

A Force-in-Readiness, or in Stasis?

Five questions about *FD 2030*

by Bing West

After U.S. combat in Iraq and Afghanistan sputtered to an unsatisfactory finish, the Marine Corps pivoted to preparing for a war with China. The pivot, called *Force Design 2030*, calls for “a nimble force capable of employing long-range fires in support of fleet operations.”¹ The key warfighting employment envisions seizing and then hopping from tiny islands in the South China Sea in order to fire missiles at Chinese warships. To pay for this, the Corps has given up its tanks and many artillery tubes. This transformation has been ongoing for two years. Sufficient time has passed to pose five questions:

1. Is the 2030 force vital for sea control?
2. Is the 2030 force credible at in its warfighting mission?
3. What are the opportunity costs?
4. Can the force so disconcert China that it is worth the opportunity costs?
5. Does 2030 force tie into a national policy sustainable for a generation?

1. Vital for Sea Control?

Force 2030 assumes the Navy needs Marines to prevent the Chinese fleet from sortieing across the Pacific. U.S. admirals will gladly accept the offer of the 2030 force. But sea control is not in mortal peril without Marine aid. Our naval aviators and attack submariners believe they are quite capable of sinking those Chinese vessels. In addition, thousands of missiles are lodged on board hundreds of U.S. Navy vessels. Conversely, the mission is not needed to insure the viability of the Marine Corps. The public prizes Marines as tough, disciplined warriors who without exception have fought in any clime or

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place. Congress and presidents support the Marine Corps as a stand-alone Service.

2. Warfighting Credibility

During any pre-war crisis, China will threaten any nation that grants landing rights. So, it is unlikely any nation will grant permission for Marines to land. The Chinese will have a plan for neutralizing every landing spot. Once hostilities begin, the Navy must place its amphibious ships in harm’s way to land Marines with scant organic firepower. This means the Navy must bring sustainment. But Wake Island in 1941 showed the Navy might decide not to send a relief force. In sum, island hopping in enemy waters is very high-risk.

Separate from capability is the issue of strategic credibility. Does the Chinese fleet really intend to reprise World War II in the Pacific? Yes, two novels—*Ghost Fleet* and *2034*—have featured a Chinese fleet sailing 6,000 miles to seize Hawaii and to drop nuclear bombs on U.S. cities. But to do so in real-life, those Chinese ships must refuel while avoiding our lethal attack submarines and carrier battle groups. Why would China throw away its fleet?

In war, the center of gravity rests upon the determination of the opposing peoples. China, under blockade and without fuel, will be ground down—if American spirit refuses to quit. But the Chinese leadership will be confident that their society can endure priva-

tions longer than can American society. Worldwide shipping will cease, and cyber networks will be severely disrupted. Will the public endure months of hardships, including the loss of electric power, massive financial disruption, and the severe rationing of basic goods?

Rallying his countrymen during the Nazi 1940 bombing of England, Prime Minister Churchill declared, “I see the spirit of an unconquerable people.”² Recently, the historian Niall Ferguson wrote, “Americans today appear to have a much lower tolerance for risk than their grandparents and great-grandparents.”³ In a war, our national will is what China will test.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* opined, “the generation born between 1995 and 2012 is far more risk-averse and more physically safe than its elders.”⁴ Does America as a society have the grit of “the greatest generation” during World War II? Would we pull together as a nation, or would our sharp cleavages result in the acceptance of Chinese terms?

3. Opportunity Costs

That existential challenge transcends our military. For the Marine Corps, the narrower question is whether the benefits of *Force 2030* outweigh its opportunity costs. Over the past century, America has fought six major wars and a dozen smaller conflicts. Naval planners foresaw the 1942–45 War in the Pacific; all other wars and crises were not

anticipated. So, the odds are about five to one that the next conflict will not be a naval conflict with China. *Force 2030* may be a force in stasis, never employed.

Force 2030, however, did give up tanks and many howitzers. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and retired Gen Robert Neller invested heavily to modernize the essence of the Marine Corps—the squad. Their shared assumption was that close-in combat remained the lodestone of the Marine Corps. Under *Force 2030*, the squad will fight without tanks or continuous close-in fire support. Marines employed tanks in Vietnam, in DESERT STORM, and in the march to Baghdad. If the next conflict requires tanks or sustained fire support, Marines will have to task organize with Army units, lining up in a queue alongside the National Guard. Command relationships will be complex and time-consuming, enervating the Marine core concept of maneuver warfare. *Force 2030* runs the risk that the next conflict will require what has been discarded, meaning Marines will not be the first to fight.

4. Disconcerting China

Nonetheless, because China poses the largest threat to American interests, *Force 2030* is a bargain if it deflects China from its incremental, irredentist aggression. The historical precedent for this is the Maritime Strategy, circa 1978–88. Following the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the Pentagon shifted from counterinsurgency to deterring a Soviet blitzkrieg against NATO. Funding and strategy concentrated on an anti-armor defense along the inner-German border, with the Navy playing a small role and reduced funding.

The Navy responded with a study called Sea Plan 2000 that advocated horizontal escalation. While Soviet armor was attacking south against West Germany, American carriers and submarines would surge north, sinking Soviet ships and submarines, including those with nuclear missiles. After wargaming, this evolved into the “Maritime Strategy,” embraced by the CNO and Secretary of the Navy. President Reagan authorized carrier exercises in the Norwegian Sea, threatening the Kola

peninsula. In response, a thoroughly alarmed Russian CNO pleaded with the Politburo for a major increase in funding. Instead, Gorbachev became more convinced that Russia could not compete militarily against America, thus hastening the end of the Soviet Union.

Similarly, *Force 2030* should apply such horizontal escalation, publicly advertising that its long-range missiles are not merely anti-ship; instead, they can also strike targets inside the Chinese homeland. If Chinese warships hid in port, Marine missiles would still go in after them. No sanctuary would be given. *Force 2030* would then get Beijing’s full attention, resulting in much diplomatic sputtering and a heavy Chinese investment in defense. Thus, during peacetime, explicit horizontal escalation by *Force 2030* would have an outsize effect enhancing deterrence, just as the Maritime Strategy had upon the Soviet Union. Viewed through this geopolitical aperture, *Force 2030* is a bargain for America’s security.

5. Is *Force 2030* Tied To a Firm National Policy?

However, unlike in the case of the Maritime Strategy, our national policy does not support *Force 2030*. For a quarter of a century, presidents from both parties have chosen not to take action as China built its littoral forts. U.S. combatant ships occasionally venture into the South China Sea to support international transit rights, but no effort has been made to quarantine or otherwise apply leverage to force China to deconstruct its forts.

Instead, in a feat of policy jiu-jitsu, the administration has used the island-hopping strategy to shrink the overall size of the amphibious force. The Marine Corps recommended constructing eight light amphibious ships to transport small packets of Marines among the contested islands, rather than risk sending in large amphibs. The administration decided that light amphibs could substitute for the construction of larger amphibs.⁵ The Marine Corps was penalized for its strategic initiative.

Whether our policymakers place real value in *Force 2030* is easy to deter-

mine. Simply propose an exercise, to include landing rights, inside the South China Sea. If the White House approves and through diplomacy secures landing rights, then *Force 2030* will move from a paper concept to an operational reality that will genuinely disconcert China. If the answer is no, then we do not have a firm policy to check Chinese irredentism. In that case, the Marine Corps should not devote more resources that degrade the Marine ethos of being ready for combat in any clime or place.

Put bluntly, our policy toward China is too erratic to sustain *Force 2030* for the next twenty and more years. Because our national policy dares not risk even an amphibious exercise in the South China Sea during peacetime, it is highly unlikely our ships would operate there during war. My novel, *The Last Platoon*, described the heroic futility of Marines pursuing a wrong-headed policy in Afghanistan. Let us not repeat that mistake. There is no policy that firmly supports island-hopping in the South China Sea.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).
2. Eric Larson, *The Splendid and the Vile*, (New York, NY: Crown, 2020).
3. Niall Ferguson, “How a More Resilient America Beat a Midcentury Pandemic,” *Wall Street Journal*, (April 2021), available at <https://www.wsj.com>.
4. Abigail Shrier, “To Be Young and Pessimistic in America,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (May 2021), available at <https://www.wsj.com>.
5. Mark Cancian, “Stormy Waters Ahead for Amphibious Shipbuilding Plan,” *Breaking Defense*, (July 2021), available at <https://breaking-defense.com>.

