

# The U.S. Marine Corps: A Service in Transition

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. Marine Corps is engaged in a massive effort to reorient its focus and posture for the type of challenge represented by China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Corps' organizations, equipment, and skills are not relevant to what will be needed to succeed in such an environment, hence the service's sense of urgency to change.

General David Berger's efforts are on the mark, should continue, and should be supported by Congress.

**A**t the direction of its Commandant, General David H. Berger, the U.S. Marine Corps is engaged in a massive effort to reorient its focus, organization, equipping, posture, and employment concept for the type of challenge represented by China in the Indo-Pacific region. The Corps seeks to shift from the heavy force it has become over the past two decades (a consequence primarily of the demands of sustained land operations in Iraq and Afghanistan) to a leaner, nimbler force able to conduct distributed operations across a heavily contested maritime environment within the range of advanced enemy weapons.

This will require a tight integration of efforts between the U.S. Navy and the Corps, as each will depend on the other to project naval power into a complex environment, and it will call for new tools—especially in the areas of unmanned systems and small naval vessels, extensive experimentation, and the divestiture of

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capabilities that have proven valuable in the past but are unlikely to be useful in the future. The shift is dramatic, even revolutionary, for the service in the same way as was its shift from small wars to large-scale, opposed amphibious landings in the 1930s. It is sorely needed and, if successful, will introduce a wholly new set of warfighting capabilities to the U.S. Joint Force.

## The Commandant's Planning Guidance

Shortly after General Berger took office as the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps in July 2019, he issued his Commandant's Planning Guidance, in which he shared his views on where the service stood in its ability to uniquely contribute to the Joint Force. Specifically, the Commandant echoed his predecessor, General Robert Neller, in stating that the Corps was not ready to win in future wars<sup>1</sup> and that the service needed to make major changes to remain relevant.<sup>2</sup> He made force design his top priority, specified a number of areas in which the Corps was deficient or oversubscribed in various capabilities, and announced an aggressive plan for correcting all of the enumerated problems. His initial announcement certainly caught the attention of Marines, defense analysts, and some in Congress—and generated quite a bit of criticism.

The Corps' effort to redesign itself to be not only relevant but combat effective in the most challenging combat environment borders on breathtaking. Seldom does a military service take such a frank look at itself, assess its deficiencies relative to evolving operational realities, and then commit to wholesale change on the scale envisioned by General Berger. In recent history, this has only happened following catastrophic defeat or when a new capability so thoroughly threatens or promises success that it cannot be ignored.<sup>3</sup>

Per Generals Neller and Berger, since the end of the Cold War, changes of such magnitude have taken place in the world, across the technology sector, and in the operational and threat environments that the Corps finds itself with organizations, equipment, skills, and approaches to war that are not relevant to what will be needed to succeed in battle—especially if pitted against a major power like China. General Berger believes that the challenge posed by China is significant enough to warrant the Corps' full attention, even at the expense of letting go of things that might still be relevant in other circumstances against other opponents.<sup>4</sup>

## Transformation Through the Years

Perhaps it is fortunate that China's rapidly growing presence as a modern, expanding, power-projection-capable competitor is evolving at the same

time as U.S. spending on defense is flattening, if not on the verge of declining. For the Marines, this means hard choices must be made, quickly, if they are to be relevant in the Joint Force portfolio of capabilities. Thoughtful analysis of changing environments and requirements should lead military organizations to adapt accordingly. Unfortunately, this does not happen often, but the Corps has a good record of transforming itself.<sup>5</sup> The service is at the beginning of its next transformation, and early signs are quite promising. The transformation envisioned by the Commandant will be as profound for the service as when it shifted from small wars to large-scale, opposed amphibious landings in preparation for World War II.

From its founding in 1775 until the mid-1930s, almost all of the Corps' experience consisted of small-unit actions. In assessing the implications of Japan's militarization and invasion of countries in Asia in the 1930s and the implications for U.S. national interests, the Corps concluded that if war with Japan occurred, the Marines would need new capabilities to wage battle across the Pacific Ocean. The Corps undertook a massive retooling of its equipment, units, and methods so as to be ready for such employment.<sup>6</sup> The techniques it developed for its drive across the Central Pacific proved to be indispensable to the U.S. war effort and were also used by the Army in its island-hopping campaign in the South Pacific, on the west coast of Europe, and throughout the Mediterranean.

Since the 1940s, although the Corps has continued to prize its "fight tonight" expeditionary nature, it has grown in weight, logistical requirements, and overall size driven by the larger and heavier weapons and platforms it has accumulated. It has become very experienced in sustained land operations, not unlike the U.S. Army<sup>7</sup>—but at the expense of retaining expertise as an amphibious force and working closely with the Navy at sea.

General Berger seeks not to overturn the Corps' history, but to continue its pattern of adapting to changing circumstances, returning it to a lighter, agile force that thinks about the projection of power in a naval context. Moving on from 80 years of experience will be a challenge, but it is necessary. To make such a momentous shift, which always generates friction, the Corps will leverage the continuity of its traditions, warfighting acumen, and credible history of adaptation. Subsequent to the release of his planning guidance, Berger aggressively marketed his rationale for why the Corps needs to change: penning articles,<sup>8</sup> participating in podcasts,<sup>9</sup> engaging in public fora,<sup>10</sup> and publishing updates on his thinking and the Corps' progress.<sup>11</sup>

In March, General Berger released Force Design 2030, his interim report on this stage of the Corps' transformation. His directed cuts raised eyebrows, as they meant that the Corps was giving up entire sets of capabilities.

The areas he seeks to develop are dependent on maturing new technologies that at present have limited utility (range, payload, endurance, etc.) and the investments of other services, like the Navy, to develop and field capabilities essential to what the Corps proposes to do.

## Developments Driving the Focus Shift

The Corps, like the other services, has taken notice of how military capabilities have evolved over the past several decades. In general, weapons ranges have increased, as has their ability to find targets and hit them with extreme precision. This is the result of advances in related sensors and surveillance technologies that enable broad scanning of areas at very high resolution from multiple types of platforms operating across a range of altitudes. Sensors are now able to detect very low levels of energy and changes in the environment, including electromagnetic emissions by radios or various types of equipment; thermal (heat) radiation from equipment, vehicles, and people; acoustic (sound) vibrations from various types of activity; the movement of people and platforms (trucks, aircraft, and ships); and various other forms of change created by military activities—all of these with the potential to alert an enemy to a unit's presence and actions.

With such warning, an enemy can direct precise fires from great distances. Many analysts now believe that military operations in close proximity to an enemy are high-risk propositions, a view shared by the services that has caused them to favor long-range strike options initiated from positions outside of the enemy's weapons ranges. Operational concepts like AirSea Battle<sup>12</sup> were constructed around this premise, with the idea that instead of bulldozing into the middle of a battlespace, the Joint Force would methodically use missiles, cyberattacks, and other means to degrade an opponent's defensive layers as well as his ability to see what U.S. forces are doing and to strike U.S. positions and forces at long range. As the enemy's posture degraded, U.S. forces would incrementally move closer, eventually defeating the enemy through attrition of his capabilities.

A potential outcome of this mindset that military forces must be moved out of the range of potential threats—one of major consequence—is that the U.S. effectively cedes key terrain to China, such as the East and South China Seas and all of the notable terrain and economically valuable resources contained therein. From a military point of view, this concession enables China to firmly establish itself, improving and hardening its position over time, and extending its reach by way of new military positions established within and along the periphery of controlled territory. This further expands

the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)<sup>13</sup> zone with which the U.S. would have to contend. Defeating China's posture—rolling back its A2/AD construct—would take considerable time, resources, and likely casualties, time during which China might well accomplish its strategic objectives.<sup>14</sup>

The Marines are also aware that since the end of the Cold War, the military posture of allies in the Pacific region has declined even more so than for the U.S. While individual items of equipment are better than their Cold War predecessors (thanks to technological improvements), the amount of equipment is less and the readiness of forces to engage in combat with a high-end opponent is questionable. The presence of U.S. forces has similarly declined with the closure of facilities in the Philippines, the reduction of U.S. forces stationed abroad in Japan and South Korea, and the general decline in the availability of forces maintained at home, even if deployed to the region for periodic exercises.

## Primary Options to Combat a Peer Threat

Generally speaking, the U.S. has two options to deal with a major competitor like China: accept the premise that it will have to work from the outside-in, chipping away at China's posture in the event of war, or develop an ability to operate inside China's weapons engagement zone to prevent the enemy from firmly establishing itself and to create exploitable opportunities for the Joint Force. In the latter case, an "inside force" would not only have to survive in close proximity to China's military power but also be able to effectively strike Chinese forces and basing structure, deny China the ability to freely operate within the first island chain, and force it to expend finite resources (munitions, fuel, attention, analytic effort, etc.) that it would otherwise have available to use against U.S. forces trying to work their way in.

## The Ability to Operate Inside

The Marines have embraced the idea of becoming the "inside force." They intend to make it harder for China to do what it wants instead of easier; force it to increase consumption of resources; degrade its posture; distract it tactically, operationally, and strategically; and deny it the luxury of focusing on a few things in which it would be able to optimize its efforts. In other words, the Corps plans to turn the tables on China.

There are several challenges to doing this. The Marines will have to be able to move forces into geographically separated positions, sustain operations at those positions with minimal resupply, move to alternate positions

as needed by means that avoid enemy detection, perform their function while minimizing the likelihood of being targeted, and yet have enough “punch” to materially affect enemy behavior. The services have been working to develop many of these capabilities already, and there are civilian analogs that could be modified for military use, but what the Corps needs does not yet exist in sufficient capability and reliability.

The Army attempted something similar in the late 1990s and early 2000s with its future combat system initiative,<sup>15</sup> but technologies at that time were not up to the challenge. Fortunately, progress has been made since then and, unlike the Army at that time, the Marine Corps is not proposing to field systems that are not technologically possible. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the individual service research laboratories and futures organizations are pursuing many promising leads with unmanned systems, alternative energy sources, non-GPS-dependent location determination, and assured communications capabilities that remain useful in the most restricted environment, among a host of others.

To be able to move discreetly, the Marines will need new platforms to transport them by sea and air or enable them to remain in place by handling logistical support with a minimum of human involvement. These platforms will need to be smaller: first, so they are affordable and can be purchased in large numbers; second, so that they can service a widely separated force; and third, so that any one loss does not result in a substantial loss of force capability. Further, smaller platforms open up many more basing options. Large platforms require large facilities that either will not be available or would reveal actions to the enemy. Again, advances in all of these areas have important implications for not only force design and equipage, but also how the force will act “inside the enemy’s wire.”

Having thought through this challenge and its implications in operational and analytic settings, Berger laid out his intent in clear terms to set the stage for a multi-phase effort<sup>16</sup> that would reorient the Corps to a primary theater and pacing threat. Many of the details have been withheld either because they are very sensitive or answers have not been sufficiently developed, but others were shared in the Commandant’s Force Design 2030 report.<sup>17</sup> Trends that characterize the evolving military contest, force attributes that will be key to operational success, and analysis to be undertaken in the coming months include:

- The proliferation of precision weapons are a reality that has to be overcome;
- The Joint force cannot be limited to a few predictable options;

- The Marine Corps must be able to contribute to the projection of naval power in a distributed operations environment; and
- The Marine Corps must take seriously the imperative at the heart of the National Defense Strategy, which is to be prepared for military competition between great powers.

Conclusions that have been drawn from analysis thus far include:

- **Forces inside the enemy's weapons engagement zone (WEZ) are more relevant than those outside.** They can attrite the enemy, enable Joint Force access, complicate the enemy's targeting, consume his resources, and prevent the enemy from winning before the war has even been fought.
- **Range matters.** The distances that characterize the western Pacific mean forces must have the ability to employ long-range weapons and move great distances with minimal signature.
- **The "hider versus finder" competition is real and very important.** This places an emphasis on reconnaissance and scouting to find the enemy and reduction of one's own signature to make it harder for the enemy to find you.
- **Forward bases and fixed infrastructure are inherently vulnerable to the enemy's long-range attack.** This is not because they have no defenses, but because they are easy to target, and China has invested in large inventories of missiles for just this purpose.
- **Mobility is not only a competitive advantage: It is an imperative.** If you cannot move, you become a target, and targets can be hit with modern precision-guided munitions.
- **Logistics are critical, revealing that self-sustainment is a very important advantage.**
- **Forces cannot avoid attrition.** Thus, it is essential that a force be able to lose assets and still sustain operations.

TABLE 1

## Marine Corps Objective Force in 2030

	Current	Change	Final in 2030
End Strength	186,200	-12,000	174,200
Law Enforcement (MP) Battalions	3	-3	0
Infantry Regt Headquarters	8	-1	7
Infantry Battalions (active)	24	-3	21
Infantry Battalions (reserve)	8	-2	6
Infantry Battalion size (Marines)	800	-200	600
Artillery Batteries (cannon)	21	-16	5
Artillery Batteries (rocket)	7	+14	21
Tank Companies	7	-7	0
Bridging Companies	3	-3	0
Light Armored Reconnaissance Companies	9	+3	12
Assault Amphibious Companies	6	-2	4
Aircraft per Fighter/Attack Squadron (active)	16	-6	10
Tiltrotor (Osprey) Squadrons	17	-3	14
Heavy Lift Helicopter Squadrons (active)	8	-3	5
Light Attack Helicopter Squadrons (active)	7	-2	5
Refuel/Transport (KC-130) Squadrons (active)	3	+1	4
Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadrons (active)	3	+3	6

**SOURCE:** U.S. Marine Corps, "Force Design 2030," March 2020, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460> (accessed May 11, 2020).

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The combined work of the first two phases resulted in an initial cut at an objective force that Phases III and IV will test for refinement. The specifics of Phase II recommendations are contained in the report,<sup>18</sup> but they are summarized in Table 1.

In each case of adding or deleting a capability, the decision was made on its relevance to the force's ability to conduct distributed operations within the range of weapons available to a peer competitor in a highly contested littoral environment. Tanks and towed-tube artillery would not be helpful, while longer-range rockets, reconnaissance units, and unmanned systems would be essential.

Divestment of units and reduction of end strength, especially three infantry battalions, the elimination of tank companies, and disestablishment of military police battalion headquarters will free funding for use elsewhere. It is unfortunate that the Commandant believes the only way he can obtain the necessary funding for his modernization efforts is to reduce the number of Marines—but given the increasingly likely flat trajectory of future defense budgets in this Administration, he is probably correct.

Interestingly, the Corps has also elected to reduce the number of F-35Bs in squadrons that currently have 16 aircraft, but in the future will only have 10. The F-35 decision is odd. The aircraft has all of the performance characteristics for which the Corps is searching (with the exception of overall range): It has an extremely low signature, an extraordinary ability to share increased understanding of the battlespace with ground forces, and the ability to penetrate defended enemy airspace so as to place ordnance on key targets that reduce the enemy's capabilities and awareness.<sup>19</sup>

Berger has stated that a major factor bearing on his decision to potentially reduce the number of F-35s acquired by the Marines is the difficulty the service is having in generating and retaining pilots.<sup>20</sup> If so, the Corps should revisit this position, since it is far harder to buy aircraft once a production line has closed or funding for such declines in later years than it is to redouble efforts to find pilots. At present, Congress strongly supports increased acquisition of the plane, and the design has matured such that current aircraft are fully combat capable.<sup>21</sup>

While the cost of an F-35B, the short takeoff/vertical landing variant used by the Marine Corps, is more expensive than an F/A-18 Hornet,<sup>22</sup> the Hornet cannot operate inside a modern A2/AD high-threat environment, and it cannot be based from a large-deck amphibious assault ship or a small airfield ashore. Consequently, reliance on a fourth-generation tactical fighter that can operate only from an aircraft carrier or major airfield will limit the Corps to obtaining tactical fighter support from facilities proximate to the field of battle (themselves targetable) and from an aircraft that would be hard-pressed to be effective in the presence of a modern, advanced integrated air defense system. Defense spending in future years cannot be guaranteed—especially given mounting levels of national debt—thus, planning for future capabilities over the next 10 years should include the purchase of key items *now*, while they can be obtained.

The Corps has embarked on the next leg of its effort that will validate and/or modify initial recommendations through extensive wargaming and real-world experimentation.<sup>23</sup> In particular, more testing of new designs for infantry battalions and a regimental structure optimized for distributed operations

are needed, both because these will be the field units tasked with conducting all of the things envisioned in the Corps' operational concepts and because all other aspects of the Corps' fleet marine forces will cue off of them: logistics, air support, modes, quantities, capabilities of transport platforms, etc.

The concluding phase will convert validated initiatives into budget items and directives that lead to redesigned, fielded forces.

## Criticisms, Concerns, and a Rebuttal

Not surprisingly, Berger's effort to redirect the Corps from global crisis response and general land-combat actions to a primary focus on the Indo-Pacific and operations against China in particular, as well as fielding very light forces optimized for sea-control and sea-denial operations, has drawn criticism,<sup>24</sup> some of which goes so far as to warn of the end of the Marine Corps.<sup>25</sup>

**Criticisms.** Criticism is important because it reveals concerns that should be addressed and potentially illuminates methodological shortfalls or flaws in the underlying logic or approach to problem resolution. In the same vein, however, criticism must also be well-founded, and much of what has been directed against the Corps not only is not, but it carries its own contradictions.

Most criticism of the transformation set in motion by Berger centers on the fear that the Corps is walking away from 70 to 80 years of experience in low- to mid-intensity conventional warfare and divesting itself of capabilities like tanks and tube-artillery that have repeatedly proven effective in general land combat. Critics point to the Corps' well-earned reputation as a multi-functional crisis response force that is globally deployable and has been regularly used to address the most common instances of conflict. These include low-intensity crises caused by violent non-state actors (terrorists, insurgents, and proto-state competitor groups) in poorly governed areas of the world.

Critics contend that by optimizing, or overspecializing, for a specific competitor in a specific theater, the service will make itself less useful—and perhaps irrelevant—in all other forms of warfare that are more likely to occur. Becoming a light infantry force, even one with longer-range strike weapons like anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, means the Marines will be dependent on other services for everything they are giving up, from some aspects of logistics to heavy armor to intra-theater lift.

And the Corps' new concept of operations as an inside force will demand that the Navy make new investments in various types of watercraft that do

not yet exist in fleet architecture plans, to include unmanned platforms perhaps possessing a high degree of autonomy. In essence, critics assert that the Corps is changing itself to fight the least likely war, losing along the way its relevance for all other forms of conflict that it would most likely be called upon to handle and placing new requirements on the other services for which they have not planned and which will compete with their own modernization initiatives.

Interestingly, the military is routinely accused of “fighting the last war” or preparing to fight the type of war it prefers rather than adapting to meet changing circumstances and modifying approaches to account for the reality of how opponents are fighting. It is therefore curious that critics would take the Corps to task for making just the sort of changes that are usually demanded when U.S. forces appear unready for the realities of a modern battlefield.

**Concerns.** What the critics miss is the cost to the Joint Force of *not* developing the capability envisioned by the Marines. The Joint Force is not able to operate inside the weapons engagement zone of a major competitor. Concerns about how to get close enough to be effective have frustrated military planning in many theaters, including any U.S. response to Russian provocation of NATO allies;<sup>26</sup> any action in the Persian Gulf region (especially with respect to Iran);<sup>27</sup> and, of course, anything dealing with China, which presents the most severe case given the nature of the geography and the limited number of U.S. troops stationed in immediate proximity.<sup>28</sup>

In each of these cases, without the ability to operate within contested spaces, the U.S. will have no option but to undertake a protracted fight from the outside, with the opponent possessing all the advantages of well-established and defended positions along the periphery and certainly within the space held. This begs the question of why the U.S. should be content with this situation, ceding key terrain to an adversary without ever contesting the case and conferring positional advantage well in advance of any conflict. This damages deterrence of opportunistic exploitation, and it undermines U.S. assurances to allies, partners, and countries pondering which side to choose.

**Rebuttal.** If the Corps succeeds, the U.S. will have an ability to operate in ways that no other country can, creating a significant advantage over major competitors like China, Iran, and Russia. The techniques, equipment, and organizations necessary to operate as an inside force will be useful across the Joint Force in various settings. Success means the too-small current U.S. military<sup>29</sup> has new tricks enabling it to win in a major fight. Any U.S. force would want to be able to operate with a smaller signature, in small,

hard-to-find packets, and still pose a lethal threat to the enemy. All of the services are exploring how best to use unmanned systems. Very large platforms like aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships, fixed airbases and logistics hubs, main aerial and sea ports of debarkation, and large troop concentrations are consistently noted as vulnerable to enemy long-range, precision fires. Why wouldn't the Joint Force benefit from solutions developed by the grand transformation of the Corps?

The Corps' success in World War II was the result of changing from a constabulary or small-wars force to a force capable of large-scale amphibious operations. Its 70-year legacy is the direct result of changing to meet a specific threat because the assessed conditions of war demanded it. The Corps is committing itself to the same type of change for the same reasons.

If the Corps fails, then the Joint Force is no worse off in terms of options available to confront a well-equipped opponent than it is now. And if the Corps becomes irrelevant along the lines its critics fear, then its light infantry and other ground capabilities can be absorbed by the Army and its naval aviation used to fill shortfalls in the Navy. A very bad day for the Marines, no doubt—but not a strategic loss for the country in terms of overall combat power.

As noted, a key criticism of the Corps optimizing as a lighter force in order to engage a heavier force has to do with the loss of logistics-intensive armor and artillery. Yet military analysts often point out that asymmetrical approaches can be very effective counters to an enemy capability versus trying to match an opponent tank for tank. Perhaps not presenting a lucrative target to the enemy has its own advantages and neutralizes a major investment made by the opponent.

And if the criticism is that the Corps' focus on China makes it less useful for insurgent wars, this might create opportunities for the Army to put its infantry brigade combat teams to good use. Another alternative resides in the special operations community. Prior to the global war on terrorism<sup>30</sup>—the broad U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—the Army's Special Forces component was organized, trained, and employed to work with the indigenous forces of a partner country to combat insurgencies and to train partner forces to be more effective in dealing with such.<sup>31</sup> It is entirely plausible that a combination of Army units backfills the Corps should a situation arise in which Marines are unavailable while the Corps develops new capabilities for an operational environment for which it is uniquely suited, especially in working closely with the U.S. Navy to regain an ability to project naval power whenever and wherever needed.

As the threat environment now stands, the conventional landing operations linked so closely to the Corps and its history would be problematic anyway, given the ability of a major competitor like China to target the large conventional amphibious ships that are already criticized as having outlived their usefulness in their current form.

Something new is needed. Big ships, large units, and major facilities are increasingly thought of as targets. China is investing enormous sums in developing long-range, precision weaponry designed to attack and neutralize such things. Smaller, mobile, and low signature will be essential to success on future battlefields of all sorts, especially when operating within range of large numbers of enemy sensors and precision weapons.

## A Calculated Risk

It is true that the Corps' success is tied to the Navy's ability to field new classes of warships, small craft, and a variety of unmanned craft. The Navy should be doing this anyway. Lacking such capabilities means the Navy will be limited to operating in the deep blue oceans far from contested waters, the shallower and congested littorals becoming too hazardous. To the extent that the Navy cannot achieve its own fleet objectives, it is because of defense budget limitations, something Congress can correct if it determines that defeating enemies and defending security objectives globally are important enough to fund. Modern technology is driving warfare to small, low-signature, fast, unmanned, precise, and expendable. The Corps recognizes this, and General Berger has committed to gaining a first-mover advantage.

While China's capabilities are formidable, they are not insurmountable or limitless. They are known and therefore manageable. The Marine Corps is taking a necessary, calculated risk to create something the nation needs, which is what success in war is all about. Creating dilemmas for the enemy should always be the objective rather than having to always react to the enemy's initiative because one has no other options. The Corps seeks to regain the initiative so as to dictate the terms of battle.

The Corps' transformation derives from a brutally honest assessment of the realities of the modern battlefield and what it will take to win in combat against a capable enemy. The Commandant has boldly stepped forward to commit the Corps to breathing new life into American naval power, and the methodical approach he has initiated will rigorously test ideas and capabilities against the unforgiving reality of conducting actual operations in

real-world settings—no wishing away logistical support challenges or magically skipping ahead in time to have a force in place with all of its capabilities intact and suffering no losses due to enemy action.

Either the Marines will succeed in creating an inside force or they will not. While it remains to be seen how this plays out, we can know for certain that not trying at all will leave the U.S. with what it already has—an inability to meaningfully contest important terrain within the range of enemy fires.

The Corps has long prided itself on being “most ready when the Nation is least ready.”<sup>32</sup> The nation is currently least ready to challenge a modern, well-equipped major competitor like China on its home turf. The Corps is making the effort to live up to the standards and expectations it has set for itself, and, arguably, what the nation expects of it.

## Recommendations

To accomplish the objectives set forth by the Commandant of the Marine Corps to ensure the service is prepared to win its next battles, several actions are needed that include to:

- **Commit to the full acquisition objective for the F-35.** The Marine Corps should remain committed to acquiring the planned fleet of 420 aircraft. Per the Marine Corps’ own observations, combat losses will remain a feature of war. The revolutionary capabilities being brought into military operations by this aircraft will be important to the Corps’ success in distributed operations within the enemy’s weapons engagement zone.

Aircraft are easier to acquire at lowest cost when the production line is operating at high efficiency, which is the case at this moment. Once the line closes, it can be cost prohibitive, with a tremendous time penalty, to restart it should the demands of war require replacement of lost assets.<sup>33</sup> It is better to procure these aircraft now while funding, political support, and production efficiencies are high—rather than risk the loss of all of these advantages at some future point in time. Marines to fly them can be found, and the task will become easier if the country must commit itself to a war.

- **Maintain an aggressive outreach program.** The Commandant and senior leaders in the service have been very good at engaging key audiences such as Congress, the defense community, the broader

public community interested in national security matters, and defense industry partners. The Corps must continue to do this to keep everyone informed, engaged, and enthusiastic as budget pressures mount and competition for defense dollars increases.

Along with this is the importance of regular reports that convey the Corps' progress in working through its phases, finding solutions to challenges, integrating with the Navy to improve naval power projection capabilities, and working with the other services to share insights into new technologies, techniques, and force employment concepts.

- **Fund the Marine Corps at needed levels.** The Administration should request and Congress should provide the additional funding needed for the Corps to not only pursue its transformational program but to do so without sacrificing the capacity represented in the three active and two reserve infantry battalions it is sacrificing to free up needed capital. The Corps is making cuts to end strength and divesting of various capabilities in part because it does not have sufficient funds to keep them *and* introduce new capabilities it will need for success in future battles.

The Administration and Congress should ensure a level of funding commensurate with the evolving nature of operational and threat environments and the demands placed on the Corps to fulfill its role in securing national security interests per the National Defense Strategy. While divestment of specific platforms, such as tanks, tube artillery, and bridging, make sense given the geography involved and the need to lighten the Corps to make it more maneuverable, basic infantryman have always been the core of the Corps. Light infantry formations can be adapted to tactical realities by means of the equipment, weapons, and missions for which they are assigned and for which they train. Numbers will matter in a distributed-operations campaign, and if losses are to be expected, sufficient capacity to sustain operations will be essential.

- **Ensure that Navy shipbuilding programs and the evolution of the maritime distributed operations concept complement a mutual perspective for naval power projection into the contested littorals.** The U.S. Navy should fully account for new capabilities necessary to support the Corps' initiatives. The Navy is

working with the Marine Corps to develop solutions for movement, support, and operational exploitation of the force the Corps is building. New platforms will compete with the Navy's own requirements within its shipbuilding budget, which already must account for the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, Ford-class aircraft carrier, a new frigate program, and other ships the Navy is trying to acquire to increase the size and capabilities of its fleet.

The Navy should join the Marine Corps in making a very public case to Congress for why the new capabilities are essential to success in the next conflict and why, consequently, the Navy's shipbuilding program must be increased accordingly—so that other critical capabilities are not compromised or wholly sacrificed.

## Conclusion

The Corps is investing itself in developing new capabilities to ensure the U.S. does not have to cede any battlespace to an opponent, to cause as many problems as possible for an opponent, to make an opponent's effort harder rather than easier, to enable the projection of U.S. naval power into the toughest of situations, and to deny an enemy the ability to use the maritime environment without challenge. Its transition is appropriate, it is necessary—and it may very well be the key to success in the next war America faces.

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## Endnotes

1. U.S. Marine Corps, "Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century," September 2016, p. 8, <https://www.mcwl.marines.mil/Portals/34/Images/MarineCorpsOperatingConceptSept2016.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2020).
2. David H. Berger, "Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps," July 16, 2019, p. 1, [https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/%2038th%20Commandant%27s%20Planning%20Guidance\\_2019.pdf?ver=2019-07-16-200152-700](https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/%2038th%20Commandant%27s%20Planning%20Guidance_2019.pdf?ver=2019-07-16-200152-700) (accessed June 8, 2020).
3. In the wake of its defeat in World War I, Germany was left with a rump army and restricted by the Treaty of Versailles in what it could maintain. This drove General Hans von Seeckt, Chief of Staff of the German Army, to undertake a comprehensive review of "what went wrong." The reforms that came out of that process set the conditions for the development of *Blitzkrieg* and the German military that achieved stunning success in the opening days of World War II. See James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992). Later, the threat and promise of atomic weapons in the late 1940s and through the 1950s spurred the U.S. and others to make dramatic adjustments to their militaries, operational concepts, and national strategies.
4. For example, tanks are incredibly useful in warfare where the landscape supports their employment, but are less so when operating in mountains or jungle or if a force must be nimble in quickly moving small units around a littoral environment. Large units comprised of hundreds or thousands of Marines are essential for large-scale operations. But large units have a large signature, meaning the space they occupy, their movement and communications, and the logistical support they need make them more noticeable and easier to target by an enemy. Reducing the size of a unit reduces its signature, and smaller units are easier to move and to support.
5. Dakota L. Wood, "Rebuilding America's Military: The United States Marine Corps," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 211, March 21, 2019, pp. 22–24, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/rebuilding-americas-military-the-united-states-marine-corps>.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.
7. The Corps' experience in large-scale, sustained land operations occurred in Korea, Vietnam, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and throughout the 15–20-year duration of Operation Enduring Freedom and the post-invasion period of OIF.
8. David H. Berger, "Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future," War on the Rocks, December 5, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/notes-on-designing-the-marine-corps-of-the-future/> (accessed June 8, 2020).
9. David H. Berger and Ryan Evans, "A Chat with the Commandant: Gen. David H. Berger on the Marine Corps' New Direction," War on the Rocks, April 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/a-chat-with-the-commandant-gen-david-h-berger-on-the-marine-corps-new-direction/> (accessed June 8, 2020).
10. Dakota Wood and David H. Berger, "A Conversation with the Commandant: Designing a Force for Future War," The Heritage Foundation, October 3, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/conversation-the-commandant-designing-force-future-war>.
11. David H. Berger, "Force Design 2030," U.S. Marine Corps, March 26, 2020, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460> (accessed June 8, 2020).
12. See Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, May 18, 2010, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/airsea-battle-concept> (accessed June 8, 2020). The AirSea Battle (ASB) concept was a sophisticated approach to dealing with China's development of a complex layered defense. ASB recommended a comprehensive set of actions to blind, disrupt, and attrite the enemy, creating opportunities for U.S. and allied forces to defeat the components of the enemy's posture. Adopted by the Department of Defense for further development, but lacking any real support from the individual services, it was eventually renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons, an egregious case of bureaucracy killing a good idea through an indecipherable lexicon and parochial disinterest by the services. See J. Randy Forbes, "RIP AirSea Battle?" *The National Interest*, January 29, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/rip-air-sea-battle-12147> (accessed June 8, 2020).
13. Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2003, p. ii, <https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/2003.05.20-Anti-Access-Area-Denial-A2-AD.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2020). "[A]nti-access (A2) strategies aim to prevent US forces entry into a theater of operations...[and] area-denial (AD) operations aim to prevent their freedom of action in the more narrow confines of the area under an enemy's direct control."
14. This expansion does create a resource problem for the opponent in that the more area it seeks to control, the larger the force and more resources are needed to maintain control, to cover all of the ground, sea, and air space with surveillance and combat forces. This can create opportunities for the attacker, in that the attacker can analyze the region, probe for weaknesses, and settle on a few areas to exploit at a time of his choosing, whereas the defender must maintain awareness of the total area all of the time so as to be aware of attack. But ceding the area to the defender does enable him to harden his position and to create belts of defensive and offensive capability that the attacker must defeat, within which he can exploit control, freedom of movement, and lines of reinforcement.
15. Christopher G. Pernin et al., *Lessons from the Army's Future Combat Systems Program*, The RAND Corporation, 2012, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND\\_MG1206.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1206.pdf) (accessed June 8, 2020).
16. Berger, "Force Design 2030," p. 5.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
21. John Venable, "F-35 Is the World's Most Dominant Stealth Fighter," *The National Interest*, April 12, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/these-metrics-show-why-f-35-worlds-most-dominant-stealth-fighter-142847> (accessed June 8, 2020). Venable makes a more comprehensive case about the risks of deferring recapitalization in John Venable, "Rebuilding America's Military: The United State Air Force," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 223, March 26, 2020, pp. 28–31, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SR223.pdf>.
22. The F-35B is now being acquired for \$108 million per aircraft, while the F/A-18 costs \$69 million. For the costs of each F-35 model, see Valerie Insinna, "In Newly Inked Deal, F-35 Price Falls to \$78 Million a Copy," *Defense News*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/10/29/in-newly-inked-deal-f-35-prices-fall-to-78-million-a-copy/> (accessed June 8, 2020). For F/A-18 acquisition cost see U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Budget Estimates*, February 2020, Vol. 1-1, [https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/APN\\_BA1-4\\_BOOK.pdf](https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/APN_BA1-4_BOOK.pdf) (accessed June 8, 2020).
23. Berger, "Force Design 2030," pp. 8–12.
24. Criticism of the Corps' effort is best captured by the arguments made in Mark F. Cancian, "The Marine Corps' Radical Shift Toward China," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/marine-corps-radical-shift-toward-china> (accessed June 8, 2020); Mark Cancian, "Don't Go Too Crazy, Marine Corps," *War on the Rocks*, January 8, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/dont-go-too-crazy-marine-corps/> (accessed June 8, 2020); Dan Gouré, "Will Commandant Berger's Planning Guidance Mean the End of the Marine Corps?" *RealClear Defense*, December 13, 2019, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/12/13/will\\_commandant\\_bergers\\_planning\\_guidance\\_mean\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_marine\\_corps\\_114919.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/12/13/will_commandant_bergers_planning_guidance_mean_the_end_of_the_marine_corps_114919.html) (accessed June 8, 2020); Dan Gouré, "Marine Corps' Vision of Future Conflicts Will Require Improved Amphibious Forces," *RealClear Defense*, July 27, 2019, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/07/27/marine\\_corps\\_vision\\_of\\_future\\_conflicts\\_will\\_require\\_improved\\_amphibious\\_forces\\_114617.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/07/27/marine_corps_vision_of_future_conflicts_will_require_improved_amphibious_forces_114617.html) (accessed June 8, 2020); and Dan Gouré, "Will Commandant Berger's New Marine Corps Be a High-Tech Forlorn Hope?" *RealClear Defense*, April 1, 2020, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/01/will\\_commandant\\_bergers\\_new\\_marine\\_corps\\_be\\_a\\_high-tech\\_forlorn\\_hope\\_115166.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/04/01/will_commandant_bergers_new_marine_corps_be_a_high-tech_forlorn_hope_115166.html) (accessed June 8, 2020). John Vrolyk makes a more general comment on the nature of conflict with China, proposing that it will be low- rather than high-intensity warfare. See John Vrolyk, "Insurgency, Not War, Is China's Most Likely Course Of Action," *War on the Rocks*, December 19, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/insurgency-not-war-is-chinas-most-likely-course-of-action/> (accessed June 8, 2020).
25. Gouré, "Will Commandant Berger's Planning Guidance Mean the End of the Marine Corps?"
26. Russia's Kaliningrad oblast is host to a formidable array of anti-air and anti-ship weapons. The ability to range nearly all of the Baltic region with its S-400 air defense system and complementary anti-ship weapons means that Russia can threaten any effort by the U.S. to flow forces into northern Europe in defense of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland.
27. See Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran and the Changing Military Balance in the Gulf: Net Assessment Indicators," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 26, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-changing-military-balance-gulf-net-assessment-indicators> (accessed June 8, 2020).
28. With the exception of bases in Japan and South Korea. Both are within range of China's long-range weapons. U.S. forces stationed in South Korea are effectively tied down to contingency plans involving North Korea, this making them unlikely to be available for any crisis involving China. Some U.S. forces are based on Guam, but it is 1,400 nautical miles from Taiwan and South Korea, and 1,700 nautical miles from the South China Sea. See Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, p. 45, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf) (accessed June 8, 2020).
29. Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2020), p. 17, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength>.
30. See the U.S. Department of State's overview of the opening stages of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) at U.S. Department of State, "The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days," <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm> (accessed June 8, 2020). For insight into the medals awarded by the U.S. Department of Defense for servicemembers involved in the GWOT, see U.S. Army, "Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal GWOTEM and Global War on Terrorism Service Medal GWOTSEM," May 12, 2020, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/Global%20War%20on%20Terrorism%20Expeditionary%20Medal%20GWOTEM%20and%20Global%20War%20on%20Terrorism%20Service%20Medal%20GWOTSM> (accessed June 8, 2020).
31. Steven O. Bucci, "The Importance of Special Operations Forces Today and Going Forward," Heritage Foundation *Essay*, October 7, 2014, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-topical-essays/2015-essays/the-importance-special-operations-forces-today-and>.
32. U.S. Marine Corps, "Role of the United States Marine Corps," <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/ROLE%20OF%20THE%20U.S.%20MARINE%20CORPS%20web%5B1%5D.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2020). p.2
33. An excellent example of this is found in the case of the F-22 Raptor. The U.S. Air Force planned to acquire 750 F-22s as its frontline air-superiority fighter (an aircraft with the primary mission of shooting down other aircraft), but ended up purchasing only 187. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates determined that the aircraft was not needed given the absence of any peer-level threat, the primary focus of the U.S. at the time being aimed against terrorist groups in a sustained counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, and mounting costs of such military operations. As time passed, however, new challenges arrived, such as China and a resurgent Russia, each committing vast sums to modernizing their own militaries. Unfortunately, with the production line for the F-22 disassembled, analysts have concluded that restarting it would be extraordinarily expensive. See FlightGlobal's excellent overview, "In Focus: End of F-22 Production Closes Chapter in Eventful History," April 2, 2012, <https://www.flightglobal.com/in-focus-end-of-f-22-production-closes-chapter-in-eventful-history/104580.article> (accessed June 8, 2020), and U.S. Air Force, "F-22A Production Restart Assessment," Report to Congressional Committees, February 2017, pp. 5 and 11–12, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4452474-F-22A-Production-Restart-Assessment.html> (accessed June 8, 2020).