

Still First to Fight?

Shaping the 21st century Marine Corps

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The headline in the Saturday *New York Times* on 1 June 1918 read “Marines—First to Fight.” The day before, a brigade of Marines attached to the U.S. Army’s 2nd Division had raced to the front to halt a breakthrough threatening Paris. They stopped the Germans cold, and five days later, the brigade successfully counterattacked at Belleau Wood—becoming the first publicly identified American unit to enter combat in World War I. Ever since that epic battle, the Corps has embraced “First to Fight,” initially as a recruiting slogan and then as an ethos that reflects its place in the country’s security architecture. As part of that ethos, the Marine Corps has promoted an institutional mindset about a high level of readiness for crises both small and large. Since 1952, the Corps has been designed and postured as an amphibious “force-in-readiness” poised for immediate use in a wide variety of missions, exploiting its expeditionary tool kit and naval mobility. When faced with a crisis, Marines believe one of the first question from the White House should be: “Where are the Marines?”

Marine Force Design 2030

The Marine Corps has earned its reputation within battle, but it has also excelled at anticipating demands for new capabilities to deal with the changing character of war. After the end of the Cold War, as it adapted to the age of terrorism and a generation of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marines made small steps forward. When he became Commandant of the Marine Corps last year, Gen David H. Berger signaled that the time for distinctive change had arrived.¹ In articulating his vision of a future Marine Corps, Gen Berger concluded:

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The rapid expansion of China’s area-denial capabilities, coupled with its pivot to the sea as the primary front in a renewed great-power competition, have fundamentally transformed the environment in which the U.S. military will operate for the foreseeable future. For the first time in a generation, sea control is no longer the unquestioned prerogative of the United States.²

His guidance was seen as both revolutionary and refreshing by pundits and reformers. It was seen as refreshingly frank, taking on cherished assumptions, and willing to reduce personnel to gain funding for needed modernization.³ Subsequently, the Commandant has shown that he was willing to gore a few sacred cows and has detailed the proposed force changes developed for a 21st century Corps aligned with the *National Defense Strategy*.⁴ This plan has generated both plaudits and concerns from defense analysts outside the Corps and retired Marines. Any change would be controversial, especially when you move away from combat proven capabilities to accept tradeoffs and embrace a different future. In this short article, I briefly detail the proposed changes, assess the general shifts represented in the design, and evaluate some issues related to the plan. This assessment indicates that the capability and capacity changes are aligned with both the

National Defense Strategy in general and the changes in the projected operating environment.⁵

Force Design 2030

The design includes a number of increases and decreases in capacity. Some of the shifts are significant, including the elimination of tanks and the large reductions in truck-towed cannon. The Marines have been using tanks since World War II and used them in Iraq and Afghanistan for mobile shock power, especially in urban fighting. Their shock and firepower in combat is valuable. But they, like the artillery, are heavy and reduce the agility of the force. In particular, they are of limited value in the emerging realities facing us in maritime operations in the Pacific where greater distances and precision is needed against near-peer competitors. The gist of the major changes is displayed in Table 1.

The new plan also alters the ACE of the Marine air-ground team, cutting 108 airplanes by eliminating squadrons and aircraft totals assigned to fighter/attack squadrons. Three unmanned vehicle squadrons are added, as is a refueling squadron that will help extend the operating range of the fifth generation F-35 Lightning being procured.

Another significant change is the expansion of missile batteries to extend the range of Marine fires. This

shift allows the Corps to support what Andrew Krepinevich has called “Archipelagic Defense” in the Pacific.⁶ To support such an approach, U.S. ground forces would be postured in and around the first island chain and apply cross-domain capabilities to deny freedom of maneuver to adversary surface forces. Marine units would deny the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy use of the seas with shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles from distributed operations in the Pacific. At the same time, other land-based air with missile defense assets—including Patriot, THAAD, and possibly railguns—would ensure the PLA could not use its air power. This strategy is in line with ideas expressed years earlier by Dr. T.X. Hammes.⁷ The new Marine concept being tested to operationalize this mission is *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (EABO), and it has been subjected to several years of study and war gaming.⁸ This concept and others like *Littoral Operations in Contested Environments*

extend the Corps’ unique naval skill sets and strengthen its integration with the Navy for maritime operations in the Pacific.⁹

Capability Shifts

There are six distinctive shifts in this design. These are shifts in degree, not necessarily in kind. Each appears consistent with the emerging environment, as well as the intent and vectors of the *National Defense Strategy* issued in January 2018.¹⁰

- *From manned to unmanned.* This design reduces manned aircraft and numerous helicopters while doubling the Marine’s unmanned air assets; for now these are more accurately titled as remotely operated vice unmanned. But they offer lower operating costs and endurance in support. Ground systems are also being added to generate man/machine teaming optional to enhance combat effectiveness and logistics.
- *From quantity to quality.* Some Services focus on technology, and some

U.S. Armed Services focus on their overall size. The Marines value their human capital and invest extensively in selection and initial recruit training. Gen Berger intends to stress quality and rejuvenate the Corps’ infantry training and educational systems to reinforce it.¹¹ In the design, the Marines tradeoff some personnel to better balance the manpower/modernization tradeoff. The emphasis is on quality in their Marines while also freeing up limited investment capital.

- *Greater precision and range.* The plan adds greater range and precision to Marine fires and opens up a potential family of munitions for different missions and targets. The ground-launched missile systems will increase range significantly from 40km to 70km or more. U.S. forces need to ensure that they are neither outgunned nor outranged by adversaries.¹²

• *Combined arms to cross-domain.* The Marines excel at traditional combined arms, but the capability mix, particularly the advanced avionics of their F-35s and the new missile batteries, allow the Marines to extend and integrate their targeting and strike assets. This enhances cross-domain applications, including from land-based forces against naval surface targets, which is of particular value in the vast Pacific.

- *From general purpose to strategically shaped.* But a shift from a “ready for anything” full-spectrum utility to a more focused and strategically relevant posture against more capable competitors is explicit in the new design. The proposed design is more agile and resilient against defined priority challengers.

• *From expensive to cost effective.* The manpower reductions and the cuts in jets and helicopters in the plan provide more balance in capabilities as well as freeing up capital to invest in critical modernization needs. It also strategically prepares for anticipated leaner budgets. The Marines have accurately anticipated not just their warfighting needs but the Nation’s priorities and capacity to modernize in the coming years.

	2020	2030	Percentage Change
Ground Combat			
Infantry Regiments/Battalions	8/24	7/21	-12.5
Fire Support			
Artillery Batteries	21	5	-76
Missile Batteries	7	21	+300
Tank Companies	7	0	Elimination
Light Armor Companies	9	12	+33
Amphibious Vehicle Companies	6	4	-33
Rotary Wing			
Heavy Helicopter Sqdrns	8	5	-37.5
Medium Helicopter Sqdrns	17	14	-17.6
Light Attack Helicopter Sqdrns	7	5	-28.5
Strike and ISR			
Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadrons	3	6	+ 100
Fighter Attack Squadrons	18	18	Same total, 50 fewer aircraft

Table 1. Marine Corps force structure change summary.

Assessment

As noted earlier, the proposed shifts in the unique Marine set of capabilities are derived from the *National Defense Strategy* and do reflect the priorities and desired investments that the Pentagon's planning documents calls for. A good strategy should document choices and clear prioritization, and its implementation should strive to align means to ends. The Pentagon did that in its strategy and framed explicit priorities as well as the risks for lower priorities. Some risk comes from making choices. Especially at this time of crisis and limited resources, discipline in execution should become critical for U.S. military leadership as we attempt to maximize our security. *Force Design 2030* details clear tradeoffs and investments in line with those thrusts. While the force design holds up well against the shifts suggested by that strategy and today's dynamic security environment, two areas warrant comment.

Joint force design. Joint interoperability at the strategic level is important. One cannot objectively evaluate the Marine force design in the absence of a holistic understanding of the other Services, so an understanding of how the Joint force is designed would be helpful. In the past, the Services resisted the idea of Joint force "interdependence." With best case defense budgets in the future declining or at a plateau, an integrated Joint force design is more salient than ever—making it imperative to ensure there are no gaps and far less redundancy in the overall armed force. How the Marine Corps changes impact the U.S. Army's armor force needs to be understood. Even more important will be clarity on how the Navy supports the Marines when deployed in expeditionary operations Navy support in terms of theater-level mobility, intelligence and surveillance, and logistics may be more salient than ever. I am sure that the Commandant realizes this and engaged with the Chief of Naval Operations to generate an integrated *naval* design.

Strategic and operational risk. The cardinal virtue in defense planning, the late Colin Gray often stressed, is prudence.¹³ This includes a reasonable appreciation for uncertainty, the con-

sequences of choices, and the need for adaptability. There is some risk involved in shaping the force for the Pacific. I have always held that forces that can achieve multiple missions should be considered at a premium over single purpose forces. Force designs that cover multiple strategic futures are preferable to a design oriented on one threat, although such specialization is needed for key capabilities. As Secretary James N. Mattis said when he rolled out the latest defense strategy, the United States

cannot adopt a single **preclusive form of warfare**. Rather we must be able to fight across the spectrum of conflict. This means that the size and the **composition** of our **force matters**.¹⁴

It matters since the Joint force has to cover a wide range of missions and terrain; they have to be rugged and reliable, instead of exquisite and expensive.

In his initial guidance, the Commandant signaled that while he conceived of the Marine Corps as the Nation's force-in-readiness, it was not designed to operate across the range of military operations (ROMO):

but rather, a force that ensures the prevention of major conflict and deters the escalation of conflict within the ROMO.¹⁵

That is a redefinition of the Corps' mission as articulated by Marines since the end of the Cold War. Gen Berger's intent was to create a Corps

optimized for naval expeditionary warfare in contested spaces, purpose-built to facilitate sea denial and assured access in support of the fleets.¹⁶

He explicitly noted that this "single purpose-built future force" could be used in many other missions around the globe; but the force would *not* incorporate investments for those contingencies.¹⁷ The new force structure reflects that guidance.

Yet, reforming the Marines solely around one scenario, instead of multiple futures and challenges, reduces versatility to some degree. A study on alternative Marine Corps force designs several years ago that I produced with a colleague concluded:

The future will be highly complex, and a premium should be placed on versatile forces, not narrow, specialized

or single-purpose assets. The Corps must find a new balance between maintaining the enduring traditional logic of its role as soldiers of the sea and meeting the challenges of a new security environment. It cannot just become a smaller version of its pre-Iraq force design.¹⁸

This has led some, including myself, to publicly express concerns that the force design stressed one mission in one theater.¹⁹ The critics accurately point to the versatility of the Marines in scenarios over the last fifteen years like Iraq.²⁰ Other analysts and Marine veterans expressed this same concern,

a Marine Corps that is custom-designed for distributed operations on islands in the Western Pacific will be poorly designed and poorly trained for the land campaigns it is most likely to fight.²¹

However, a detailed look at the published report on the design reveals a robust force with sufficient flexibility over multiple tasks. With its tailorable force building blocks, along with the additional precision strike assets, the 21st century Marine Corps retains utility across numerous contingencies, including conflicts like eastern Ukraine and the likely proxy wars of great power competitions.²² These are far more likely in eras of great power competition, especially a contest between nuclear armed competitors as we have now. Yet, *Force Design 2030* reduces risk in the Pacific theater and accepts some readiness tradeoffs in potential secondary tasks or unknown crises. That is a risk in all force development efforts.

Strategy and force planning are about choices with different risk tradeoffs with constrained resources. The new Marine force *is* more strategically shaped, and it prudently reduces risk in what U.S. strategy defines as the primary challenge of our times. But it has not eliminated the Corps' ability to respond to many scenarios as an overview of threats shows.²³ *Force Design 2030* is not a hammer with only one purpose, retaining the ability to defeat an array of rivals. In fact, the Corps' agility, lethality, and resilience are enhanced in key ways and targeted to meet strategic requirement rather

than general utility. Yet, the Marine “Leatherman tool” task organization remains, with new attachments.

Every Marine will have different ideas about how to tweak this plan. There could be more of a hedge, perhaps more unmanned systems, or adjust the missile/artillery mix in order to retain some artillery. These can be sustained in the Marine Reserve as a hedge against uncertainty.²⁴ We can almost certainly expect communications and logistics difficulties as the creative operational concepts are put to the trial, and future adversaries will exploit them. The Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory is no doubt aware of this and is studying a range of potential solutions. More details on counter-UAS capabilities are needed. The possibility of intensive urban operations needs to be considered, Fallujah’s deadly battle come to mind.²⁵ That said, reformed Marine infantry units, with increased firepower, man/machine teaming, and long-loitering armed UAS support should remain capable of urban fighting.

Thus, these are near-term, strategy-driven changes based upon clear strategic priorities, as well as known adversary capabilities and changes in the character of modern warfare. The next generation of Marine innovators are promoting a number of creative concepts worthy of consideration.²⁶ They begin the path toward more transformative changes tied to advances in technologies like artificial intelligence, robotics, additive manufacturing, and hypervelocity missiles.²⁷ These should continue to be explored via experimentation over the next few years.²⁸ Their true battlespace potential will emerge over time, and will be part of the continuous process of rigorous force development and change that the Marine Corps has demonstrated for generations with helicopters, remotely piloted vehicles, tilt-rotor planes, etc.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this is *not* a radical shift of force capabilities or capacity. Nor is it risk free. But it is a response to strategic direction that recognizes stronger competition from adversaries who have gone to school on our methods and invested to thwart our power projection

approach. In so many ways, the force design represents a measured step forward in response to both strategic direction established in the *National Defense Strategy* and to emerging challenges in the strategic environment.²⁹ The proposals take the Marines two long strides forward into the 21st century. Gen Berger has crafted a positive vision about how the Corps should posture itself for this unfolding century, vice a repeat of the old missions and outdated tactics from the last one. Clearly, in such a dynamic age, we need more than just a shrunken version of the Corps pre-Iraq 2001 force structure. Given the intensive efforts that major states have made in developing robust anti-access capabilities against the predictable pattern of deploying U.S. forces, the Marine plan is actually overdue.

Rather than radical, the shifts in the 2030 plan are quite deliberately measured. The Marines are not just “First to Fight,” but often also “First to Adapt,” and *Force Design 2030* reinforces that history. When future Presidents call to “send in the Marines,” will they still be both ready and successful? The answer to that question seems to be a clear “Yes.”

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Gen David H. Berger, “Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future,” *War on the Rocks*, (December 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.
3. David Ignatius, “The Marines Have Set the Bar for Reform,” *Washington Post*, (August 2019), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.
4. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).
5. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy, Sharpening the U.S. Military’s Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: January 2018).
6. Andrew Krepinevich, “How to Implement the National Defense Strategy,” *Breaking Defense*, (February 2018), available at <https://breakingdefense.com>.

7. See T. X. Hammes, “Off Shore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely War,” *Strategic Forum*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, June 2012).

8. For a good discussion of *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, and related issues see John Berry, “What’s in a Name,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA March 2020).

9. The LOCE concept, 2017 can be found at <https://www.candp.marines.mil>.

10. The author served on the NDS Task Force during the formulation of the strategy from March 2017 to January 2018.

11. *Force Design 2030*. On Gen Berger’s interest in improved recruit quality see “Will the Marine Corps become the US Military’s Smartest?” *Military Times*, (February 2020), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.

12. See RAND’s report on this challenge, David Shalpak and Michael Johnson, “Outnumbered, Outgunned and Outranged: How Russia Beats NATO,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, April 2016), available at <https://www.rand.org>.

13. Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Defense Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

14. James N. Mattis, “Remarks on the National Defense Strategy,” transcript, *DoD News*, (Washington, DC: January 2018), available at <https://www.defense.gov>.

15. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.

16. *Ibid.*

17. See “Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future.”

18. Frank Hoffman and George P. Garrett, *Envisioning Strategic Options, Comparing Alternative Marine Structures*, (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, March 2014).

19. “Send in the Marines,” *The Economist*, (London, UK: April 2020). See also Gen Anthony C. Zinni’s concern in Michael Gordon, “Marines Plan to Retool to Meet China Threat,” *Wall St. Journal*, (March 2020), available at <https://www.wsj.com>.

20. Michael Gordon, “Marines Will Retool, With an Eye to China,” *Wall Street Journal*, (March 2020), available at <https://www.wsj.com>.

21. Mark Cancian, "Don't Go Too Crazy Marine Corps," *War on the Rocks*, (January 2020), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.
22. As one scholar has presciently noted, "Proxy wars are not merely relics of Cold War superpower competition. Indeed, they are likely to be an increasingly used facet in the rivalry between today's existing and rising superpowers." Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, (London, UK: Polity, 2013).
23. T. X. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place," *War on the Rocks*, (April 2020), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.
24. For this useful concept see Mark F. Cancian, "The Marine Corps' Radical Shift toward China," (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2020).
25. For a detailed assessment on future urban challenges see Gian Gentile, et al., *Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations for the U.S. Army*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, Arroyo Center, 2017).
26. Jeff Cummings, Scott Cuomo, Olivia Garrard, and Noah Spataro, "Marine Warbot Companies: Where Naval Warfare, the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and Close Combat Lethality Task Force Intersect," *War on the Rocks*, (June 2018), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.
27. Christian Brose, "The New Revolution in Military Affairs," *Foreign Affairs*, (May/June 2019), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>.
28. Jeff Cummings et al, "Charting a New Course for the Navy-Marine Corps-Coast Guard Team," *War on the Rocks*, (8 May 2019).
29. For a detailed assessment of how the 4th Industrial Revolution will affect globalization and our security see T. X. Hammes, *Deglobalization and International Security* (Amherst, NY: Caliber, 2020).

