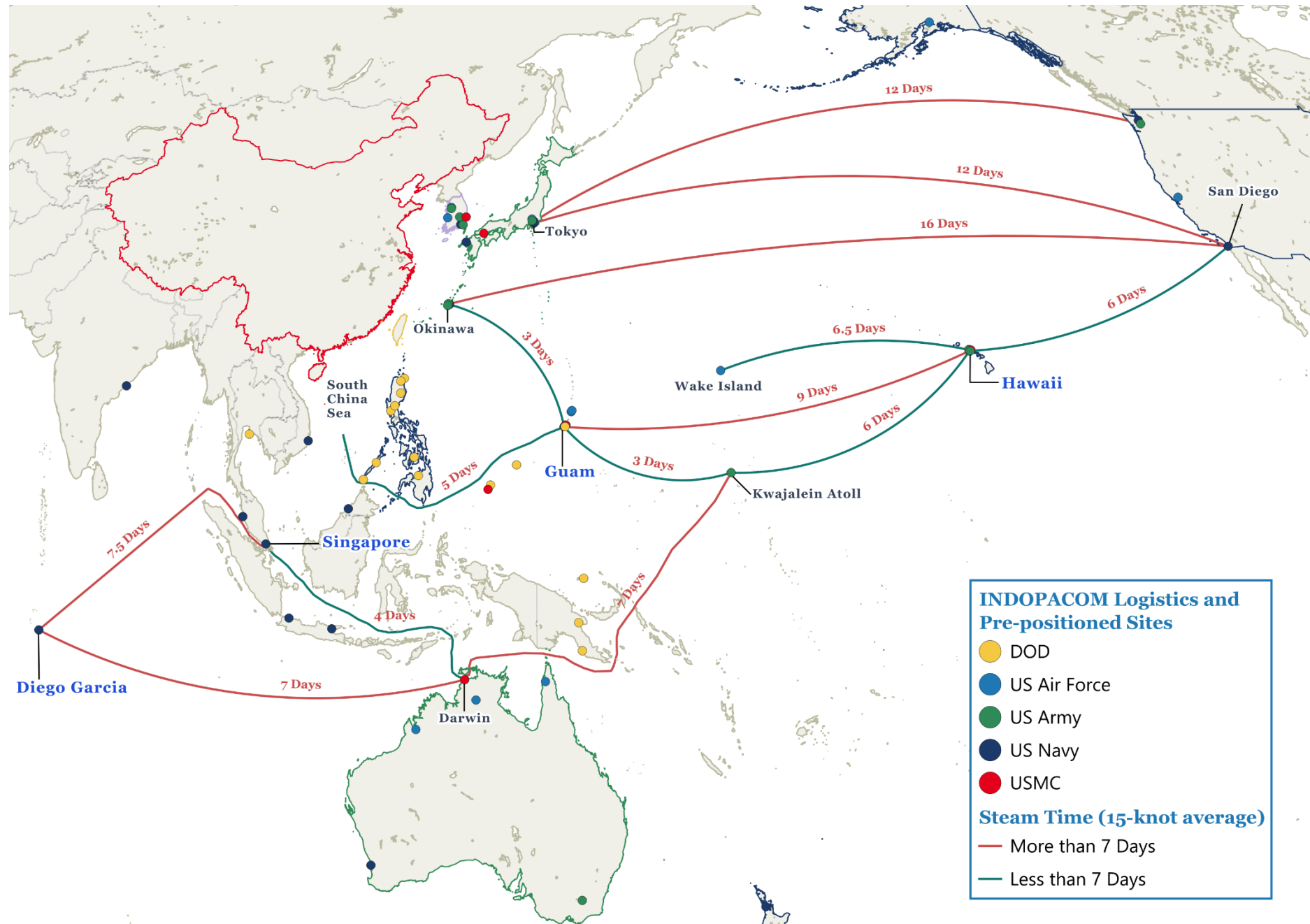
The platforms changed. The underlying acknowledgement did not: the existing approach would not work, and no proposed replacement had been validated. The Iran war arrived midway through this sequence, not after it. The assumption was not resolved between 2023 and 2026. It was repeatedly restated as unresolved, each restatement proposing a different fix, none tested under the conditions the concept describes.

¹⁰⁸ Master Sergeant Joshua Owen, "Defend EABO Logistics: Hiders and Finders," *Proceedings* 150, no. 12 (December 2024), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/december/defend-eabo-logistics-hiders-and-finders>.

¹⁰⁹ George Galdorisi, "Large Contested-Logistics USVs Will Get Marines Beyond the Beach," *Proceedings* 151, no. 1 (January 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/january/large-contested-logistics-usvs-will-get-marines-beyond-beach>.

¹¹⁰ Vihlen, "Large Unmanned Logistics Aircraft."

Figure 9: US Logistics Architecture in the Indo-Pacific and Sailing Times



Note: Pre-positioned stockpile and supply-base locations are approximate assessments based on open-source intelligence and public reporting. Sailing times are approximate and calculated using an assumed average speed of 15 knots.

Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN using open-source intelligence

The Implications for the Indo-Pacific

The logistics survivability problem is harder in the Indo-Pacific than in any other theatre for three specific reasons. First, the distances are greater: the South China Sea covers 1.4 million square miles, and resupply at the ranges EABO requires pushes beyond the capabilities of current and near-term unmanned logistics systems.¹¹¹ Second, the ISR environment is more saturated: the PLA's space-based reconnaissance, maritime patrol aircraft, and distributed maritime domain awareness network provide a detection architecture qualitatively different from the IRGC-N's capabilities in the Gulf. Third, there is no territorial logistics equivalent: unlike the IRGC-N, Stand-in Forces in the Pacific must sustain themselves in partner territory under contested conditions, without the decades of pre-positioned infrastructure that makes the IRGC-N model work.

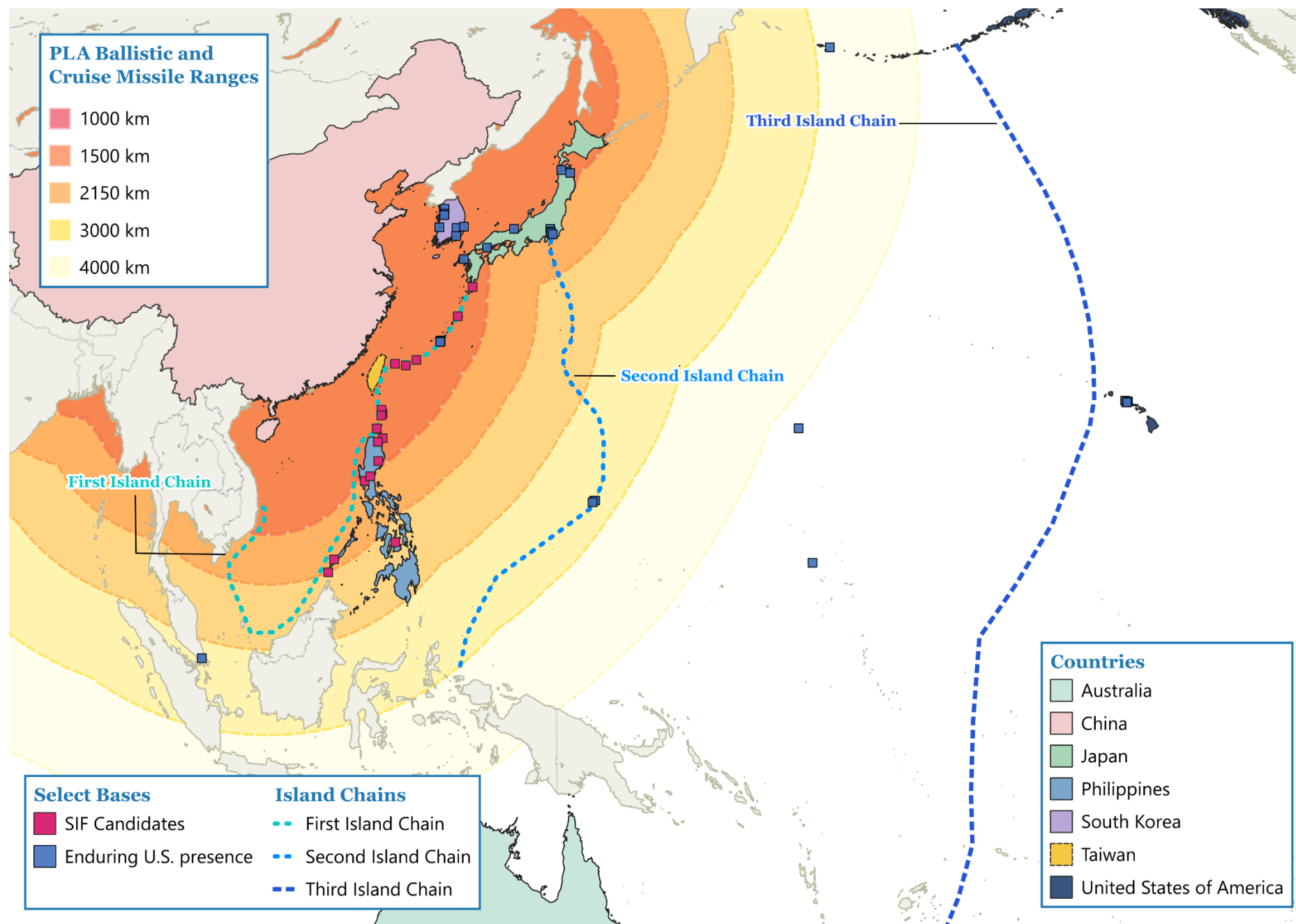
Until the signature problem and the pre-positioning gap are resolved, the logistics survivability assumption remains the most dangerous of the three structural failures. It is dangerous not because it is the most likely to prevent EABO's initial employment but because it is most likely to cause its failure after employment. This inverts the concept's own logic, creating problems for US forces rather than the enemy: a US formation in a forward island position that is running out of fuel and ammunition under PLA ISR is not a deterrent asset. It is a hostage.

The Iran war also surfaces a basing vulnerability lesson directly applicable to the Indo-Pacific. The damage sustained by US assets — assets left in the open without hardened concrete hangars — must be read against the PLA threat environment. China's Dongfeng (DF) ballistic and hypersonic missiles represent a qualitatively more advanced capability than Iran's inventory.¹¹² No missile defence system achieves 100% intercept rates. What that means in practice is that US military planners, and the allies hosting US forces, must accept that some missiles will penetrate — and mitigate accordingly through hardened hangars, dispersed basing, layered air defence, and civilian shelter capacity across the First Island Chain.

¹¹¹ Vihlen, "Large Unmanned Logistics Aircraft."

¹¹² *Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, January 2024), <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/01/long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the--asia-pacific-implications-for-regional-stability/>.

Figure 10: SIF Candidate Locations Within the Three Island Chains



Source: Created by AIIA · TITAN

Section 4

The Allied Mirror

The institutional readiness problem is not a uniquely American pathology. The three structural failures — institutional reversion, the access assumption, logistics survivability — are not unique to FD2030 but are present across allied expeditionary forces pursuing the same paradigm. This matters beyond academic comparison, because Section 4.3 and Section 5's recommendations depend in part on what allied capability can realistically contribute to closing the gaps the USMC cannot close alone. Before that argument can be made, it needs bounding: what can allies actually offer, on what timeline, and what can they not?

The two cases examined here bracket that range. The Royal Marines' Future Commando Force offers the limiting case: a force pursuing the identical operational logic as EABO, exposed to the same three failures, on a timeline worse than the USMC's own and with a fraction of the resources to close the gap. The second is Australia's LMG, pursued via an independent institutional pathway. It offers a concrete, dateable instance of one failure — the access assumption — being partially addressed today, at a scale one allied force can generate independently. Read together, the two cases do not show that allies will solve what the USMC cannot. They show what allied contribution can plausibly look like in practice — from Australia's working example to the Royal Marines' structural limits.

Two clarifications follow from this framing. First, neither case is a claim, prediction, or recommendation about whether the United Kingdom or Australia would, should, or will commit forces to a Taiwan contingency specifically — that is a sovereign political decision for each government, contingent on circumstances this paper does not assess. Second, the FCF and the LMG are used here as illustrative instances of a generalisable institutional problem, not as an exhaustive or final set of comparators. The same three failures, examined through a common structure, could equally be applied to Japan's Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, France's Indo-Pacific posture, or any other allied force pursuing distributed maritime denial — the two cases examined here were chosen for the range they bracket, not because they are uniquely qualifying.

4.1 The Future Commando Force: The Same Preconditions, Less Time

The FCF is the most significant doctrinal transformation of the Royal Marines since the Cold War, shifting the Commando Force away from large-scale conventional amphibious assault toward forward-deployed Littoral Response Groups (LRGs): light, distributed, high-readiness formations designed to operate in contested environments with minimal signature and maximum agility. The operational logic is the same as EABO's — distributed, low-signature, forward presence inside or proximate to the adversary, achieving disproportionate effects through positioning rather than mass.¹¹³

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The FCF therefore depends on the same preconditions EABO does — credible amphibious lift, an institutional certification pathway, and a validated logistics model — and is exposed to the same three failures. What makes the comparison analytically useful is not that the failures recur, but that they recur with less time and fewer resources to close them. The Albion-class landing platform docks that provided 3 Commando Brigade's primary heavy amphibious lift were withdrawn from service by March 2025 and one of them has since been sold to Brazil.¹¹⁵ Their planned replacement, the Multi-Role Strike Ship, was cancelled in the June 2026 Defence Investment Plan as too complex for the Commando Force now being pursued;¹¹⁶ the UK and the Netherlands then signed a £2.4 billion agreement in July 2026 to build 8 Amphibious Transport Ships to a common Dutch design, with the first British ship expected in the 2030s.¹¹⁷

The USMC entered the Iran war without its primary connective platform because of procurement delays. The Royal Marines enter the equivalent period without their

¹¹³ UK Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: HMSO, March 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf.

¹¹⁴ "Austerity and Ambition: Reshaping the Royal Marines for Modern Conflict," Navy Lookout, <https://www.navylookout.com/austerity-and-ambition-reshaping-the-royal-marines-for-modern-conflict/>.

¹¹⁵ "Royal Navy Strike Ships to Replace Albion and Bulwark as Ships Sold to Brazil," *Portsmouth News*, <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defence/royal-navy-strike-ships-replace-albion-bulwark-brazil-5180741>.

¹¹⁶ UK Ministry of Defence, *The Defence Investment Plan* (London: HMSO, June 2026), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-defence-investment-plan>.

¹¹⁷ "New British Assault Ships to Enter Service in 2030s," UK Defence Journal, July 8, 2026, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/new-british-assault-ships-to-enter-service-in-2030s/>.

primary heavy lift at all — the ships were retired before their replacement was funded, let alone built. The USMC's institutional unreadiness window, in Failure One's terms, cannot begin to close before 2029. The FCF's analogous window cannot begin to close until the 2030s, several years later on the government's own stated ambition, against the same period of concern. Even with the platform, the Royal Marines have a fraction of the USMC's resources to compress that gap. Retiring the Albion class in March 2025 leaves the Royal Marines without amphibious heavy lift through precisely the years in which PLA capability matures fastest, regardless of whether the UK is called upon during that period.¹¹⁸

The signature problem and the access assumption apply to the FCF in recognisably similar ways — an LRG's resupply generates the same kind of detectable signature a Stand-in Force's does, and LRG(South)'s global crisis-response mandate exposes it to the same access-fragility dynamics the Gulf demonstrated, even where LRG(North)'s NATO-area operations sit within more established access frameworks. The point for this section is not to re-run Section 3's analysis for a second force. It is narrower and more consequential for Section 4.3: if the coalition architecture the USMC needs depends in part on what allies can independently contribute, the FCF's version of these preconditions is harder to meet, on a longer timeline, with less resource depth — which bounds what the Royal Marines can realistically bring to a coalition posture before the early 2030s.

Australia's case, considered next, sits at the other end of that range.

¹¹⁸ "Multi-Role Support Ship Procurement Update," UK Defence Journal, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/multi-role-support-ship-procurement-update/>.

4.2 Australia's Littoral Manoeuvre Capability: Solving Access by Not Needing It

Australia is not pursuing a replica of EABO or the FCF. Its distributed littoral capability, driven by the 2023 Defence Strategic Review and the 2024 National Defence Strategy, has developed along an independent path — integrating long-range fires with amphibious lift and building the Army's own Littoral Manoeuvre concept, which the newly formed LMG now operationalises through a single sea-land-air command structure. The operational logic is EABO-adjacent. The development path is Australia's own.¹¹⁹

On 2 December 2025, in Sydney, the Australian Defence Force embarked an M142 HIMARS launcher — together with its resupply vehicle and trailer — aboard HMAS Canberra and one of her landing craft.^{120 121} The trial, conducted as part of HIMARS's formal introduction into service, validated the full package — launcher, resupply vehicle, and trailer — as sea-transportable and transferable to a landing craft for movement to austere coastal locations. Five months later the trial moved from harbour to beach. On 13 May 2026, 10th Fires Brigade transported a HIMARS launcher, its resupply vehicle, munition pods and support trailers between HMAS Choules and the Cowley Beach Training Area in northern Queensland, using an LCM-8 and a Mexeflote, during Exercise Black Cutlass. The Sydney trial proved the package could be embarked; the Queensland activity proved it could be put ashore across an undeveloped beach and recovered. The Australian Army has now certified HIMARS for movement by C-130 and C-17 aircraft and aboard the Navy's landing helicopter docks, and the launcher force is being built toward forty-two under a long-range strike investment of roughly A\$2.3 billion, with deliveries running to 2027.

In December 2025, Austal was awarded an A\$1.03 billion contract for 18 Landing Craft Medium vessels, purpose-specified to carry HIMARS launchers and main battle tanks,

¹¹⁹ Australian Department of Defence, "Army Launches New Littoral Group," news release, April 9, 2026, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2026-04-09/army-launches-new-littoral-group>.

¹²⁰ "Australia Tests HIMARS Rocket Launcher Deployment Aboard Canberra-Class Ships for Littoral Strike," Army Recognition, 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/australia-tests-himars-rocket-launcher-deployment-aboard-canberra-class-ships-for-littoral-strike>.

¹²¹ Australian Department of Defence, "HIMARS Proves to Be Shipshape," news release, December 2, 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-12-02/himars-proves-be-shipshape>.

with construction beginning in 2026 and deliveries running to 2032.¹²² Two months later, in February 2026, Austal was awarded a second and larger contract worth approximately A\$4 billion for 8 Landing Craft Heavy vessels based on Damen's LST100 design, each able to carry six main battle tanks or the equivalent in HIMARS launchers, with deliveries running to 2038.

What this demonstrates is not a substitute for EABO, but an established pathway toward the thing EABO's access assumption most needs: a sea-mobile long-range fires capability whose employment logic — distributed positioning, shore-based sea denial, complicating an adversary's targeting calculus through dispersion — does not depend on US-style host-nation access to position fires inside an adversary's WEZ. An allied force that can generate this effect from its own amphibious shipping, under its own sovereign authority, is a force whose contribution to a coalition posture does not add to the access burden of Indo-Pacific partners.¹²³

The limitation is real and worth stating clearly. The Littoral Manoeuvre Group was established only on 30 March 2026, as an element of 17th Sustainment Brigade, and is sized and postured for Australia's northern approaches. Its medium landing craft deliver through 2032 and its heavy landing craft through 2038, which means the capability is not fully in the water until the far side of the risk horizon this paper is concerned with. No shore-based anti-ship missile programme has been confirmed. Forty-two HIMARS launchers, however employed, are a fraction of the fires mass a Taiwan contingency would demand. The HIMARS-on-Canberra trial proved a concept, not a fielded force, and Australian assets operating around the Tiwi Islands or the Banda Sea are not a substitute for USMC Stand-in Forces in the Ryukyus or the Philippine Sea — the distances, command relationships, and political authority involved are categorically different. None of that diminishes what the trial demonstrates. It bounds it: this is what partial, access-independent mitigation of

¹²² "Australian Army Orders Heavy Landing Craft to Move Tanks and HIMARS Launchers Across Littorals," Army Recognition, 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/australian-army-orders-heavy-landing-craft-to-move-tanks-and-himars-launchers-across-littorals>.

¹²³ Containerised missile launcher systems represent a separate and broader line of development toward the same general effect — sea-mobile, access-independent fires — that the HIMARS-on-Canberra trial demonstrates by other means. Proposals to mount containerised missile systems on merchant ships for rapid fleet expansion are also under active discussion. None of this is what the Australian trial itself involved — HIMARS-on-Canberra used the launcher in its standard configuration, not a containerised one — but the parallel development is worth noting as another route to a similar effect.

Failure Two looks like in practice, today, at the scale one allied force can generate on its own.

The rotational side of the relationship has moved too. MRF-D 26 was certified as a special-purpose Marine air-ground task force during Balikatan 2026 — the first rotation to earn the certification since the deployment began in 2011 — with expeditionary advanced base operations among the mission sets evaluated.¹²⁴ A certified crisis-response task force operating alongside Australian amphibious shipping is precisely the allied combination Recommendation One's CFOC-level evaluations would need to include.

4.3 The Coalition Architecture Gap

The FCF and Australian cases together establish a specific finding. The institutional readiness problem is not a product of FD2030's particular choices — it is endemic across allied expeditionary forces pursuing the same paradigm, and each force is at a different point along the same set of preconditions.

The Australian case suggests what coalition depth can and cannot do, and the distinction is worth drawing precisely. It does not change the military arithmetic. Forty-two launchers arriving through 2027, 18 medium landing craft through 2032 and 8 heavy landing craft through 2038 are not a substitute for the fires mass or the lift a Taiwan contingency would demand, and no honest reading of the programme makes them one. What it changes is the political arithmetic. A capability generated independently, under sovereign authority, from a partner's own shipping, does not draw on the hosting decisions of First Island Chain governments — which means every increment of it reduces, at the margin, the coercive pressure any single partner must absorb alone. That is a contribution to the access problem rather than to the fires problem, and it is the one allied contribution the United States cannot generate for itself.

¹²⁴ "Darwin-Based USMC Ospreys Hone Expeditionary Skills in Philippines," *Asian Military Review*, September 2026, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2026/09/darwin-based-usmc-ospreys-hone-expeditionary-skills-in-philippines-foc/>.

This matters most for the access assumption specifically. EABO's access problem is a function of partner governments weighing their own exposure against PLA coercive pressure when deciding whether to host US forces. That calculus changes when the hosting burden is distributed. A Philippine government facing PLA pressure over EABO basing is more isolated than one operating within a posture where multiple allied forces are independently executing distributed maritime denial in the same operational area. The burden concentrated on a single partner is more coercible than the same burden distributed across several allied nations with independent security interests in the outcome.

This is the one area where coalition depth directly addresses a structural failure rather than merely supplementing existing capability — but only if the posture is pre-planned and pre-exercised rather than assembled under pressure. The existing frameworks do not provide this. The Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) establish posture commitments and logistics nodes. AUKUS develops technology pathways. Talisman Sabre exercises units together at formation level. None of them answers what the access-distribution argument specifically requires: what each force can contribute to distributed maritime denial without depending on the others, and what pre-negotiated access arrangements allow the coalition posture — not any single nation's bilateral agreements — to survive partner coercion at H-hour.

The Iran war demonstrated that access denial moves faster than alliance management during a contingency. A coalition access framework negotiated before the contingency is the only instrument that changes that dynamic. The gap this section identifies is specific: no existing framework produces a shared operational concept defining what allied forces can each do independently, what the irreducible dependencies are, and what coalition access arrangements must be in place before a contingency develops. That gap — not the FCF's or Australia's individual circumstances — is Section 4's finding.

Section 5

Recommendations

5.1 Recommendation 1: Designate CFOC-Level MCCRE as the EABO Readiness Standard

Failure One establishes that the institutional unreadiness window cannot begin to close before 2029, and that LSM delivery, the MLR reduction from three to two, and SLV bridging are each tracked against their own schedules rather than against the point at which CFOC-level MCCRE becomes possible. A delay to any of these currently triggers no institutional response, because nothing is measured against that target.

The recommendation is specific: the Marine Corps, in coordination with Marine Corps Forces Pacific (MARFORPAC) and US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), should formally designate CFOC-level MCCRE — a single evaluation of the MLR together with LSM connectivity, naval integration, and logistics architecture, conducted under EABO-specific Mission Essential Tasks — as the institution's stated EABO readiness standard, distinct from IOC, from the 3rd MLR's organic-equipment FOC standard, and from the pre-CFOC MCCREs already conducted. LSM delivery, MLR force structure, and SLV-based bridging should each be reported as inputs to that standard's timeline, not as independent programme milestones. A formation that has completed CFOC-level MCCRE has cleared the same bar the ARG-MEU was built against — though one evaluation is a single data point, not the decades of repetition that make ARG-MEU employment instinctive. One that has not completed CFOC-level MCCRE — regardless of how many pre-CFOC MCCREs it has completed — has not cleared it, and the institution should say so explicitly.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Explicit non-certification carries institutional costs beyond the formation itself — budgetary and career incentives can make declaring readiness easier than declaring its absence. This paper does not attempt to resolve that dynamic; it notes it as a precondition worth keeping in view as the recommendation is implemented.

Required Elements of CFOC-Level MCCRE

Three elements distinguish CFOC-level MCCREs from the pre-CFOC MCCREs conducted in 2025 and again in 2026. None can be evaluated before LSM delivery.

First, contested insertion with LSM connectivity: the formation must demonstrate the ability to reach and occupy a forward island position using the LSM for inter-island manoeuvre, under conditions of adversary ISR and fires pressure.

Second, a defined sustainment-without-resupply threshold: the formation must demonstrate the ability to maintain combat power and signature discipline for a specified period without external resupply, directly testing the logistics survivability assumption examined in Failure Three. The specific duration is a matter for the programme office, informed by inputs this paper does not have access to. What matters here is that CFOC-level MCCRE includes such a threshold as a pass/fail criterion, where, on the public record, the pre-CFOC MCCREs to date have not.

Third, a demonstrated joint kill chain: the formation must be evaluated as part of an end-to-end sensor-to-shooter sequence involving naval and joint partners — surface combatants, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft — rather than alongside them in a separate exercise series. The specific chain is again a matter for the relevant commands to define. What CFOC-level MCCRE requires is that some such chain be specified and tested as a condition of certification, not merely that the partners be present.

Allied Participation

The standard would benefit from allied involvement from the outset. Coalition partners contributing to CFOC-level MCCRE design — rather than joining only once the standard is set — could help build the joint-certified employment model the coalition architecture requires. The two forces examined in Section 4, the FCF and the LMG, illustrate what such participation could look like — but the relevant set of partners is broader. First Island Chain states whose own access and basing decisions are central to Failure Two, including Japan and the Philippines, would be directly relevant to any such design, as would other allies pursuing the same distributed-littoral paradigm.

The FCF's own institutional unreadiness window cannot begin to close until the 2030s, with fewer resources to close it once it can, and no existing framework — AUSMIN, AUKUS, Talisman Sabre — currently produces a shared operational concept defining

what allied forces can each contribute independently. CFOC-level MCCRE, if developed with allied input, could be one of the few near-term opportunities to begin addressing that gap before either window can begin to close. It would not by itself constitute the coalition architecture the gap ultimately requires, but it could begin generating the shared operational experience such an architecture would need to draw on.

What scale and which allies participate would necessarily depend on what each partner judges feasible and useful — but the option is worth raising now, while the standard is still being designed, rather than after.

5.2 Recommendation 2: Wargame the Access Failure and Publish the Results

The access assumption failure documented in Section 3 is the structural weakness most likely to render EABO inoperative, and the one least likely to be resolved by further internal Marine Corps efforts. It cannot be fixed by procurement, by exercise, or by doctrinal revision. It can only be partially addressed by a combination of diplomatic investment — pre-negotiating access arrangements that are resilient to partner exposure calculus at H-hour — and rigorous operational planning that honestly accounts for what happens when those arrangements fail. Neither element of this work can proceed credibly without first knowing what the failure looks like: what the operational consequences are, how quickly they manifest, and which aspects of EABO remain executable and which collapse when the access assumption is not met.

The recommendation is therefore specific. The Marine Corps, in coordination with INDOPACOM and the joint force, should commission and conduct a wargame whose central design condition is access denial by an Indo-Pacific partner at or before H-hour. The wargame should not treat access as a logistics variable to be managed, nor as a whole-of-government challenge to be mitigated by diplomatic engagement. It should treat access denial as the primary operational constraint — the starting condition from which the wargame proceeds — and ask what the force can do from that position. The findings — at a minimum an unclassified summary — should be published in a form that operational planners, allied partners, and defence analysts can access and respond to.

Why Publication Matters

The publication requirement is not a transparency gesture. It serves two specific functions that classified-only wargaming cannot perform.

The first function is allied planning integration. Allies would benefit from knowing what the access failure looks like, in order to design their contributions with that failure in mind. A classified US wargame result that is not shared with allies, or shared only in fragmentary form through liaison channels, is less useful for the kind of integrated coalition planning the access assumption failure calls for. The AUSMIN 2025 communiqué committed the US and Australia to expanding MRF-D capacity and establishing combined logistics networks in Australia,¹²⁶ but commitments of this kind are logistics and posture arrangements, not operational planning for access-failure contingencies — a gap that exists across the bilateral and coalition frameworks more broadly, and one that published wargame results would at least begin to address.

The second function is institutional accountability. A January 2026 Proceedings piece on wargaming beyond the battlefield argues that overclassification stifles a wargame's utility, and that the best unclassified wargames shape discourse and build the institutional consensus that drives change in doctrine and procurement.¹²⁷ A classified wargame result on EABO access failure may inform a staff paper. An unclassified published result can inform a Commandant's planning guidance, a congressional budget justification, and an allied defence minister's briefing simultaneously — and a 2023 Center for Strategic and International Studies series modelling a Chinese invasion of Taiwan across twenty-four unclassified iterations is a working example of an access-relevant wargame shaping policy debate in exactly this way.¹²⁸ The Iran war has created a moment of institutional openness to uncomfortable findings — a moment that classified-only work will not exploit.

¹²⁶ Australian Department of Defence, "Joint Fact Sheet: Australia–US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2025," ministerial statement, December 9, 2025, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-12-09/joint-fact-sheet-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2025>.

¹²⁷ Brian Kerg, Amber Luke, and Patrick Ramos, "Wargaming Beyond the Battlefield," *Proceedings* 152, no. 1 (January 2026), <https://www.usni.org/WargamingBeyond>.

¹²⁸ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>.

What the Wargame Must Answer

The wargame's design conditions should be specific enough to generate operationally actionable findings rather than general conclusions about the importance of host-nation access. Four questions should drive the design.

First, which EABO operational capabilities remain executable without First Island Chain access, and from what geographic positions? The answer to this question determines what the fallback concept of operations looks like — whether it is a materially different concept or a degraded version of the same one. Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Hawaii sit outside, or at the outer edge of, the WEZ; employment from those positions would therefore constitute stand-off rather than stand-in operations. The precise operational consequences of that shift — for fires reach, for sea denial effectiveness, for the cost-exchange ratio against PLA A2/AD systems — need to be established rather than assumed.

Second, how quickly does partner access calculus change under PLA coercive pressure, and what are the decision points? The Iran war demonstrated that Gulf states denied access rapidly, collectively, and before the shooting started. The wargame should model the political timeline of an Indo-Pacific partner's decision-making under analogous pressure — specifically, whether pre-existing access agreements create sufficient inertia to sustain access through the initial operational period, or whether they collapse at the same speed as the Gulf arrangements did.

Third, what pre-positioning of personnel, equipment, and logistics would need to be in place before the contingency arrives to allow EABO to be executed for an initial period without depending on real-time access decisions? This question connects the access assumption failure to the logistics survivability failure examined in Failure Three, and its answer has direct procurement and diplomatic implications — specifically for what the pre-positioning arrangements negotiated under AUSMIN and the US-Philippines EDCA need to contain to be operationally meaningful. It also bears directly on Recommendation One's second required element: a defined sustainment-without-resupply threshold for CFOC-level MCCRE cannot be set without an answer to what pre-positioning makes that threshold achievable in the first place.

Fourth, what diplomatic actions — access agreements, pre-positioning arrangements, status of forces frameworks — would need to be completed before a contingency

develops to change the access calculus in Washington's favour? This question is the direct bridge between the wargame and the diplomatic programme. Without an operational answer to what diplomatic outcomes are required, the diplomatic effort lacks the specificity it needs to be effective. The State Department and the Office of the Secretary of Defense need the wargame's findings to know what they are trying to achieve.

Who Conducts It and Under What Framework

The wargame should be conducted at the joint level — sponsored by INDOPACOM rather than Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) — to ensure that its findings carry weight beyond the Marine Corps and that its design conditions reflect the full joint and allied operational picture.

The access-failure wargame should aim for an almost entirely unclassified publication, recognising that some operational specifics will require classification but that the general strategic and operational findings — what works, what fails, what the fallback looks like — do not.

Allied involvement in the wargame's design, if not the wargame itself, would strengthen it considerably. The access failure scenario is not a US-only problem, and its findings will need to inform allied planning as well as US planning — so involving allied planners in setting the design conditions, where each partner judges this useful, would help ensure the wargame's design conditions reflect more than the US operational picture alone. Japan, the Philippines and Australia, among others, would be natural candidates for this kind of involvement.

5.3 Recommendation 3: Reorient Concept Development Prioritisation Toward Logistics Survivability

The logistics survivability failure has two dimensions. The procurement dimension — what platforms deliver sustainment — is already receiving attention, primarily through the large unmanned logistics aircraft and the LSM. The operational dimension — how the signature problem is resolved and what pre-positioning is required — is not. This recommendation addresses the operational dimension, since it determines whether the procurement investment produces a viable result.

Reorient the Problem Definition

Concept development treats logistics survivability as a platform question: what system delivers the resupply. The large unmanned logistics aircraft, the LSM, and the contested-logistics USVs are all platform answers to what is, in fact, an operational question: how does a Stand-in Force receive sustainment inside a contested maritime environment without generating the ISR signature that makes it targetable? A better platform reduces the delivery signature. But it cannot eliminate it, and it does not address the aggregation signature generated by the resupply pattern over time, or what happens when logistics is all but severed.

The Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL), Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC), and the School of Advanced Warfighting should be tasked with answering this as an operational question, addressing three sub-problems: how delivery events avoid targetable signatures; how the aggregation pattern is managed to prevent detection over time; and how pre-positioning reduces dependence on real-time resupply. Until these are answered, the large unmanned logistics aircraft and the LSM are procurement programmes in search of a concept, not solutions to a defined problem. This paper does not specify a timeline for that work, for the same reason it does not specify CFOC-level MCCRE's sustainment-without-resupply threshold in Recommendation One: the answer depends on inputs — classified threat data, technical feasibility assessments and so on — that this paper does not have access to. What it specifies is that the three sub-problems above are answered as a defined deliverable, not as an open-ended research agenda with no point at which the institution can be said to have answered them.

The Pre-Positioning Programme

A pre-positioning architecture is being built — Typhon and NMESIS forward-deployed to the Philippines, the Davao Gulf fuel depot, III MEF's 45-day sustainment planning.¹²⁹ Examined closely, this architecture validates the paper's concern rather than answering it.

First, the nodes are fixed and identifiable. Batan Island, Lal-lo, Cagayan de Oro, the Davao Gulf, the EDCA sites in northern Luzon, Camp Carroll, Sagami — all are publicly reported and therefore targetable. Distributing the force without distributing its logistics nodes does not solve the targeting problem; it simply relocates it. The Davao depot illustrates this precisely: a facility holding nearly 1 million barrels of fuel, publicly solicited and already opposed by the Davao City government.¹³⁰ ¹³¹ It is structured as a contractor-owned, contractor-operated facility specifically to distinguish it from a US base — yet publicly characterised by the Armed Forces of the Philippines as falling under EDCA, the framework governing US access to Philippine military sites. The two framings imply different legal and political logics for the same facility.¹³² ¹³³ A known location with an unresolved political dimension is not a low-signature solution.

Second, the timeline is misaligned with the threat. The Davao depot is not operational until 2028. NMESIS fielding runs later still: the first six launchers reached 3rd MLR in 2023, and capacity is being built toward 18 launchers per medium-range missile battery, to be fully realised in FY2033.¹³⁴ III MEF's 45-day figure derives from its designation as INDOPACOM's stand-in force for the first 45 days of a contingency, and has so far driven specific medical pre-positioning planning (Role 2 facilities, Class VIII supplies) rather than a defined standard across all logistics categories. The gap

¹²⁹ Captain Andrew Lin et al., "Expeditionary Advanced Medical Care in the Indo-Pacific," *Proceedings* 151, no. 4 (April 2025), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/april/expeditionary-advanced-medical-care-indo-pacific>.

¹³⁰ "Bayan, Davao LGU Oppose US Military Oil Depot Plans in Davao Gulf," *Davao Today*, <https://davaotoday.com/headline/bayan-davao-lgu-oppose-us-military-oil-depot-plans-in-davao-gulf/>.

¹³¹ "US–Philippines Ties Enter More Mature Phase with Planned Fuel Depot," *South China Morning Post*, This Week in Asia, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3350066/us-philippines-ties-enter-more-mature-phase-planned-fuel-depot>.

¹³² "Pentagon Adds to Pacific Refueling Capacity with New Philippine Depot," *USNI News*, April 7, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/04/07/pentagon-adds-to-pacific-refueling-capacity-with-new-philippine-depot>.

¹³³ "Upcoming U.S. Depot in the Philippines."

¹³⁴ Feickert, *Marine Littoral Regiment*.

between current medical pre-positioning and broader sustainment requirements for that window is not publicly quantified.

Third, the programme confirms rather than resolves the access-logistics linkage from Failure Two. Every node sits in partner territory under bilateral agreements. The Davao depot, the Lal-lo refuelling point, and the EDCA positions in northern Luzon are accessible only so long as Manila permits it. The same political variable that determines whether the manoeuvre force can insert also determines whether it can be resupplied.

The recommendation is specific: publish a summary-level assessment of what is currently pre-positioned, under what access agreements, and what additional pre-positioning an MLR needs to operate for a defined initial period without maritime resupply — paired with a diplomatic programme to negotiate the host-nation agreements such pre-positioning requires, since those agreements are more specific and more politically demanding than the general EDCA provisions now in place.¹³⁵ Neither can proceed without the operational definition the first sub-section calls for, and both are directly relevant to allied logistics planning: an Australian government deciding what to pre-position at Darwin or Tindal cannot do so intelligently without knowing what the US has pre-positioned at EDCA sites in northern Luzon.

The LSM as Critical Path

The Landing Ship Medium remains the critical-path item for EABO's operational viability. The December 2024 cancellation of the LSM RFP and restart under a commercial design approach pushed first delivery to 2029. In July 2026 the Navy awarded TOTE Services a \$2.2 billion vessel construction manager contract, with construction expected to begin in late 2026.¹³⁶ The programme now has a contract, a class name and a yard. It does not yet have a ship. The LSM should be treated as a critical-path item for the CFOC standard in Recommendation One: an MLR cannot be certified without LSM connectivity, since without it the formation cannot execute the

¹³⁵ The published assessment this recommendation calls for is a summary-level account of what is pre-positioned and under what general access terms — not an inventory of exact quantities, locations, or vulnerabilities, which would themselves need to remain classified.

¹³⁶ Mallory Shelbourne, "Navy Awards TOTE \$2.2B to Serve as VCM for Landing Ship Medium," *USNI News*, July 13, 2026, <https://news.usni.org/2026/07/13/navy-awards-tote-2-2b-to-serve-as-vessel-construction-manager-for-landing-ship-medium>.

inter-island manoeuvre central to the concept's survivability logic. If LSM delivery slips, CFOC-level certification slips with it.

5.4 Recommendation 4: Formalise the Coalition Architecture Below Treaty Level

Section 4.3 identifies a specific gap: no existing framework produces a shared operational concept defining what allied forces can each contribute independently to coalition distributed maritime denial, or what coalition access arrangements must be in place before a contingency develops. This recommendation is the instrument that closes it.

The recommendation is to establish a standing coalition planning cell tasked with developing and maintaining an operational concept for coalition distributed maritime denial in the Indo-Pacific. The cell should sit below treaty level in its commitments — it does not require new alliance agreements, parliamentary ratification, or modification of existing status of forces arrangements — but above liaison level in its work. It should produce operational planning products, not policy statements, and should be resourced with planners at the O-6 to O-7 level — consistent with how combatant command J5 directorates typically staff planning work, though the precise grade mix is a determination for INDOPACOM J5 to make, not one this paper specifies with confidence — with access to relevant intelligence and operational planning data.

Ownership

Ownership of the cell should reflect the distinction between policy authority and operational planning this recommendation depends on. The Under Secretary of Defense for Policy is the right principal: senior enough to authorise the structure, but a level below the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of State, both of whose attention is committed elsewhere. USD(P) is a policy office, though, and a cell reporting into a policy office may risk producing policy statements rather than the operational planning this recommendation calls for. INDOPACOM's J5 directorate should own and resource the cell day to day — the same placement Recommendation Two uses for the access-failure wargame, and for the same reason: the work needs to carry weight beyond a single service. USD(P) authorises and reviews. INDOPACOM owns and resources. The cell should report to USD(P) at least annually — frequent enough to

maintain policy oversight, infrequent enough to keep the cell focused on planning products rather than recurring briefings.

The Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT), a standing Asia-Pacific multinational planning body designed to augment multinational task force headquarters for crisis response, demonstrates that a coalition planning capability of this kind isprecedented in the region. Whether the cell proposed here should be a new body or an extension of MPAT's mandate into peer-conflict distributed maritime denial planning is a design question for INDOPACOM and USD(P) to resolve, not one this paper resolves in advance — but the existence of MPAT means the proposal extends established practice rather than inventing a new institutional category.¹³⁷

A fair question follows from MPAT's own example: standing coordination bodies like this one often persist on paper long after they stop producing anything useful. This proposal avoids that fate only if anchored to more than its own existence. The anchor is the annual exercise specification: a cell with no required output drifts toward briefings and then irrelevance, but one tied to a dated deliverable — that year's exercise design — has an external forcing function an advisory body lacks. It either delivers on schedule or visibly fails to, in front of the allied planners expecting it. The same logic ties it to Recommendation Two: a cell convened before the wargame's findings exist has a defined task waiting the moment they publish, not an open mandate. No design feature guarantees survival against bureaucratic reality — but tying relevance to a recurring, visible product is what distinguishes this from a committee that exists on paper.

What the Existing Framework Does and Does Not Provide

The AUSMIN 2025 communiqué, the most recent and comprehensive statement of US-Australia defence cooperation, commits both governments to expanding MRF-D, establishing combined logistics networks in Australia's north and south, and reaffirming the criticality of Submarine Rotational Force-West.¹³⁸ AUKUS Pillar II's Maritime Big Play programme is advancing trilateral autonomous systems integration,

¹³⁷ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Multinational Planning Augmentation Team*, CJCSI 3165.01D (Washington, DC: Joint Staff), <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%203165.01D.pdf>

¹³⁸ Australian DoD, "AUSMIN 2025 Joint Fact Sheet."

anti-submarine warfare, and shared command-and-control software.¹³⁹ ¹⁴⁰ Talisman Sabre and MRF-D provide a framework for bilateral and trilateral training. All of this is real and substantial. None of it is operational planning: what allied forces would do together in a contingency, how they would be commanded, or what the division of labour would be when US assets are simultaneously committed elsewhere.

The US committed three carriers to CENTCOM in succession by April 2026 — USS Abraham Lincoln, USS Gerald R. Ford, and USS George H.W. Bush — redirecting strike groups from the Indo-Pacific on short notice; the Lincoln alone departed the South China Sea in January 2026.¹⁴¹ Two of the four Avenger-class mine countermeasure ships based at Sasebo were also redirected to CENTCOM, degrading the Indo-Pacific's mine countermeasure posture. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith publicly acknowledged the resulting Indo-Pacific capability gap on 18 May 2026. MRF-D rotations continued during this period but at reduced scale, and no current framework specifies what allied forces would do, or what they could sustain independently, when that happens.¹⁴²

What the Planning Cell Must Produce

The cell's primary product would be an operational concept for coalition distributed maritime denial — a document answering the four questions posed in Recommendation Two's wargame framework, from the coalition's collective rather than any single nation's perspective. What can the coalition do together that no single force can do independently? What are the irreducible US dependencies that allied forces cannot substitute for? What is the C2 architecture, and under whose authority does it operate? What is the division of labour when US cross-theatre commitments reduce availability in the Pacific?

¹³⁹ "AUKUS Navies Step Up Autonomous Warfare Push in 2026," UK Defence Journal,

<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/aukus-navies-step-up-autonomous-warfare-push-in-2026/>

¹⁴⁰ Australian Department of Defence, "Defence Tests Cutting-Edge Autonomous Capabilities During AUKUS Maritime Big Play," media release, February 19, 2026, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2026-02-19/defence-tests-cutting-edge-autonomous-capabilities-during-aukus-maritime-big-play>.

¹⁴¹ "U.S. Reinforces Middle East with 3 Aircraft Carrier Strike Groups as Pressure on Iran Builds," Army Recognition, 2026, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2026/u-s-reinforces-middle-east-with-3-aircraft-carrier-strike-groups-as-pressure-on-iran-builds>.

¹⁴² "A US-Australia-Led Coalition for a Combined Joint Deterrence Force in the Indo-Pacific," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/us-australia-led-coalition-for-a-combined-joint-deterrence-force-in-the-indo-pacific>.

The second product is a coalition access planning framework. Host-nation access turns on sovereign decisions partner governments make under their own exposure calculus, not on US diplomatic effort alone — which means resolving the access assumption failure requires partner governments themselves to make commitments resilient to coercive pressure at H-hour, and those commitments are more politically sustainable distributed across multiple allied nations than carried by one. A partner government facing PLA pressure over EABO basing is in a weaker position than one that knows other allied forces are independently executing distributed maritime denial in the same framework, because that turns the partner's own exposure into a coalition problem rather than a bilateral one. The planning cell should help develop the access framework that makes this distributed commitment credible.

The third product is an exercise specification: an annual coalition distributed maritime denial exercise testing allied forces together under realistic access and logistics constraints, including conditions where US assets are partially committed elsewhere. Talisman Sabre provides a starting framework; the cell's specification should extend it to the access-failure and cross-theatre scenarios Talisman Sabre does not currently model.

This product and Recommendation One's allied participation in CFOC-level MCCRE design are related but distinct: CFOC-level MCCRE certifies a single US formation against a US-defined standard, with allied input shaping that design; the cell's exercise specification tests coalition forces together against a coalition-defined concept. The cell should coordinate the two — an MLR's CFOC-level MCCRE and a coalition exercise are natural complements, not competing efforts — but the certification standard remains the Marine Corps' own, and the coalition exercise remains the cell's.

Who the Cell Should Include, and on What Basis

Australia's operational centrality makes it the key partner.¹⁴³ Section 4.2's HIMARS-on-Canberra trial and the subsequent Landing Craft Medium contract show Australia is already building the kind of access-independent distributed fires capability the coalition architecture needs. Canberra, however, must know what the US expects of it

¹⁴³ "As USMC Leans on Australian Territory, ADF Can Gain — But We Must Guard Autonomy," *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/as-usmc-leans-on-australian-territory-adf-can-gain-but-we-must-guard-autonomy/>

and what the US can and cannot provide. No current framework answers that, and Australia's existing capability gives the cell something concrete to plan around from day one.

Japan and the Philippines should be the cell's next priority, for a different reason: Failure Two's access assumption argument runs directly through their territory — the Philippines' EDCA sites and the Davao Gulf pre-positioning architecture, Japan's Ryukyu-chain basing. A coalition access framework that does not eventually include the two governments whose territory the access assumption depends on is incomplete from its inception. This paper does not claim the same evidentiary basis for either that it claims for Australia; no dated trial or contract demonstrates what each could concretely contribute today. The cell's task with respect to both should therefore start with establishing what each can credibly contribute and on what timeline, rather than assuming a readiness level the public record does not yet support.

The UK's role should remain narrower than either. Section 4.1 establishes that the FCF's institutional unreadiness window cannot begin to close until the 2030s at the earliest, with a fraction of the USMC's resources to close it once it can. That reorientation is now stated policy rather than an analytical preference: the June 2026 Defence Investment Plan pointed the Commando Force explicitly toward NATO's northern flank and the Arctic. Whether a British government would weigh a Pacific contingency above simultaneous demands on NATO's eastern flank, the High North and the Mediterranean is not a question this paper can answer in the UK's favour. The cell should draw on UK input through the existing AUKUS Pillar II channel — autonomous systems, ASW integration, shared sensor architecture — without necessarily extending UK participation to operational planning or standing exercise commitments this section reserves for partners with a nearer and more direct stake in the outcome.

The Sovereignty Dimension

A concern regarding sovereignty will naturally arise when a partner is asked to integrate this closely with US planning, and as the USMC leans on partner territory, each government must guard its own autonomy. The structure proposed here answers that concern rather than dismissing it. A standing cell in which partner planners have the same standing to set design conditions and evaluate findings as US planners is not

a US-led process with allied input. It is a coalition planning process in which each partner's contributions and constraints are treated with equal seriousness.

The sovereignty concern also cuts the other way. A government left out of the planning is the one more likely to be handed a *fait accompli* later — a US operational concept that already assumes its basing, its logistics, its political exposure. Co-authoring the plan is the better protection.

The Relationship Between Recommendations Two and Four

Recommendations Two and Four are sequentially dependent. The access-failure wargame in Recommendation Two should precede and inform the planning cell's work, because the cell needs the wargame's findings to know what coalition distributed maritime denial would look like when the access assumption fails — the contingency the coalition architecture most needs to plan for. The sequencing: commission the wargame; publish findings on the timeline INDOPACOM's planning cycle allows; convene the planning cell once those findings are available as the primary analytical input.

This is not a reason to defer the cell's establishment. A cell stood up only after the wargame publishes will take longer to become effective. The cell should be established in parallel, so its members, terms of reference, and relationships with relevant commands are in place before the findings arrive.

Section 6

Conclusion

The Marine Corps has redesigned itself once already in response to a perceived strategic imperative. The doctrine and force structure that won the Pacific campaign — amphibious assault, the Fleet Marine Force — were built years ahead of the war that required them, against a threat that had not yet arrived. Force Design 2030 is the same kind of bet: that the institution can rebuild itself faster than the threat it is rebuilding for. The question this paper has tried to answer is whether that bet is being honoured — not whether EABO is the right concept, but whether the institution that built it will be ready to use it when the moment that matters arrives.

The Iran war does not answer that question on its own, but it makes the answer harder to avoid. Institutional readiness cannot be produced on demand. It is built over years, sometimes decades, and cannot be accelerated simply because a deadline has arrived. The Marine Corps' own evidence shows this clearly: the ARG-MEU's reachability is the product of decades of repetition; EABO's equivalent is still measured in a handful of MCCREs against a formation without the platform its concept requires.

Institutional reversion is not a failure of will or judgment. It is what happens when an institutional unreadiness window is still open at the moment a contingency arrives — and that window will not even begin to close until 2029 at the earliest. It was fully open throughout the Iran war, and it remains fully open now. The Iran war's institutional reversion was, in one limited sense, fortunate: its consequences were costly — commercially, militarily, and diplomatically — but recoverable. A Taiwan contingency, fought at greater distance against a far more capable ISR architecture, with less warning and less margin for US assets already committed elsewhere, would not offer the same opportunity for recovery.

This paper's four recommendations — designating CFOC-level MCCRE as the readiness standard, commissioning and publishing an access-failure wargame, reorienting concept development toward the operational dimension of logistics survivability, and establishing a standing coalition planning cell — are each actionable now, by existing institutions, as a first step. None requires new legislation or treaty

commitments to begin — though Recommendation Four's coalition access work will eventually require the broader diplomatic effort Failure Two already established no single service can compel. What they require immediately is the institutional will to treat a stress test with the seriousness it deserves.

The concept is sound. The preconditions are not yet in place. The question is whether the Iran war's demonstration is treated as the warning it is, or absorbed as a data point and filed — and whether the next demonstration, in a more consequential theatre, finds the same gaps unclosed.

This paper has tried to make that question unavoidable. The concept's advocates should want to close the gap, because a concept that cannot be employed when needed is not a concept; it is a hope. The concept's critics should want to close it too, because reverting to legacy employment under pressure is an institutional problem that reversing Force Design 2030 would not solve. The Iran war has given both sides reason to act. The question is whether either will.

Abbreviations, Acronyms and Initialisms

A2/AD	Anti-access/Area-denial
AN/TPY-2	Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance-2
APS-3	Army Prepositioned Stocks-3
ARG	Amphibious Ready Group
ARG-MEU	Amphibious Ready Group-Marine Expeditionary Unit
ASW	Anti-submarine Warfare
ATACMS	Army Tactical Missile System
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral security partnership
AUSMIN	Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations
BLT	Battalion Landing Team
C2	Command and control
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CFOC	Concept-level Full Operational Capability
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DLA	Defense Logistics Agency
EAB	Expeditionary Advanced Base
EABO	Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

EMCON	Emission Control
FARP	Forward Arming and Refuelling Point
FCF	Future Commando Force
FD2030	Force Design 2030
FOC	Full Operational Capability
G/ATOR	Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
HQMC	Headquarters Marine Corps
INDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command
IOC	Initial Operational Capability
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-N	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
LCS	Littoral Combat Ship
LHA	Landing Helicopter Assault Ship
LMG	Littoral Manoeuvre Group
LPD	Landing Platform Dock
LRG	Littoral Response Group
LSM	Landing Ship Medium
MADIS	Marine Air Defense Integrated System

MARFORPAC	United States Marine Corps Forces, Pacific
MCCDC	Marine Corps Combat Development Command
MCCRE	Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation
MCWL	Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory
MET	Mission Essential Task
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit
MLR	Marine Littoral Regiment
MPAT	Multinational Planning Augmentation Team
MRF-D	Marine Rotational Force – Darwin
MRSS	Multi-Role Strike Ship
NMESIS	Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System
PAC-3 MSE	Patriot Advanced Capability-3 Missile Segment Enhancement
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PrSM	Precision Strike Missile
RAA	Reciprocal Access Agreement
RFP	Request for Proposals
SEAB	Sensing Expeditionary Advanced Base
SIF	Stand-In Forces
SLV	Stern Landing Vessel
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
TM-EABO	Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations

TS/SCI	Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information
ULS-A	Unmanned Logistics System–Air
USD(P)	Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USV	Uncrewed Surface Vessel
VBSS	Visit, Board, Search and Seizure
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement
WEZ	Weapons Engagement Zone
WIFI	Wargame for Innovation and Frontline Improvisation

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