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CMSI Translations #32: The U.S. Marine Corps Concept for "Stand-In Forces"—Analysis and Response

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翻译

TRANSLATIONS

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The U.S. Marine Corps Concept for "Stand-In Forces"—Analysis and Response[1]

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Abstract: "Stand-In Forces" (SIF) is an operational concept proposed by the United States Marine Corps (USMC) within the context of strategic transformation, emphasizing the development of combat forces capable of sustained forward presence within the "weapons engagement zone" (WEZ). These forces can conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, gain long-range target custody, and engage in interference, deception, littoral zone harassment, rapid littoral strike, sustainment, protection, and security operations, as well as other actions to address changing conditions and challenges. To counter the continuous penetration and encroachment into our near seas, we must proactively engage and establish effective countermeasures. We must focus on addressing weaknesses and enhancing our amphibious systems warfare advantages; prioritize innovation and advancement to accelerate the development of maritime unmanned combat capabilities; and emphasize advancing the establishment of cyber- and information systems to address our core priorities.

Introduction

In July 2019, the USMC first introduced the concept of SIF in the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, as derived from the "stand-off" concept. The subsequent 2020 and 2021 USMC *Force Design 2030* white papers devoted significant sections to further elaborating on the SIF concept, which was followed by continuous exercise validation and implementation of the concept. In December 2021, the USMC issued *A Concept for Stand-In Forces*, providing a comprehensive elaboration of this concept and cementing its status as key operational doctrine for the USMC. In May 2022, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific (MARFORPAC) announced that the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF), headquartered in Okinawa, had been designated as the SIF within the First Island Chain. The SIF concept aligns with the U.S. military's current and overarching warfighting fundamentals and complements other service components' operational concepts. It reflects core adjustments in the development of U.S. forces and operations, which will profoundly impact our own military preparedness. We must pay close attention to this and respond effectively.

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[1] 岳志强 [Yue Zhiqiang], 王丽 [Wang Li], and 李金桥 [Li Jinqiao], 美海军陆战队 "防区内力量"概念分析与应对 ["The U.S. Marine Corps Concept for "Stand-In Forces"—Analysis and Response"], 军事学术 [*Military Art*], no. 11 (November 2023), pp. 49-51.

Translator's Note: *Military Art* is an "internal" (军内) PLA publication.

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I. Accurately Grasp the Fundamental Concept of the USMC SIF

The USMC's *A Concept for Stand-In Forces* clearly states that the SIF is "small but lethal, low signature, mobile, relatively simple to maintain and sustain forces designed to operate across the competition continuum within a contested area as the leading edge of a maritime defense-in-depth in order to intentionally disrupt the plans of a potential or actual adversary. Depending on the situation, stand-in forces are composed of elements from the Marine Corps, Navy, Coast Guard, special operations forces, interagency, and allies and partners." A comprehensive analysis of relevant USMC publications and training activities reveals the core tenets of the SIF as follows.

(1) Operational Emphasis on Persistent Forward Presence.

SIF is a concrete implementation and deepening of the operational approach established in the U.S. *Joint Warfighting Concept*, stressing penetration into enemy littorals to enter the WEZ to establish persistent presence in denied areas within range of enemy long-range precision strikes and to maintain an interlocked contact posture with the enemy.[3] [The SIF] would coordinate with forward-deployed assets like distributed surface action groups and expeditionary forward operating bases to support the introduction of large-scale naval or air forces or decisive strikes. This creates a balanced, distributed force deployment posture that amplifies overall U.S. military operational advantages.

(2) Operational Emphasis on Unmanned and Lightweight Combat Elements.

SIF prioritizes employment of low-signature, low-cost, survivable and resilient small unmanned or minimally manned platforms to deplete adversary resources and constrain adversary freedom of action. Currently, SIFs are starting to develop and employ these operational capabilities, supported by relatively mature technologies and equipment including unmanned combat platforms, pre-positioned undersea weapons, C-130 transport aircraft, MV-22 tiltrotor aircraft, HIMARS rocket launchers, and Naval Strike Missiles (NSM).

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(3) Operational Focus on Us (China).

SIF is a U.S. operational concept within the Indo-Pacific Strategy to counter China's growth in so-called "anti-access/area-denial" (A2AD) capabilities. SIF supports all-domain operations across the "competition continuum"—from peacetime to crisis to armed conflict, including through reconnaissance, targeting, harassment, and, when necessary, air defense and anti-ship operations to establish sea denial. This concept will further support the US re-orientation toward stand-off forces and non-contact warfare, by establishing bases of operations to support interior lines of operations and strengthening competition for and control over China's near seas.

II. In-depth Analysis of the Employment Concept for the USMC SIF

SIFs are employed directly against China. In peacetime, they serve as key assets for deterrence and containment along China's frontiers, maintaining a persistent forward presence in China's

[3] **Translator's note:** This mostly describes "persistence in the contact layer."

near seas to enhance reconnaissance, surveillance, understanding of the operating environment, and maritime sensing and domain awareness. At the same time, SIFs strengthen cooperation with allies through joint exercises to enhance combined operational capabilities. During crises, SIFs serve as rapid response forces, deploying unmanned, light, and special operations forces to conflict zones on short notice. These SIF missions include reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance ahead of kinetic operations, visible power projection, disruption and sabotage operations, and even on-call strikes. These actions demonstrate force presence and support for allies while deterring China from escalating. In armed conflict, they serve as the leading-edge enablers, initiating effective attacks to deny China the initiative and establish support and sustainment ahead of larger-scale SIF entry into China's near seas. A comprehensive analysis of the core concepts, force deployment, equipment development, and geographic employment of U.S. SIF reveals the following primary operational approaches:

(1) Reconnaissance and Surveillance.

This is the primary mission for SIF, to be sustained from peacetime through crisis through armed conflict. It enhances situational awareness for U.S. naval fleets, joint forces, and allied units within contested areas, providing support to decision-making across command echelons and operational phases. During peacetime, SIFs conduct routine reconnaissance and surveillance which familiarize forces with the operating environment; during crises, SIFs conduct reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance missions to collect on so-called "adversarial malign activities"; during wartime, SIFs maintain high-intensity, high-frequency surveillance to promptly and accurately gain target custody of enemy positions. Specific actions include deploying small, unmanned combat platforms near China's key military targets for reconnaissance and surveillance, and cueing and deploying hydroacoustic arrays and other assets to establish barrier zones and monitoring areas to track Chinese submarine operations.

(2) Long-Range Target Acquisition.

During crises and armed conflict, SIFs can deploy unmanned assets to approach our naval formations and critical island or coastal targets, or conduct reconnaissance via special operations forces to provide target cueing for forces operating outside the contact layer. On April 21, 2021, during the U.S. Navy's "Unmanned Integrated Battle Problem 21" (UxS IBP21) exercise, a guided-missile destroyer successfully struck a target vessel at 400 kilometers with a SM-6 by integrating unmanned tracking sensors and without needing to activate the ship's primary sensors, demonstrating tactical maturation [for the integration of unmanned sensors].

(3) Jamming and Deception.

During crises and armed conflict, SIFs can deploy unmanned assets equipped with electronic warfare payloads to conduct deception and communications jamming operations against us. SIFs can also deploy unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and covert acoustic jammers to simulate submarine signals in our area of operations, deceiving our reconnaissance and anti-submarine capabilities to divert for verification and identification, thereby supporting and reinforcing other strike operations. The electronic warfare payloads onboard U.S. unmanned platforms can generate hundreds of false target signals to overwhelm our radar tracking capacity and saturate our information channels, rendering us unable to effectively counter incoming threats.

(4) Forward Undersea Harassment.

During crises and armed conflict, SIFs can deploy large UUVs or have submarines launch small UUVs to loiter near our shipping lanes. They can covertly ambush or conduct suicide attacks against our undersea forces and large vessels. Large UUVs can patrol and loiter for extended periods with low power consumption, autonomously detect submarines and large vessels, and launch torpedo attacks. Small and medium UUVs can form "schools" [swarms] and integrate with manned submarines and surface forces to conduct strikes against our undersea forces. Pre-positioned undersea weapons, deployed in critical areas of our near seas, can be activated via long-range acoustic communications during armed conflict to execute reconnaissance, detection, and strike missions, threatening maritime domains across hundreds of square kilometers.

(5) Forward Rapid Strike.

During armed conflict, surface vessels or transport aircraft can covertly deploy low-cost strike capabilities such as HIMARS or NSM anti-ship missiles to islands forward of the First Island Chain. These assets can rapidly strike and withdraw, delivering precision strikes and fires deterrence against our land-based targets and surface vessels.

(6) Mission Assurance.

During armed conflict, SIF can enable rapid airfield seizure, conduct surveillance and escort operations, and enable safe and rapid deployment and withdrawal for tactical actions such as "Rapid Raptor" (快速猛禽), "Rapid Phantom" (快速幽灵) and "Agile Lightning" (敏捷闪电). SIF support and assurance can reduce security threats to itself and forces outside the contact layer, take on more high-risk, low-efficiency tasks, and simultaneously meet critical operational needs such as answering rapid information requirements and providing forward support and sustainment.

III. Proactive Countering the USMC SIF Conceptualization and Implementation

The USMC's continuous refinement of the SIF concept and optimization of deployment and operational employment will erode our land-enabled advantages in sea denial, make it more difficult for us to breach island chain blockades, induce rapid depletion of our combat resources, and complicate our operating environment. This escalates the real-world threats facing us and we must maintain strategic resolve and respond proactively and effectively.

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(1) Maintain Proactive Offensive Operations to Effectively Hinder Continuous Penetration Into Our Near Seas.

To effectively counter the USMC SIF, we should adopt a proactive offensive posture, aggressively expand our operational reach, project forces forward, and apply countermeasures at the source. This will neutralize the strategic pressure from U.S. maritime encroachment and redirect the trajectory of maritime military competition more favorably toward us. First, we must proactively deploy combat forces forward. We must maintain and normalize forward-deployed forces, extend undersea combat capabilities as far forward as feasible, and organize information

support assets such as survey vessels, electronic warfare aircraft, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft, and airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance over critical maritime areas. We must establish strategic exterior lines for deterrence and strike capabilities, shaping a maritime force posture which can quickly transition between peacetime and wartime operations to effectively constrain and impede U.S. forward-deployed combat assets. Second, we must proactively execute counter-information warfare. We must leverage our late-mover advantage in cyber and electromagnetic domain technologies to develop offensive capabilities which can effectively paralyze U.S. maritime command and control networks. We must employ counter-information warfare through the emplacement of viruses and offensive cyber operations to deceive, disrupt, or even cripple their maritime cyber and information systems. Third, we must strengthen the development of non-kinetic warfare, especially in the research and development of ultra high-power shortwave jamming and extend the range of electronic attack capabilities, and prioritize the development of novel information warfare capabilities, including high-power microwave (HPW) jammers, lasers, and anti-radiation drones to establish effective lethal and disruptive suppressive measures against U.S. small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) and enhance strike efficacy.

(2) Focus on mitigating weaknesses and vulnerabilities to expand our near seas systemic combat advantages.

In response to the USMC SIF's steady bearing toward us, we must reassess our near seas security challenges and accelerate the mitigation of weaknesses in our systemic combat capabilities to ensure the security of our near seas. First, we must strengthen our reconnaissance and early warning capabilities. We must prioritize the ability to detect "low, slow, small, and stealthy" targets by accelerating the development and deployment of advanced radar systems, enhancing the range and capabilities of shore-based radars, vigorously developing space-based reconnaissance systems, and extending the operational range of unmanned reconnaissance platforms. We must maintain surveillance and monitoring capabilities over key positions and targets to achieve comprehensive and precise monitoring of our near seas. Second, we must continuously improve our near seas early warning capabilities. We must strengthen overall early warning coordination by integrating reconnaissance resources from the military, maritime-related government departments, and civilian entities to address issues such as fragmented, redundant, and inefficient coastal surveillance efforts. This can streamline data coordination and information sharing, through establishing simultaneous intelligence reporting channels and building a more rigorous and precise persistent all-domain early warning system for coastal waters which will ensure coastal air, space, and undersea domain awareness. Third, we must fully leverage the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance capabilities of civilian vessels. By leveraging the large volume of civilian vessels, we can establish joint reconnaissance mechanisms, achieving low-cost, high-efficiency reconnaissance and early warning. We can conduct maritime deception to overwhelm U.S. SIFs with massive information overload to paralyze and neutralize their capabilities, effectively supplementing our own reconnaissance and surveillance assets.

(3) Emphasize innovation and surpassing capabilities to accelerate the development of maritime unmanned combat forces.

USMC SIFs primarily rely on small unmanned autonomous assets. We absolutely must avoid engaging small capabilities with large capabilities, or resource-intensive assets against lightweight assets. We should expedite the development of unmanned equipment and strike platforms, enhancing the mobility, stealth, and intelligence of weapon systems to win in combat at lower cost. The first capability is UUVs. We must emphasize intelligent, modular, deep-submersible, and multi-functional development, focusing on reconnaissance, maritime search and rescue (SAR), and materiel delivery variants. The second capability is unmanned surface vessels (USVs). We must develop a series of USVs based on the concepts of integration, modularization, and standardization, further enhancing intelligent and autonomous coordination capabilities to seamlessly integrate with existing naval combat systems. The third capability is UAVs. We must coordinate shipborne and land-based systems, with shipborne platforms primarily integrated onto destroyers, frigates, amphibious assault ships, and aircraft carriers. We must prioritize resolving ship-aircraft compatibility issues and focus on developing surveillance UAVs and reconnaissance-strike integrated UAVs. The fourth capability is in undersea pre-positioned weapons systems. We must combine fixed and mobile system integration to accelerate the development of undersea unmanned weapons systems capable of multi-domain and multi-functional employment with integrated reconnaissance-strike capabilities.

(4) Highlight critical priorities and vigorously advance the development of network information systems.

As the central nervous system for conducting maritime military operations, network information systems provide robust support for countering the USMC SIFs. Our efforts should focus on enhancing our maritime reconnaissance, surveillance, and object identification capabilities; efficient command and control; and autonomously coordinated offensive and defensive operations. We must integrate and strengthen comprehensively information resources and expedite the construction of an integrated maritime network information system within the broader architecture of the military network information system. First, we must coordinate the development of a near seas network information system guided by the principle of information dominance, and enhance the top-level design of airborne, surface, underwater, and dual-domain information capabilities. We must coordinate information linkages and interfaces among various unmanned systems to establish a tactical-level networked information system, which can integrate manned and unmanned assets at sea. We must ensure new combat capabilities are integrated into the network to effectively achieve operational objectives. Second, we must prioritize the development of undersea networked information systems and strengthen the development of undersea and cross-domain network information systems to advance the placement of shore-based acoustic surveillance sonar systems in critical ports and waterways. We must develop networked undersea information systems which integrate functions such as undersea detection, communications, positioning and navigation, and hydrographic data collection. This will gradually establish multi-layered, comprehensive, and three-dimensional underwater early warning and detection capabilities. Third, we must accelerate the development of combat command systems. We must advance the construction of next-generation command and control systems, improve maritime joint operational databases and target identification

systems, develop intelligent command and control methods, and promote the development of systemic integration of battlefield awareness, firepower strike, and command and control.