Redefining Our Identity

Should the Marine Corps command its own Navy?

by Maj Beau L. Pillot

Embarked Marine conducts sustainment training while underway with LPD 20 (USS* Green Bay*) in the background. *(Photo courtesy of U.S. Naval Institute- U.S. Navy (Markus Castaneda).)*[1]

The dramatic changes in geopolitics, technology, economics, and our environment have given way to the Marine Corps operating in a multipolar world with pacing challenges of the People's Republic of China, Russia, and other global threats.[2] The Marine Corps has long prided itself on being the U.S.'s premier expeditionary force, prepared to deploy rapidly in response to crises. However, as global threats evolve and peer adversaries such as China and Russia expand their anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, the Corps faces a pressing challenge to sustain its forces given its *Force Design* initiatives and operating in future contested littoral environments.[3] In addition to its organic land and air-based capabilities, should the Service develop its organic maritime capabilities—both crewed and uncrewed—to diversify distribution and improve sustainment for future operations? This question strikes at the heart of a debatable ongoing identity crisis that has troubled the Marine Corps for the past decade, particularly since *Force Design* initiatives began.[4]

A Lingering Identity Crisis?

For the past few decades, the Marine Corps has straddled conflicting roles with multifaceted identities being promulgated to its ranks: a naval amphibious force, a crisis-response unit, combined joint forcible entry operations (peer-on-peer), and a land army heavily engaged in counterinsurgency operations.[5] Many authorities and former general officers within the national security spheres of influence warned that the Marine Corps must find clarity in its mission, especially as it faces emerging threats in a world with peer adversaries, challenging U.S. dominance.[6] "What is the Marine Corps really about?" is a question that has sparked a debate about the Marine Corps' future identity.[7]

The *38th* and *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance* (2019/2024) aimed to refocus the Marine Corps on its naval roots, mainly through the innovative and debated expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept. Expeditionary advanced base operations envision forward-deployed Marine forces, known as stand-in forces (SIF), that operate in contested environments to support more extensive naval operations while disrupting adversary capabilities.[8] However, the Marine Corps' lack of specific organic maritime capabilities creates a critical vulnerability, leaving it dependent on external partners, namely the Navy and the Army, for maritime logistics and sustainment in a contested littoral environment.

The Role of EABO

The shift toward EABO reflects the Marine Corps' response to a changing strategic landscape, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, where China's A2/AD capabilities have made traditional naval and amphibious operations more

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dangerous. Expeditionary advanced base operations calls for Marine units to operate from temporary, dispersed, and austere bases within adversary-controlled areas. These SIFs are designed to remain mobile and have low signatures to avoid detection and destruction while providing critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to enable the more significant Joint Force to maneuver and strike.[9]

The Gap in Organic Maritime Capabilities

Stakeholders within DC CD&I Logistics Combat Element Division advocate that the lack of organic maritime capabilities poses significant gaps in the Marine Corps' ability to sustain EABO and SIF operations.[14] The Marine Corps' reliance on external Navy and Army assets for transportation is unsustainable in high-threat areas where adversaries control critical maritime terrain. Historically, the Navy has provided the bulk of naval lift and sustainment for Marine forces. However, with peer adversaries fielding A2/AD long-range precision weapons, Navy amphibious warship shortages/readiness issues, recruiting-retention challenges in the Navy, and lack of capacity in maritime surface connectors (both materiel and personnel), the Marine Corps must rethink its approach to sustaining its Ground Combat Element via surface and subsurface lines of communication."[13]

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The *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* outlines how EABO depends on mobile, cost-effective forces that can operate autonomously for long periods.[10] It emphasizes the Marine Corps' crucial role in littoral operations and its reliance on the Joint Force and the Navy for inter-theater (strategic) and intra-theater (operational) lift. While the Medium Landing Ship (LSM) aims to bolster the Navy's capacity to support the Marine Corps—particularly the Marine littoral regiment (MLR)—the current online capabilities within both the Navy and Marine Corps do not sufficiently address how units conducting EABO or other littoral operations would carry out littoral transportation and distribution, a critical aspect of operations.[11]

The challenge of sustaining these forward-deployed units, particularly in contested littoral environments, is significant. Without robust *multimodal* and *multi-domain capabilities*, the Marine Corps' ability to support EABO missions is hampered, leading to a severe tactical and operational gap.[12] This gap was certified by the Deputy Commandant, Combat Development and Integration (DC CD&I) in the summer of 2024 with two Deliberate Universal Needs Statements from the FMF "needing to conduct distribution operations in direct support of the EABO forces by not laying blame to the Navy.[15] The Marine Corps helped design these challenges, and for it to say it is a *Navy problem* to determine how to move the SIF in EABO is ignorant and passing the buck.

The Deputy Commandant CD&I is synchronizing and collaborating on the capabilities integration process for a "family of high-speed, general-purpose surface vessels" capable of operating in brown, green, and blue water environments to support EABO. This fleet would include crewed and autonomous vessels, enabling the Marine Corps to move personnel, supplies, and equipment without depending solely on other organizations. Concurrently complicating this challenge is the delayed fielding of the LSM, a vessel intended to bridge the gap in maritime maneuver for EABO.[16] Initially expected to begin fielding in fiscal year 2029, the LSM will not reach full operational capability until the mid-2030s. This delay leaves the Marine Corps without the critical ability to execute littoral transportation and distribution in a contested environment.

Conflicting Paradigms: What is the Future Role of the Marine Corps?

Beyond its logistical shortcomings in this contested littoral environment, the Marine Corps faces a more profound, strategic question: What is its future role? If it is no longer a range of military operations (ROMO) force, then it is

An autonomous low-profile vessel stands by at the Del Mar boat basin as part of Project Convergence Capstone Four on 23 February 2024, at Camp Pendleton, CA. *(Photo by Kevin Ray J. Salvador/U.S. Marine Corps.)*

becoming a force that is tailoring itself to specific missions across the ROMO.[17] I MEF—the largest MAGTF—focuses on power projection, offensive operations, amphibious operations, and combined joint forcible entry operations.[18] II MEF is the Service's crisis response force-in-readiness as a "pacing contingency."[19] III MEF is the main effort to deter the People's Republic of China as the "fight now" SIF capability to persist inside the contested environment.[20] This begs the question of whether the Corps should focus exclusively on EABO and MLR operations in the INDO-PACIFIC region or joint forcible entry and crisis response missions across the ROMO—or all of the above?

The Concept for Stand-In Forces (2021) suggests that the future lies in distributed operations, with small, lethal, and low-signature units positioned inside the adversary's defensive network. These forces are designed to act as the first line of defense, delaying enemy advances and providing intelligence for larger joint forces. At the same time, traditional Marine Corps doctrine emphasizes larger formations, amphibious assaults, and sustained operations in contested areas. This strategic tension between smaller, agile forces and more conventional amphibious operations fuels the Marine Corps' identity crisis.

The Installations and Logistics Campaign Plan (2023) addresses this duality by emphasizing the importance of logistics and sustainment in distributed and large-scale operations. However, the Marine Corps can only effectively support neither paradigm without organic maritime capabilities. The reliance on external assets limits the Marine Corps' operational flexibility and creates vulnerabilities when joint assets are unavailable due to conflicting priorities.

The Case for Organic Maritime Capabilities

To resolve its identity crisis and ensure operational relevance, the Marine Corps must invest in organic maritime capabilities tailored to its unique operational needs. These capabilities would allow the Marine Corps to support distributed operations in the littorals, improve sustainment, and reduce its dependency on external partners.

- *Reducing Dependency*: The reliance on the Navy and Army for maritime logistics introduces operational risks, especially when these partners have conflicting priorities. By developing its organic maritime capabilities, the Marine Corps can ensure it retains the flexibility to execute missions without delays or vulnerabilities tied to external logistics networks.
- *Improving Sustainment*: With its fleet of vessels—ranging from small, crewed watercraft to uncrewed surface vessels and autonomous low-profile vessels—the Marine Corps would have greater control over its supply chains. This capability would enable it to sustain forward-deployed units like SIF without relying on joint forces. As the Installations and Logistics campaign plan suggests, autonomous systems could significantly enhance logistics resilience, reducing the risk to personnel and ensuring the continuous flow of supplies.[21]
- *Diversifying Distribution*: Developing organic maritime capabilities would enable the Marine Corps to create a multi-domain distribution web; operable in permissive and contested environments, reflecting the Marine Corps' dedication to adaptability and versatility. This web would integrate air, land, and sea capabilities to ensure the flexibility and redundancy needed to sustain forces in contested environments.

Depiction of future Marine Corps watercraft-ancillary surface craft. *(Photo: Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL)–Logistics Combat Element Science & Technology Branch.)*

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The Need for a "Marine Corps Navy?"

Whether the Marine Corps needs its own navy is more than a logistical issue. It speaks directly to the Marine Corps' identity in the modern strategic environment. As the Concept for SIF and EABO makes clear, the future of warfare will involve contested littoral environments where smaller, more agile forces must operate independently for extended periods. The Marine Corps cannot execute this vision without the ability to move and sustain its forces within these environments, utilizing capabilities across all land, air, and maritime domains.

Developing organic maritime capabilities would allow the Marine Corps to embrace its naval roots while

adapting to the demands of EABO. A Marine navy that includes both crewed and autonomous vessels would provide the Marine Corps with the flexibility to support EABO and sustain a long-term presence in contested littoral environments.

Conclusion: Steering into the Future

Developing organic maritime capabilities is a logistical and strategic imperative to succeed in EABO. These capabilities will enable the Marine Corps to diversify its distribution networks, improve sustainment, and operate independently in contested environments. By building its own Marine navy, the Marine Corps can redefine its role in the 21st century, bridging the gap between its amphibious roots and the demands of modern distributed operations. Only by embracing this evolution can the Marine Corps resolve its identity crisis and ensure its readiness for the conflicts of tomorrow.

Whatever the future role or identity of the Marine Corps becomes, it is agnostic to the challenges faced by III MEF and the SIF. As the Service continues force design and tailors the MEFs to "specific capabilities and mission sets," the SIF has a gap within the maritime domain for transporting and distributing materiel and personnel. The Marine Corps needs to own this nuanced mission of EABO as the Joint Force offering to the combatant commander and start resourcing the SIF with the capabilities required to execute. So yes—to some extent, the Marine Corps does need to command its own navy.

Notes

1. Brian Kerg, "What Does the Navy Need from the Marine Corps?" *Proceedings*, November 2019, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/november/what-does-navy-need-marine-corps.

2. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: March 2022).

3. Ibid.

4. L. Spaeder, "Sir, Who Am I? An Open Letter to the Incoming Commandant of the Marine Corps," *War on the Rocks*, March 28, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/sir-who-am-i-an-open-letter-to-the-incoming-commandant-of-the-marine-corps.

5. Gen Eric Smith, *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: August 2024).

6. P.K. Van Riper, "The Marine Corps' Plan to Redesign the Force Will Only End Up Breaking It," *Task & Purpose*, April 20, 2022, https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marine-corps-force-design-infantry.

7. Ibid; and "Sir, Who Am I?"

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual Expeditionary Advance Base Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2023).

9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *A Concept for Stand-In Forces*, (Washington, DC: 2021).

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, 2nd Edition*, (Washington, DC: 2023).

11. This includes a number of factors ranging from: (1) Historical fiscal challenges of maintaining the readiness of (31) amphibious ships between the Marine Corps and Navy; (2) Reduction of the Maritime Prepositioning Force–[The MPF program is retaining seven full operational status vessels and five in a reduced operational status vessel]; (3) Decline in U.S. Naval Beach Group Readiness (personnel and materiel) of both LCAC and LCUs.

12. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Deputy Commandant Combat Development & Integration, Sustaining the Force 2.0*–Functional Concept, (Washington, DC: April 2024): "The Marine Corps continues to develop ways and means for an agile, resilient and integrated sustainment web to effectively sustain maneuver forces within a contested environment."

13. DC CD&I, *Decision Memorandum–DC CD&I Capability Portfolio Integration Board (CPIB) Decision on Deliberate UNS (D-UNS) #23279DA "Littoral Tactical Logistics Section*," (Washington, DC: June 2024).

14. Capabilities Development Directorate (CDD) Logistics Combat Element Division (LCED) is downtrace of DC CD&I and located on board Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA.

15. Mallory Shelbourne, "Marines, Navy Crafting Long-Term Fixes for Amphibious Warship Shortages," *USNI News*, May 3, 2024, https://news.usni.org/2024/05/03/marines-navy-crafting-long-term-fixes-for-amphibious-warship-shortages; and Heather Mongilio, "Navy Set to Miss Recruiting Goals by 6,700, Chief of Naval Personnel Tells House," *USNI News*, April 17, 2024, https://news.usni.org/2024/04/17/navy-set-to-miss-recruiting-goals-by-6700-chief-of-naval-personnel-tells-house.

16. The LSM is the envisioned principal littoral maneuver vessel for the MLR. The command and organization for this future capability will remain under the control of the Navy, possibly in a direct support role to the MLR and OPCON to the naval fleets. Additionally, the LSM's expected role is maneuver or positional advantage of forces, not guaranteeing the use of littoral transportation and distribution.

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

18. *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Installations and Logistics Campaign Plan 2023*, (Washington, DC: 2024).

22. The ancillary surface craft (ASC) is a III MEF-generated requirement that the MCWL is currently undertaking as a Science and Technology initiative within the LCE portfolio. Current delivery scheduled for (2) craft beginning of FY 2026 by the company Birdon Group. The ASC is a beachable roll-on/roll-off craft that is designed to be interoperable with USN amphibious shipping (e.g., LSM, LCU, LPD, LHA) with the ability to operate in sea state 5 and survive in sea state 7/8.