

2023 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: First Place

# Thinking Bigger

Global and revolutionary over regional and evolutionary

by Col Seth M. Milstein

In 2018, the *National Defense Strategy* called for a change in focus from terrorism to great-power competition, specifying the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing threat. This was reaffirmed in the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*. In 2019, the Marine Corps began a significant reform, *Force Design 2030 (FD2030)*, with conflict against the PRC as the defining consideration. The vision is a Marine Corps optimized for a high-end fight within a naval campaign in the Western Pacific. In focusing on a theater-specific scenario, the Marine Corps is accepting risk everywhere else and, worse, has missed a historic opportunity for revolutionary redesign to prepare for the realities of 21st-century warfare regardless of venue. To be sure, the challenges posed by the PRC go beyond military concerns in the Western Pacific. An upgraded 21st-century Marine Corps, a naval expeditionary force with offensive character, is a magnificent weapon for executing to what Sun Tzu ascribed supreme importance: attacking the enemy’s strategy.<sup>1</sup>

## Pacing Threat: It Doesn’t Mean What We Think It Means

When considering the PRC as the pacing threat it helps to start with an appreciation of their ends, ways, and means. What does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) want? The end is no mystery, although the reasons behind it are often missed. The PRC has always had ambitions of becoming a superpower—Chinese exceptionalism is real.<sup>2</sup> The ancient view of China as the “Middle Kingdom” deserves mention as “middle” refers to being between

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heaven and everybody else. Traditional Chinese views toward governance are instructive, with emphasis on hierarchy, Confucian views on legitimacy, and Sinification—having others adopt Han ways to make them more civilized. The last historically extended to culture, language, and ultimately the tributary system, where bordering peoples paid tribute to Han emperors and adopted some degree of Han culture, thus becoming less barbaric in the eyes of the Han imperial court.<sup>3</sup>

The PRC’s approach to statecraft extends far beyond the borders of China. With a long view toward economics, the PRC has been acquiring critical resources and commodities globally for decades, including key strategic terrain such as ports and mountains with major mineral deposits.<sup>4</sup> Economic diplomacy is a common practice, with the Belt and Road Initiative a centerpiece of ensuring economic stability. A hallmark trait has been doing business without political or ideological strings. While predatory business practices are common, the PRC does not demand compliance with social agendas nor question the sovereign choices of trading partners. Predatory means include wholesale theft of industrially important intellectual property globally.<sup>5</sup> PRC intelligence efforts are a key enabler of economic

competition, particularly in high technology.<sup>6</sup> Beyond espionage, the PRC has actively engaged in influencing the politics of countries where it believes it has interests.<sup>7</sup>

As an aspiring superpower, the PRC has been aggressively claiming leading roles on the global stage. Aside from active participation in international organizations, it has created competing bodies, such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, founded in 2014 as a rival to the World Bank and the IMF.<sup>8</sup> The PRC has grown its role in international diplomacy. In an unprecedented move, the PRC helped negotiate the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> The logic behind the PRC’s development of expeditionary capabilities becomes clear with the PLA’s “Far Seas” doctrine. While six aircraft carriers add little value against Taiwan—well within range of landbased airpower—they offer far more value guarding interests away from home.

Taiwan is a special, yet complicated, case. The CCP regards Taiwan as a badly behaved province, governed by Nationalist exiles from the founding of the PRC. Despite belligerent language and periodic clashes, seizing Taiwan is fraught with problems beyond an amphibious assault. Taiwan is the center of

global microchip fabrication, producing 41 percent of the world's microprocessors and 90 percent of the most advanced chips. Taiwanese production requires supplies, delicate facilities, and a highly trained workforce, all relatively fragile and vulnerable to outright destruction in an invasion.<sup>10</sup> Much of the PRC's manufacturing uses chips imported from Taiwan. Disruption of this supply chain has grave economic implications. Worse is that many bleeding-edge PRC technological efforts, such as AI and quantum computing, depend on the most advanced chips made in Taiwan.

With all due affection and respect to former SECDEF James Mattis, he is not what keeps CCP leadership up at night. It is their own population. The past five centuries have not been kind to Chinese emperors and dynasties, with the majority falling to internal strife. The CCP is painfully aware of this and takes extraordinary precautions to guard against internal discord. Draconian population controls and censorship are in place. Ironically, more PRC cyber capability may be directed against its own people than the rest of the world through the Golden Shield project, also known as the "Great Firewall of China."<sup>11</sup> The CCP obsession with economics is directly correlated with this fear: they are concerned about keeping the population satisfied. Extreme growth rates are needed to support the numbers of people entering the workforce, yet this is possible because the Chinese economy was agrarian until recent industrialization.<sup>12</sup> Regime security is the CCP's priority.

While the PRC aspires to global influence and reach, it is not ten feet tall. Despite aggressive diplomacy, economic, and cultural outreach, Beijing cannot match the soft power of the West and the United States specifically; they do not have the problem of people worldwide trying to get in. Aside from perpetual fear of the people, the CCP suffers from various forms of corruption.<sup>13</sup> The CCP is inextricably linked with industry, with military leadership woven into this complicated tapestry. Generals essentially have to bribe their way up, requiring supporting business holdings to raise funds.<sup>14</sup> The old Chi-

nese proverb, "The mountains are high, and the emperor is far," summarizes grounds for doubting the integrity of PRC institutions. Years of dubious decisions have created demographic time bombs without clear solutions. Finally, mind-bending technological progress coupled with cutthroat entrepreneurship complicates the CCP's vision of harmony within China.<sup>15</sup>

Much as some wish to draw parallels, the modern PRC is not the Imperial Japan of the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Considering the strengths, weaknesses, and decision mechanisms, the challenges posed by the PRC are far more complex than the latter. It is safe to say that CCP strategy does not hinge on a Mahanian decisive missile battle at sea. There is ample opportunity to complicate their aims long before.

### **Thinking Bigger: Seizing the Initiative**

Understanding the wide-reaching challenges posed by the PRC, what is to be done? A global strategy involving the whole of government is needed, which immediately creates tension within the confines of the DOD Unified Command Plan. The PRC's intentions and capabilities go far beyond regional concerns and cannot be reduced to an INDOPACOM OPLAN that ignores the worldwide use of PRC national power while waiting for conventional war. What might the Marine Corps offer to such a strategy?

Like a latter-day Schlieffen Plan, the answer is not committing to a single course of action that crams a significant fraction of the Marine Corps' operating forces into the beaten zone of a massive amount of PRC firepower. Parking limited and relatively immobile combat power in isolated and predictable locations cedes the initiative and offers plenty of opportunity for enemy target practice. At the same time, retrenching from the rest of the globe offers a vacuum for the pacing threat and ambitious adversary to fill. Worst of all, this approach wastes a historic Marine Corps strength: excellence at expeditionary operations.

Before a future high-end fight begins, engagement is a key enabler. This

means naval presence, comprised of visiting forces, a traditional naval mission pre-dating the United States. These may be Marine units, possibly aboard ships, but could be as small as single representatives, such as defense attaches. Joint exercises, bilateral training, capacity building, or even community relations activities help build confidence and demonstrate U.S. resolve. Friends are invaluable, regardless of the stage of competition. Friendship begins with mutual trust and respect, and trust cannot be surged. Building relationships takes time and contact, ideally between consistent interlocutors. Presence is an opportunity to introduce Marine units back onto deploying ships other than L-class amphibians. More importantly, embarked "micro-MAGTFs" give every Navy vessel more options for expeditionary littoral operations and rapid intervention. Compared to the loss of access and confidence that creates voids for the PRC and others to exploit, engagement is cheap.

Where the PRC is comfortable running gray-zone operations in their backyard, the Marine Corps is ideal for returning the favor everywhere else. Marines can hold PRC strategic interests at risk, ramping threats up and down based on the needs of policy. From information operations to lethal force, a MAGTF's presence and behavior can signal that critical resources are not as safe and secure as the CCP might prefer. Sometimes decisive action by Marines is unnecessary, as access is a requirement for anybody who presumes to operate in a foreign country. If, for example, whoever governs in Afghanistan decides to nationalize the Aynak copper mine, what options are available to the PRC for redress?

Should deterrence fail and a conventional conflict begins, Marine forces, as a naval striking arm, are perfect for attacking the strategic resourcing web the PRC has woven. Destructive raids, seizure of key terrain, terminal guidance of effects, and working with partners—all can be used against PRC holdings or installations to deny resources or access needed to sustain hostilities. The ability to dominate littorals, from the land or seaward side, allows the Marine

Corps to turn the anti-access area denial problem on its head for the PRC to solve. Embarked Marine forces can employ ambush tactics on PRC sea lanes of communication, forcing the PRC to defend its transportation network worldwide. While the PLA is developing expeditionary capabilities of its own, being ready to deal with mobile, combined-arms threats globally will demand time and additional expense. Rather than fighting in the PRC's backyard, Marines can force them to play away games against the expeditionary pros.

### The Once and Future Corps

*FD2030* is disappointing because it is more incrementalism. Despite some of the more aspirational literature surrounding it, such as *Talent Management 2030*, it is mostly an evolution of the existing force structure: get rid of tanks, swap some cannons for rockets, add some missiles and rejigger the size of battalions and squadrons. It falls short of its promise of creating a Corps for 21st-century warfare in favor of creating a force tailored for a specific scenario. It is striking how little adaptation to the modern environment is truly being pursued—this is neither Gen Holcomb's sweeping reorganization nor Gen Gray's intellectual renaissance.<sup>17</sup> Even new capabilities are merely being bolted onto existing constructs that are conceptually seventy years old.<sup>18</sup>

Some of *FD2030* has real merit. The emphasis on reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance embraces truisms about modern warfare: finding targets confers the opportunity to engage them. This was demonstrated during counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Marines often found enemies by being ambushed by them. In naval warfare, target detection and tracking are everything.<sup>19</sup> Antiship cruise missile capability has value as well: a MAGTF can deny the use of waterways to enemies. An embarked MAGTF can give L-class shipping a limited ability to do more during war at sea than just be a target.

A better answer comes from asking what distinguishes a 21st-century force from a 20th-century one. Differ-

ences begin with the ability to disperse while employing vast capabilities across multiple domains. A truly revolutionary idea is redesigning Marine forces around command and control (C2). Technology has reached a point where individual Marines can be nodes in greater kill webs, but existing C2 architecture is firmly rooted in the 20th century. Conversely, the full range of effects across domains can be brought to bear to support Marines, except that existing C2 structures lack the flexibility to match the speed and complexity of modern conflict, from the tactical to strategic levels.

The idea is far from radical. The history of warfare is a history of C2 capabilities: commanders expressing their intent to forces that execute in the face of adversity. The Roman legions, Nelson's fleet, Guderian's panzer divi-

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### ***Task organization, discipline, standard operating procedures, training, doctrine, initiative, and decision-making ability are all part of a C2 architecture.***

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sions, and many more examples demonstrate where superior C2 carried the day in battle. Combined arms is fundamentally a C2 problem that brings disparate capabilities together in time and space to generate disproportionate effects. The organization of most Marine Corps units, essentially modern expressions of the best lessons of the Second World War, is meant to enable combined arms from the fire team to progressively higher echelons.<sup>20</sup>

The thinking behind the panzer division is particularly instructive. The strength of these divisions was less about tanks, as early German tanks were inferior to their French and Soviet opponents than about their C2 architecture. Heinz Guderian, a signal officer, designed a C2 architecture that allowed panzer commanders to lead forces from anywhere in the command, using a relatively new technology called radio.<sup>21</sup> The division was designed to rapidly bring combined-arms effects together—motorized infantry, tanks,

artillery, and engineers, supported by aircraft—in the time and place of a commander's choosing. Radio was a critical enabler to deploy combined arms faster than previously possible. Tanks were certainly useful, as they provided mobile armored firepower that could rapidly mass direct fires and exploit gaps, but they were just one capability in a panzer commander's toolbox.<sup>22</sup>

Lest the technologists insist that C2 is about having the latest gizmos and information superiority hinges on having multi-cloud enabled modern applications using microservices and containers in a Kubernetes control plane with a satellite uplink, C2 encompasses people and procedures in addition to technology. Human factors are at least as important as the ability to pass data. Task organization, discipline, standard operating proce-

dures, training, doctrine, initiative, and decision-making ability are all part of a C2 architecture. All contributed to the success of Rome's legions, while their communications systems consisted of shouted commands, runners, flags, and musical instruments.<sup>23</sup> While Nelson was a revolutionary tactician and legendary naval commander, his victories owed much to competent ship captains commanding well-drilled crews and the premier naval communication of the era, ADM Home Popham's telegraphic signal flag system.<sup>24</sup> Radio enabled Guderian's successes, along with competent junior leaders, well-considered battle drills, and doctrine that built on the best lessons learned of World War I.

To redesign the Marine Corps around C2 pushes all the capabilities available to a MAGTF to the lowest echelon, shares a common data plane, and enables combined arms to be integrated so the individual Marine can enable reconnaissance and counter-

reconnaissance and kill webs. Task organization and interoperability, especially in objective areas in the face of uncertainty, is simpler with common C2 connections. It makes every Marine a sensor and a channel for the full array of effects of the Marine Corps, the Joint Force, and potentially the whole of government. It means that lethality and maneuverability per Marine can be significantly higher while supporting a faster tempo. It demands much more capable junior Marine leaders to make such constructs work, but the past twenty years have proven the value of *strategic corporals* in practice. It allows for graceful degradation in combat, allowing Marine units to win on modern battlefields when Murphy invariably interferes. It supports better operational decisions, allowing commanders to pick times and places for tactical actions that support meaningful objectives. Finally, it provides a framework to assimilate new capabilities.

## Conclusion

The Marine Corps' answer to the PRC's ambitions for superpower status is *FD2030*, a plan that restructures the Marine Corps for conventional war in the western Pacific. In pursuing this effort, the Marine Corps is missing a golden opportunity to prepare for the full spectrum of 21st-century operations. The PRC's strategy, strengths, and weaknesses leave a global range of options for an expeditionary naval force to credibly threaten. By taking a revolutionary approach to reorganization and redesigning the Marine Corps' structure around C2 capabilities, the United States can have a lethal yet flexible force that can challenge the PRC in any clime or place. Such a force retains the ability to address other crises that might arise.

Aside from the benefits of enabling combined arms and the ability to win on 21st-century battlefields, such a change has one additional purpose: to set an example for the rest of the Joint Force. If the entire defense establishment is rebuilt around a common C2 architecture, many existing problems with interoperability and joint operations will be solved. This will not be

the first time the Marine Corps has led the way in innovation, and it will result in forces well-suited for modern conflict and ready to incorporate new formations and technology to come. Being able to field a modern expeditionary force with a global reach will both give American leaders unprecedented options and give CCP leadership—or any other adversary—plenty of reason to think twice about the consequences of their decisions.

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