

Competing Visions

Force Design 2030 vs. Vision 2035

by Col Mark Desens (Ret)

Gen Eric Smith recently released his *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance* (39th CPG). As expected, his guidance sustains the “righteous journey” of *Force Design* that his predecessor began.¹ Also unsurprising is the resistance from several notable retired generals to this conception of what the future Marine Corps should look like.

As Gen Smith states, “Our Campaign of Learning is continuous, and the Service has proven willing to adjust where necessary.”² Indeed, the Corps has made several refinements to its *Force Design* over the past few years. These changes point toward continuing challenges to the basic assumptions of *Force Design*. More deeply, the fundamental assumptions about the future operating environment, and the resultant strategic and operational approaches, remain worthy of debate, as that debate is central to a vibrant campaign of learning.

Though each side of the *Force Design* debate deeply disagrees on the way forward, *Force Design 2030* (FD2030, now just *Force Design*) and the anti-FD2030 group’s own concept, “Vision 2035: Global Response in the Age of Precision Munitions,” actually share very similar views on the future operating environment. This is a happy circumstance that allows for a side-to-side comparison of each side’s approach to structuring a force for the next generation of global challenges.³

Gen Berger’s *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance* (38th CPG) and his “The Case for Change” article largely capture the intellectual underpinnings of current *Force Design* while “Vision 2035” represents the counter-FD2030 group.⁴ A blow-by-blow comparison of FD2030 changes to “Vision 2035” is omitted to focus on the underlying issues that inform force design.

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Global Outlook

Both groups have very similar views of the global operating environment. Below are “Vision 2035” excerpts followed by similar ones from Gen Berger’s 38th CPG for comparison.

Vision 2035: “The future security environment will be characterized by increasing great power competition and the rise of peer and near-peer competitors. Though China and Russia will probably remain the most dangerous threats, they are not the most likely threats. We cannot ignore regional competitors such as North Korea and Iran. Failed and failing states, violent extremist organizations, and competition for resources will also present unique challenges to the international order.”⁵

38th CPG: “I will continue to advocate for the continued forward deployment of our forces globally to compete against the malign activities of China, Russia, Iran, and their proxies—with a prioritized focus on China’s One Belt One Road initiative and Chinese malign activities in the East and South China Seas. ... In addition to deterring aggression and supporting naval operations, our forward deployed forces will remain ready to respond to crises globally as the force-in-readiness.”⁶

Peer competitors. Regional competitors. Proxies. Failed states. It is clear that the two camps share very similar perspectives regarding the operating environment. The difference is how each group determines the way forward.

The consequent question is how the force should be organized, trained,

and equipped. “Vision 2035” advocates for a more global, middleweight force, while Gen Berger’s 38th CPG, as well as Gen Smith’s 39th CPG, see China as Priority One—with whatever is left to administer the rest of the World. Will FD2030’s approach deter or help defeat our most dangerous competitor? Or will instability around the Globe overwhelm our (diminished) capacity to counter it? As all strategy is based on hypotheses as to how a dynamic, human environment will respond to our actions, we cannot know for sure which future will manifest nor do we have the resources to mitigate every risk.

As risks can never be erased, they must be prioritized and mitigated. The following sections investigate key risk areas and how each group views and addresses each risk. These are proposed as topics for future articles and debates.

Mature Precision Strike Regime (MPSR)/Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD)

The divide between camps arguably begins here. In his article “The Case for Change,” Gen Berger spends a full two pages drilling into the challenges of operating in an MPSR environment.⁷ From Berger’s point of view, he was providing emphasis and detail to challenges he assessed must be met—a call to action and clearly his priority.⁸ On the other hand, his critics have interpreted his focus on MPSR as an obsession leading to institutional overreaction. For the moment, Berger gets the edge. If money talks, Berger’s success in garner-

ing increased funding for the Marine Corps speaks loudly in his favor.⁹ The Congress and the DOD have been keenly focused on the “pacing threat” posed by China. Plus, many of the same capabilities Berger fielded to III MEF in the Pacific will have applicability in other regions.

For their part, the anti-*FD2030* group acknowledges, “The proliferation of long-range precision weapons and sensors and recent advances in other guided munitions and unmanned systems present their own set of unique and seemingly implacable problems.” However, they argue that the MPSR and associated A2AD phenomena that Berger spends so much time on are just technological changes in warfare—not a revolution—that we will overcome.

The Russian Navy being driven out of the Black Sea and Houthi interference in Red Sea shipping are two recent and powerful examples of the MPSR as an A2AD capability that supports the *FD2030* side. On the other hand, as the war between Russia and Ukraine drags on, we see that the initial Russian shock and awe campaign with hundreds of missiles did not result in the systemic shock Russian leaders desired. Despite the looming threat of Russian columns, Ukraine stayed in the fight. Since then, cannon artillery and tanks—legacy ground-combat systems—have been as critical to the fight as drones and missiles.

Because responding to an MPSR, especially in the maritime environment, is a pressing (and expensive) change in warfare, the Marine Corps would be well-served to actively debate how the force, and how much of it, should adapt to counter it. However, the Corps must take care not to over-correct at the expense of being able to execute crisis response and sustained land operations.

Naval Relations: Sea Control vs. Title 10 Missions

From his *38th CPG*, one clearly sees that Gen Berger was all-in on support to fleet commanders and, specifically, maritime operations. By contrast, “Vision 2035” embraces the Navy in the conduct of amphibious operations but

demurs from support to sea control and maritime security.

The following phrase from Berger’s *CPG* highlights the divide:

“During World War II, we as a Service, clearly understood that Marines operated in support of the Navy’s sea control mission. In subsequent years, the luxury of presumptive maritime superiority deluded us into thinking the Navy existed to support “Marine” operations ashore.¹⁰

Recent generations enjoyed an entire career in which the Navy sailed the seas with impunity. Berger posits that those days are over and that Marines must see the Navy as more than their ride to the fight—that Marines must be active participants in the Navy’s sea control fight.

A fair question to debate is whether and how much help the Navy needs or wants for *its* sea control mission and whether this assistance comes at the unhealthy expense of the Corps’ ability to conduct its other Title 10 missions.

Naval Relations: Amphibious Power Projection

The Corps’ ability to project power is underwritten by the Navy. Unfortunately, amphibious operations are not viewed as a strategic priority by the Navy or the DOD. For fleet commanders, the priorities are subma-

The devaluing of amphibious capabilities reflects a *single melee* or Mahanian decisive-battle approach to the operating environment. This would almost certainly not be successful against a peer competitor, nor has it been effective against a naval power operating from land, such as the Houthis in Yemen. In the former case, extended lines of communication would need to be shortened by obtaining and protecting forward logistics hubs. The latter case can likely only be solved by putting forces ashore to conclusively eradicate the enemy. Both scenarios are well suited to amphibious forces and, importantly, both have strategic impact.

Fleet commanders need to better exploit the *strategic* value of amphibious forces, from competition through conflict. Recent initiatives, such as Task Force 61/2, demonstrate how innovative use of amphibious capabilities can have a strategic impact. Furthermore, even a surface analysis of sustained conflict quickly exposes the Navy’s weaknesses and need for the ability to secure (and seize, if needed) advanced naval bases.

The critical problem facing the Marine Corps today is the lack of *capacity* in amphibious shipping, including the capability to sustain or rapidly reinforce via maritime prepositioning. There are simply not enough ships to meet day-to-

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rines, destroyers, and aircraft carriers. Amphibious operations are viewed as tactical capabilities and, thus, lower in priority for resourcing. As Gen Berger stated:

“Our Nation’s ability to project power and influence beyond its shores is increasingly challenged by ... the continued degradation of our amphibious and auxiliary ship readiness... It would be illogical to continue to concentrate our forces on a few large ships.”¹¹

day obligations (i.e., amphibious ready groups/MEUs), let alone to answer the call to major conflict.

The *composition* of the amphibious fleet is also precarious. Because the number of ships has been constantly reduced, the Navy-Marine Corps team has packed more capability into a few, exquisite ships, costing upwards of \$2B each.¹² The loss of a single ship in war or a contingency could jeopardize an entire mission. As a result, naval command-

ers are reluctant to place an amphib in harm's way.¹³

While current L-Class readiness is poor, it presents opportunities to look at alternative mixes of shipping—medium landing ships, littoral combat ships, expeditionary transfer docks, expeditionary fast transports, etc.—to expand and diversify the capabilities of a maritime MAGTF. These alternative mixes could retain the power of a traditional L-Class ship (e.g., LHA/D for aviation and command and control) with the ability to distribute forces across a number of platforms for increased reach. This capability would be valuable across the conflict continuum from Phase Zero to major conflict.

Just as in operations ashore, tactical distribution of the force at sea improves its survival. It also opens options. The same force spread across more ships—supported by modern over-the-horizon communications—protects the force and puts an adversary in a dilemma. This is a classic operational maneuver from the sea.

Implications

This quote from “Vision 2035” sums up an approach that both sides should find acceptable:

While recognizing the overriding importance of the Pacific region and the fact that China will continue to challenge U.S. security interests in the region and elsewhere, our vision is to restore the ability to maneuver, regain the initiative, and respond quickly and decisively to threats anywhere in the world.¹⁴

Both sides should also agree that the MAGTF remains our core warfighting construct. It must be modernized to meet emergent threats, and it must greatly reduce its footprint (size, weight) so that the MAGTF may be able to “respond quickly and decisively to threats anywhere in the world.” Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (the greatest misnomer ever) and tanks work against this mandate. While Gen Berger may have guessed wrong regarding sustained land combat (time will tell), he is right to say that the Corps is overweight.¹⁵

Going Forward

Channeling the historian Sir Michael Howard, Gen Berger acknowledged our imperfect view of the future by hoping that we will not “get it too badly wrong.” Howard also said, “What does matter is the capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives.”¹⁶ The force that the Corps develops will likely not be perfect, but it must be able to quickly adapt to meet the needs.

The Marine Corps is only midway through its current *Force Design* (modernization) campaign. There is still much to learn. The Corps has always benefited from the decades of experience and insight we have brought to bear in navigating treacherous waters. We need to sustain a healthy, open dialogue across the force—active, retired, officer, and enlisted—to keep the campaign of learning fully energized. Our future Marines and sailors are depending on us.

Notes

1. Gen Eric M. Smith, *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: September 2024).

2. Ibid.

3. Charles Krulak and Anthony Zinni, “Vision 2035: Global Response in the Age of Precision Munitions,” *The National Interest*, December 16, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vision-2035-global-response-age-precision-munitions-205995>. This article's first premise is that the retired generals who disagree with *FD2030* cannot be as out of touch with the challenges of modern warfare as some have accused. After all, this is a group that includes warfighting legends such as Anthony Zinni (former CENTCOM Commander), Chuck Krulak (31st CMC), and James Conway (34th CMC and I MEF Iraq 2003-2004). Inferred is the second premise that General Berger and *FD2030* supporters were equally sensible in their analyses.

4. Gen David H. Berger, “The Case for Change,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 104, No. 6 (2020)

5. “Vision 2035.”

6. Gen David H. Berger, 38th Commandant's Planning Guidance, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

7. Andrew Krepinevich, *Maritime Competition in a Mature Precision Strike Regime*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014). Krepinevich gets credit for coining this term.

8. Having been the III MEF commander, Gen Berger's awareness and sensitivity to the MPSR does not come as a surprise.

9. Statista, “Budget of the Navy and the Marine Corps in the United States from Fiscal Year 2001 to 2025,” *Statista*, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/239290/budget-of-the-us-navy-and-the-us-marine-corps/>. (Data from Department of the Navy Budget materials) The Marine Corps “Green Dollar” budget was \$27.62B in 2018. It jumped to \$43.96B in 2019 with incremental increases thereafter.

10. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

11. Ibid.

12. Congressional Research Service, *Navy LPD-17 Flight II, and LHA Amphibious Ship Programs: Background and Issues for Congress*, (Washington, DC, 2024). An LPD-17 Flight II costs \$2B while LHA-10 (p. 6) is projected to cost \$4.56B.

13. During Operation DESERT STORM (1991), the 5th MEB never came ashore due to the Iraqi floating mine threat.

14. “Vision 2035.”

15. “The Case for Change.”

16. Ibid. Excerpted from Sir Michael Howard, “Military Science in the Age of Peace,” (lecture, Chesney Memorial Gold Medal, October 3, 1973).

