

The Flawed Argument for Change

Service competency and *FD 2030*

by Gen Anthony C. Zinni (Ret)

In the *Force Design 2030* report of March 2020, the CMC states as his “Argument for Change” that “Our current forces design, optimized for large-scale forcible entry and sustained operations ashore, has persisted unchanged in its essential inspiration since the 1950s.” Understandably, many of us who have served as Marines during that period from the 1950s until today take issue with this statement since we believe our Corps has undergone many significant changes and innovations over those seventy-plus years. Past Commandants like Generals Wilson, Barrow, Gray, Krulak, and others saw the “character of war” change with the advent of airpower, nuclear weapons, insurgency, and other new technologies and forms of warfare. They adapted, made changes, integrated new technology, and adjusted our warfighting concepts, doctrine, training, and education in thoughtful approaches that fully engaged the leadership of the Corps. During this period, the Marine Corps also created and employed a deliberate and methodical combat development process needed to turn new ideas into proven capabilities.

A profoundly significant opportunity for the Marine Corps came with the passing of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. This act directed important changes to roles and missions, lines of authority, conduct of operations, and support. It resulted in a complex structure that is often misunderstood. This legislation is worth reviewing to fully understand its effects on the Marine Corps.

The Goldwater-Nichols Act

This act elevated the Marine Corps

>Gen Zinni retired in 2000 as the Commander of U.S. Central Command.

to full-service component status within the combatant commands. Prior to the enactment of Goldwater-Nichols, the Marine Corps’ operational forces were designated as FMF, which required them to operate primarily under Navy fleet commands though in accordance with *Title 10* of the U.S. Code the FMF could operate outside this principal role “as the President may direct.” After World War II, Marine operational forces were often deployed

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in this additional role. The end of the Cold War saw a significant reduction in U.S. military forces and the Marine operational forces were committed to greater roles in combatant commanders’ operations and war plans.

Goldwater-Nichols also established the chain of command authority as running from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the combatant commanders. It removed the Service Chiefs from the operational chain of command and assigned them support responsibilities

such as training, equipping, organizing, and maintaining their forces. Under this arrangement, the Services provided the forces and the combatant commands integrated and employed those forces.

Competency

Combatant commanders request Service forces to be assigned or allocated to them to meet operational and planning requirements. The Secretary of Defense approves the assignment or allocation. The Services establish component commands in each combatant command and assign forces to them as directed. The Services retain administrative control while the component commands exercise operational control under the command authority of the combatant commander. In his *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, Gen Berger stated, “Our MARFORS [Marine Forces Component Commands] are intended as administrative headquarters that advise their respective commands on the Marine Corps.” This is clearly not in accordance with Goldwater-Nichols or the established chain of command authority. The Marine Corps established its first component commands in 1992, Marine Forces Pacific and Marine Forces Atlantic. These components initially answered to multiple combatant commands until the Corps established separate components in each combatant command (COCOM). Through the years since, the Marine Forces Component Commands and the MEFs had to prove their ability to meet the challenging requirements placed upon them by COCOMs. In the war plans of CENTCOM, EUCOM, PACOM, and the U.S Forces Korea Command, Marine headquarters, including Ser-

vice component commands, were given significant roles as combined corps-level forces, joint task forces, and joint functional commands. The Corps still provided FMF to the Joint Force Maritime Component as well. Gen Berger has reportedly reduced the staffing of component headquarters and lowered the grade of at least one component commander.

Component commanders answer to two masters, the combatant commander and their Service chief. Several issues such as conflicting service doctrine, employment of forces, joint exercise requirements, and organization for employment can be sources of friction and require cooperation and coordination conducted through the component commanders. Although the authority lines are clear, the relationships can be difficult and are compounded by the additional role of service chiefs as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their influence as advisors to the Secretary of Defense and the President. In my experience serving in three COCOMs and commanding one, the best component commanders enthusiastically promoted their service capabilities and constantly looked for opportunities to be included in COCOM plans and operations. As CENTCOM commander, I often had Service chiefs personally contact me to discuss employment and structure issues, contemplated changes to their assigned or allocated forces, and many other issues that affected both commands.

Combatant Commands

COCOMs, in addition to having service component commands, many also have subordinate unified commands and joint task forces in their command structure. COCOMs may further have subordinate joint functional component commands, such as a Joint Force Special Operations Component, a Joint Force Land Component, a Joint Force Air Component, and a Joint Force Maritime Component. The Service component may be directed to provide forces to these functional components or to serve as one of these functional components. The Service components may also be directed to be the core of a Joint Task

Force established by the combatant commander. Marine operational forces have filled these assigned roles in several operations and in COCOM war plans.

Back to Our Roots or Backward to Our Roots

The CMC has said we will “get back to our roots.” By that, he seems to be retreating to the Marine Corps’ pre-1986 operational status as FMFs, providing tactical type-commands under a Navy Fleet. His *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* gives every indication that this is the direction he wants to take the Corps. Obviously, the Marine Forces Component Commands can still fulfill their historic FMF role under the current structure by assigning forces to the Navy or Joint Forces Maritime Component Commands. In fact, recent naval integration efforts by several Marine component commands offer a case in point—these headquarters remain on an equal footing with their Navy counterpart and maintain a direct line to the combatant commander. To return to the FMF role solely or primarily, however, is a very narrow approach that we have long since moved past to provide a more expansive role that better meets COCOM and national security requirements. In those years from the 1950s, previous Commandants developed balanced, ready, expeditionary forces flexibly able to task organize for any mission across the spectrum of conflict. Goldwater-Nichols presented the Marine Corps with the opportunity to demonstrate these unique service capabilities. A great deal of blood, sweat, and tears went into building an operational capability that provides a powerful complement to our sister Service capabilities. The Corps has demonstrated this operational capability time and time again. Since the 1980s, numerous Marine general officers have been selected to command COCOMs and others to serve in senior joint assignments. This recognition of the operational skills and experience of our leadership is being diminished by the CMC’s intended withdrawal from the major role we have established at the operational and strategic levels. To reduce the operational forces of the Marine Corps to primarily a tactical naval

role is a clear step backward.

Through all the rhetoric regarding the CMC’s plans to bond solely with the Navy, we have not heard from the Navy. Does the Navy support the amphibious ship requirements, maritime preposition ship requirements, or the light amphibious warship program? Have Navy leaders described the Navy’s role in the littoral strategy the Commandant espouses? When we developed the Maritime Strategy in the 1970s and 80s to control the northern flank of NATO, Marines had a true partnership with the Navy. Does that exist now or is this just a one-sided partnership?

A Global and Ready Marine Corps Force for All Theaters

The myopic focus on one theater and one narrow role described in the Stand-In Forces and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concepts presents a very limited view of how Marine Corps operational forces can best serve our nation’s national security interests. Pursuing a limited mission as a “reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance service” eliminates a well-established and varied set of capabilities that Marine operational forces can provide to combatant commanders.

All of us who have served in our Corps of Marines through decades of changing conflicts and commitments understand the need to adapt and incorporate new technology and new ways of meeting our mission requirements. We have in our experience, however, affected those changes through carefully established processes that incorporated the new with the tried and true. The ad-like promotional media for *Force Design 2030* begins by quoting the *U.S. Code Title 10* mission of the Marine Corps. It does not describe the role of the Marine Corps in subsequent legislation or how it has expanded and evolved since Congress enacted *Title 10*.

