Force Design 2030 and Intelligence

Maturing the precison warfare regime

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The supporting concepts of *Force Design 2030* (*FD2030*) require a Marine Corps capable of operational-level intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) whose task and purpose are continuous forward collection of targeting intelligence on behalf of the Joint Force using organic and well-connected means.[1] In other words, Marines seek to become a key of the mature precision warfare regime: the reconnaissance-fires complex. The Service, however, is not structured, trained, or equipped for that mission—especially in terms of collection operations and compartmented information. The Corps has also expended its intelligence resources in pursuit of alternate goals. Perhaps more importantly, the Service is culturally unprepared for the task. The Marine Corps has spent an historical interlude provided by counterinsurgency in the Middle East invested in aptitudes aligned to the previous era of characteristics of war. To reorient quickly, Marines then produced a set of operating concepts under *FD2030* to meet great-power challenges.[2] Despite innovative thinking, however, institutional backsliding during the attempt to balance experimentation and innovation against crisis response and current operational force requirements has left the Marine Corps adrift between force models. As a result, the Corps faces a decision: become a capable operational-level ISR force or revert to a crisis response force reliant on the ISR of others. It cannot do both due to practical and fiscal realities.

FD2030 builds from concepts starting with the Office of Net Assessment's revolution in military affairs focused on the anti-access/area-denial concepts of advanced placement and scouting, eschewing large, fixed bases in favor of mobile advanced forces capable of continuing to exist in the weapons engagement zone (WEZ) and providing value to the Joint Force and the warfighting command—the geographic combatant command (GCC).[3] Although not explicitly stated in Marine Corps documents, the foremost value proposition imagined contributes to deterrence during competition through demonstrated effectiveness. The expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO), Stand-In Force (SIF),[4] and reconnaissance counter-reconnaissance (RXR) concepts[5] are all predicated on a capable distributed forward organization possessing exquisite abilities to sense and make sense of adversary systems, networks, and actions at speed ("the eyes and ears of the fleet and Joint Force"[6]). That value proposition is the nexus of developed information as a characteristic of conflict per the Department's net assessments: providing intelligence. The SIF then poises the Joint Force to execute targeting; it provides the reconnaissance portion of the reconnaissance fires complex. Though the Marine Corps will also fire, that would not be its key contributing value and is not necessary during competition other than to demonstrate capability. The concepts tend to skip straight to

conflict to explain their development requirements which can usefully prepare for the worst case and hopefully demonstrate the ability to act. However, that tendency also ignores the most common scenario: deterrence during competition. If the concept works, then conflict never happens.

The key feature for a SIF to effectively contribute within the context of the GCC would be to provide something that the GCC does not already have such as operational ISR for positive identification/confirmation or for filling gaps in the picture. Force presence alone is not a valid value proposition because a force positioned on the ground that the adversary does not covet without much innate ability to kinetically impact the ground that the adversary does want is not very useful, especially in conflict. If that force provides command and control for over-the-horizon capabilities beyond those organic to it but does only that, it merely becomes a target within the WEZ that does not add much to deterrence. The GCC can already command and control (C2) disparate entities including relay to allies and partners. Should C2 be degraded by the adversary (disrupted, disconnected, intermittent, or limited bandwidth), then connectivity is likely even more degraded for the forward C2 element close to the interference. The SIF could theoretically build stockpiles of versatile long-range mobile precision weapons systems forward, but doing so would require a radical adjustment to the Service budget in direct competition with the other Services during a period of fiscal constraint and better relationships with non-traditional partners. The SIF con-

tributes to new domains such as space and cyber but does not do so under its own auspices or with any need to be forward in the WEZ. So, what utility does this SIF provide?

FD2030 answers that question with the RXR concept, re-envisioning what Marines mean by the word "reconnaissance" into a forward-deployed sensing force providing the up-close operational picture for the GCC in coordination with joint, national, and national-technical means.[7] It is not enough to simply collate the picture provided by others. To be of value, the Corps must have the capability to provide part of or confirm the picture through intelligence collection. That collection cannot only be the extremely local version that previous Marine tactical concepts customarily describe ("conduct reconnaissance and surveillance operations in support of the MAGTF commander's scheme of maneuver"[8]), though that is included. Marines would have to contribute to all-domain, operational ISR, feeding directly into joint targeting processes—especially during competition. That is operational ISR, considered in the Air and Space Forces to be an enduring core mission and mission-essential task and the driving purpose behind specified units in the Army and the Navy.[9]

The SIF also requires excellent security cooperation skills. Simply put, to flexibly maneuver in the WEZ of great power competitors is to maneuver in the political space of someone else's nation-state and to draw the adversary's attention directly to that state.[10] Continuous engagement, therefore, aligning missions, tasks, goals, and objectives with partners remains of utmost importance to the forces forward along with concurrent planning for weapons systems, C2, and capacity must occur at the GCC headquarters level with those partners to account for total force capability. The Marine Corps moved ahead with large-scale organizational change, including divestment from traditional capabilities including tanks and tubed artillery to invest in Marine littoral regiments—among other things, saving money and manpower for Congress—

but did so mostly without considering this security cooperation requirement for its operating concepts.[11]

Service culture plays an important role in the blind spots of *FD2030* and SIF development like security cooperation. Marine culture traditionally values offensive fire-power and close combat—to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver—while deprecating all else.[12] That offensive, closing fire power dynamic must be controlled by a local Marine commander in total charge of a disciplined force able to act alone—an unsupported expeditionary force as in previous conflicts. Neither joint-enmeshed operational ISR nor security cooperation fits into that cultural dynamic. As a result, achieving *FD2030* requires a Service cultural adjustment of emphasis, something not assisted by the way in which the change was initiated—with a small group of intimates giving way to hand-picked planners signing non-disclosure agree-

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ments in the first two years.[13] While Marine discipline could be assumed to sustain change, Service culture will inevitably win out, and the trends of the last few years highlight that. As noted above, innovation was also arguably hampered by several decades of counterinsurgency between the anti-access/area-denial and WEZ concepts and *FD2030*. Counterinsurgency, requiring large infantry formations to control the ground supported by organic air power reliant on operational intelligence provided by others and ground patrolling for the local commander, harkened to less modern characteristics of conflict. The Marine Corps expended resources on that familiar problem set, like the other Services, reserving little to meet assessed future challenges of great-power competition.

The Corps has made only furtive efforts in formal security cooperation, mostly for counterinsurgency and in decline since the conclusion of large tactical operations in the Middle East. The traditional purview of Special Operations Command, *FD2030* proposed sufficient change in scale to differentiate its concepts while acknowledging the need to partner with special forces. No structure or effort has been invested to ensure the access that the SIF requires to execute its mission, however. The Marine Security Cooperation Group was deactivated "in accordance with the 38th Commandant's planning guidance and FD2030."[14] Security cooperation for *FD2030* is a key enabling function.

Operational ISR, unlike security co-operation, is arguably the hub of the *FD2030* vision. Very little has been reported about new Marine formations or initiatives for ISR. Of the six missions of the Marine littoral regiment, only one—support maritime domain awareness—even approaches intelligence, reconnaissance, or broader ISR.[15] At the same time, three other major (and important) efforts have diverted resources and attention from intelligence, the joint function that routinely leads ISR efforts in the Joint Force: cyber, space, and information. These are vital investments, but they were made in an environment without additional resources and as a result, those resources were taken from the established intelligence warfighting function. In cyber, space, and information, the culture of the Marine Corps encourages proponents to self-describe as "operators" to imply that the efforts fall within the combat culture of the Service, which further divides them from their natural classified and compartmented environ-

ments in the intelligence staff where they originated to be in operations staffs without the clearance or preparation to manage them. Furthermore, while a SIF proposing multi-domain operational ISR must participate and contribute to these areas of endeavor, an expeditionary commander will not have charge of these missions in the kind of independent way of previous conflicts in traditional domains.

The cyber domain provides a case in point with a new functional combatant command to oversee operations. In the data and information-driven modern world, coordinated action is essential to consistent cyber operations. Cyber exists because of the digital age, which has altered the characteristics of warfare and confrontation. The Marine Corps has contributed a substantial investment into U.S. Cyber Command's (CYBERCOM) capabilities. Just as CYBERCOM remains inextricably intertwined with the National Security Agency (NSA) and signals intelligence (SIGINT), however, a great deal of the Marine Corps investment has come through the diversion of the resources of Marine SIGINT and electronic warfare.[16] For cyber combat mission teams, fully half the enlisted complement remains SIGINT specialties and much of the new structure in the cyber specialties has been recruited out of SIGINT/electronic warfare because those Marines have the skills and the clearance. The Marine Corps has been at the forefront of experimentation with cyber forces forward, but actions are taken strictly under the auspices of CYBERCOM and are by no means the independent purview of a forward expeditionary commander.[17] All must be done in close coordination with the GCC, CYBERCOM, and NSA; in other words, the effort, while "operational," is something in which the Corps participates and contributes, but it must do so as part of a meshed network within the Joint Force through the GCC to the intelligence community (IC). Furthermore, most of these efforts directly correlate to intelligence and before the advent of CYBERCOM would simply have been viewed as an extension of NSA.

Space, similarly, not only has a combatant command but a new Service to support it. Marine interest in space has come from close scrutiny of the requirements of RXR, given the utility of space as a competitive domain. The Service must participate and contribute, but space operations need to be coordinated and the SIF needs to achieve competitive priority in a resource-constrained environment where another Service and command set the agenda. Once again, it is the reliance on the GCC that will enable the Corps to achieve the priority of requirement to actuate its RXR concepts with respect to forward presence in competition, whether it has the equipment, clearance, and training to do so.

Space and cyber naturally coalesce with intelligence due to the sources, methods, and classifications used to execute actions in those domains. In addition, the C2 of these functions and domains intermingled with the need to achieve effects, often referred to by Marines as "fires" regardless of a kinetic action, form a natural combination in the mature precision-strike regime for the characteristics of compartmented, classified modern warfare. Moreover, intelligence pursues an enterprise approach with GCC priority to obtain focus on requirements among the large and wide-ranging IC. In other words, intelligence is the most mature warfighting function and capability that has the data-centric, information-driven characteristics that new concepts (*FD2030*), new domains (cyber and space), and new functions (information) require.

Seeking a unifying theme, the Marine Corps identified information and data centricity as key characteristics of the modern operating environment. For the DOD and the Joint Warfighting Concept, however, defense information advantage means the ability to use information and information systems to achieve an operational advantage over adversaries, while denying them the same.[18] This means having a specific focus on adversary perceptions, sensing, and sense-making, as well as systems and capabilities, to disturb or divert those processes—this activity is specifi-

cally an intelligence function. Furthermore, information advantage in DOD relates to the concept of information superiority, defined as the operational advantage derived from the ability to collect, process, and disseminate (the intelligence cycle) an uninterrupted flow of information; to achieve understanding, this information must be refined into intelligence while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same: counterintelligence. The existing convergence of these capabilities should enhance the perception of and need for a strong intelligence capability and capacity. These could certainly be unified under the moniker of "information" or information dominance but not at the expense of the lynchpin function of the converged construct. What the Marine Corps has done instead is to exploit its intelligence apparatus to use the resources to make other functions and features.

The Marine Corps has developed a unique, but impractical approach to what it has deemed to be the seventh warfighting function: information. According to *MCDP 8*, this is not the same sense of information that the DOD net assessments have. Instead of an acute understanding of adversary collection, sensing, decision making, and actions, it is an effort to achieve information advantage in the public domain. Militaries from republics, however, rarely set the public agenda that they exist to execute and, in great-power competition, confront autocracies exercising high levels of control over public discourse. Unlike insurgents and terrorists, whose actions most often occur solely to send messages, great powers compete in all domains to achieve concrete advantage—succinctly, to gain ground. Where military positional advantage is meaningless to a terror group, a nation will seek to exert real authority over real claims. Even against terrorists, traditional military structures—with every advantage in public media access—struggle. For example, the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza provides extensive evidence of this. Information projected by militaries is often viewed dubiously as either intelligence or propaganda. So, the information advantage

that the Joint Force seeks from its Service components is not some viral social media post. That perception attempts to project American society on potential adversaries, a tendency referred to in intelligence as "mirror imaging." The information advantage the GCC needs is of adversary decision making and that type of advantage is the realm of intelligence. For the pacing threat, then, the Corps should be building a robust intelligence enterprise tuned precisely to its pacing threat.

The Marine information effort has, however, by zero-sum constrained resource necessity, dismantled what tentative intelligence efforts the Service made in the first two decades of the new century. The Marines of intelligence specialties have been combined into information groups or employed to support other ends. The Service almost terminated its ground intelligence programs for officers. The Service cryptologic component is also its cyber component, despite an explicit need to staff, train, and equip forces for intelligence. Even though MEF information groups (MIGs) have been led mostly by intelligence officers, these officers are the screened and selected cream of what should be an intelligence enterprise. The MIGs each work for independent local commanders in the classic Marine tradition, resisting efforts to execute global enterprise despite initiatives such as the Marine Corps Information Command to attempt to coordinate them. There are potential process and regulatory issues for information gathering on adversarial activity that is not intelligence within these mixed units. Even at the headquarters, there is no longer any separate director for intelligence because it is now a collateral duty for the Deputy Commandant for Information. Within the Deputy Commandant for Information directorate, the human resources of what was once the intelligence department were used to create six new divisions and teams; establish the Marine Corps Information Command; provide support to the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab; as well as several other efforts.

Information, however, in the form presented by the Marine Corps, is not a defined and resourced discipline supported by DOD and non-DOD government agencies and, most importantly, specified funding; intelligence, by contrast, is. The Marine Corps is one of the eighteen agencies, Services, and offices that form the IC and thus does receive both Military and National Intelligence Program funding. The Deputy Commandant for Information is the only deputy commandant to maintain a separate resource division and workforce division because the authority for funding and people comes from the IC rather than the Marine Corps. The Marine emphasis on intelligence, however, especially under the auspices of information, has been so insignificant that even the Space Force receives more National Intelligence funding than the Corps. That simple fact describes the posture of the SIF in the Joint Force. Dismissing intelligence as an "enabling" function for its close-with-and-destroy mission, it has been mostly an afterthought. Why would any GCC conceive that a Service with no major independent programs or structures for intelligence be able to fill GCC intelligence gaps forward as an SIF during competition and deterrence? If contrasted with the special forces for whom both advanced reconnaissance and security cooperation are major missions, the Army's Intelligence and Security Command preserving military intelligence brigades while building multi-domain task forces, or the 16th Air Force as a true task-able global enterprise, the Marine Corps is not even comparable. From that perspective, the value of the newly fielded forces remains somewhat unclear—with no reports of GCCs requesting new Marine formations.

Intelligence, the core function for reconnaissance and operational ISR, is an enterprise function that stretches from national to tactical and involves international coalitions as well (involving robust security cooperation). Like cyber and space, therefore, achieving priority in a resource-constrained environment necessitates a Joint Force approach at the highest warfighting echelon: the combatant command. Each of these domains and issues is important to the totality of the missions of the GCC but must be executed in a coordinated, enterprise fashion through the Service component. In his 2019 planning guidance, however, the Commandant declared "our MARFORs are not operational headquarters, nor will they be treated as such. Our MARFORs are administrative headquarters,"[19] and therefore of no emphasis in *FD2030*. Consequently, Marine components are also not postured to fight for requirements and priority in cyber, space, or intelligence.

The Marine Corps information effort and its sub-components, what remains of intelligence in the Service, has postured for the last war—counterinsurgency in the public domain. Its information resources seek to contest the public domain, just like insurgents and terrorists. Most of its intelligence resources are expended as far forward as possible under local commanders, down to the company-level intelligence cell. A company-level intelligence cell cannot do targeting for the Joint Force because it is designed for either immediate low-level crises or continuous counterinsurgency. The experimental infantry battalion has not produced an advanced, mesh-networked, joint ISR force. The new infantry scout platoon capability points toward thinking about moving to contact, not persisting in the forward maritime space with

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advanced exquisite sensors. If that is the case, the infantry battalion presents the GCC with a liability, not a sensor, that can only provide security in a country friendly enough to have allowed access in the first place. Yet, the experimentation and divestments, coupled with naval disinterest and poor amphibious ship readiness, have not made the Marine Corps available for crisis response missions either: recent missions have all fallen to the Army to execute in Kenya, the Middle East, and Sudan, in part because the Marine Corps has not invested in the Joint Force either—preferring to husband its resources internally.

This presents a results-oriented, tactically focused, close-with/destroy specialty force with a strategic conundrum. In need of a global strategic ISR enterprise, it has all but discarded and disaggregated its Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise and subordinated it to an information structure for which it did not have doctrine until 2022 and does not connect the Service to additional resources. Instead of retaining skilled intelligence professionals, the Service has been hemorrhaging capable, competent, cleared personnel to organizations that do perform intelligence because individual Marines are among the most prized personnel in the IC. To build an electronic warfare capability for the experimental infantry battalion, the Service had to reverse itself and attempt to rebuild and then expand its SIGINT/electronic warfare specialties (resources that had been used to build cyber and space capabilities for several years at the expense of their own readiness). Moreover, to be the SIF that performs RXR, the Corps will have to emphasize intelligence at all levels to bring its capabilities into focus—a cultural adjustment that will face the same intense backlash as *FD2030*. The Service has only just begun to grapple with the need for compartmented intelligence and information, but RXR inhabits those highly restricted and regimented spaces.

One article cannot solve this conundrum and further operating concepts will remain hypotheses without sub-stantive adjustment. Still, a few observations can be offered based on the evidence provided by other Services:
- To be the force of choice means to participate in the Joint Force—componency matters.
- A global ISR enterprise requires a formal and preferably command structure, not an informal community of interest.
- A SIF conducting RXR in competition must have operational ISR as a core task at all echelons.
- Executive agency accesses national and military intelligence programs: expeditionary reconnaissance should be a Marine Corps realm.[20]

To solve the problem of weak componency for the Corps, Marines should follow two well-trodden courses of action: continue to build combined task forces under the naval component and return componency to the MEFs as additional hats (with certain exceptions). The Marine Corps has several component headquarters set over MEFs with the same commanding rank but mostly established without forces and of lesser rank. The MEF, per Marine Corps practice and guidance, is the far more capable staff and does not need an intermediate headquarters between it and the warfighting GCC. The MEF is also an operational command and will likely qualify to be a joint task force as well. Making the MEF the component should obviate the need to place any more than MEF liaisons at the current component headquarters, harvesting general officer, officer, and enlisted structure. The Service should then employ that structure to augment the MEFs to resemble a joint corps headquarters more closely, integrate into naval combined task forces, and finally build new entities.

Marines will then have the resources in the zero-sum environment to consider a global, Service-wide, ISR command (potentially an ISR and security command). The well-meant Marine Corps Information Command, which represents the convergence of signals intelligence with cyber and space, has struggled due to its posture as a fifth role for Marine Forces Cyber while performing mostly intelligence with NSA. Moreover, tying the Marine Corps Information Command to the amorphous Marine concept of information separates it from the intelligence resources and community. The ISR command moniker would give a structured authority as well as potential access to resources and should provide Service-wide reach, but it must work for the Head of the Intelligence Com-munity Element and Director of Intelligence for the Service. It should also have rank-equivalency with the Corps-level headquarters of the Service—the MEFs. Maritime forces also provide a model for these types commands.

To justify both the SIF and RXR operating concepts while developing commensurate capabilities, the Marine Corps must develop the core task of reconnaissance making it understood as operational ISR at all echelons. The only way to engage busy commanders is to go beyond concepts and provide specified, defined Marine Corps tasks with core mission essential tasks against which every command must be measured. These mission essential tasks must form part of the core mission, the Defense Readiness Reporting System C-Level standard. Only then will commands begin to review and examine their requirements to perform these missions more effectively and begin self-actualizing innovation to achieve

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them. Commanders must seek ways to show their higher headquarters and the Joint Force that they are the unit of choice for operational ISR. Marines are known for discipline and resourcefulness; giving them the task exploits those traits to move the Corps more rapidly in the *FD2030* direction.

Finally, the Marine Corps needs a programmed capability that captures the attention of the IC, the community with the resources needed to fulfill *FD2030* concept visions. A November 2023 article in the *Marine Corps Gazette* outlined a strong possibility: executive agency for expeditionary reconnaissance.[21] The Marine Corps must reshape Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise as a global ISR enterprise, like the 16th Air Force, that needs to be operationally engaged with GCCs. Marines must also provide those warfighters with strategic value but in a way that can be understood. At that point, with the enterprise command, tasks to the Service, and executive agency, the requirements will flow, and the Service could become the force of choice as a SIF. When Defense guidance, IC recognition, and most importantly common knowledge know that to deploy a Marine battalion is to deploy an informed, mesh-networked, exquisitely capable entity that will identify and locate the adversary anywhere, anytime, as well as close with and destroy them, the Corps will have arrived at *FD2030.*

All of this, however, requires a cultural shift. Prominent voices continue to argue that *FD2030* and a "911 force" in readiness for rapidly developing crises are mutually exclusive.[22] Many similar voices cannot embrace the lack of Marine Corps independence or the notion that an operation might occur solely to collect intelligence. These antiquated perspectives fail to recognize that the force that performs intelligence, ISR, and RXR always operates in the real world and is never alone—it is "always on" because it must be effective. Furthermore, it must possess superb command and control with highly informed access and awareness that will prepare it to respond rapidly and knowledgeably. Finally, it will have to be light, fast, and efficient to cover the area with the resources necessary for a SIF. These attributes can enhance crisis response, but they can only do so if Marines embrace the mission.

Notes

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8. LtGen Robert Walsh, *MCRP 2-10A.6 (formerly MCWP 3-25) Ground Reconnaissance Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

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