U.S. Marine Corps

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Introduction

The United States Marine Corps (USMC) serves as America's expeditionary force positioned for rapid response to international crises. The Corps delivers a unique capability to deploy on short notice with an inherent flexibility that is based on its employment of integrated Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs). After 20 years of counterinsurgency, the Marine Corps is four years into reorganizing itself to improve its ability to prevail against the military forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and challenges posed by other high-capability adversaries. This modernization is based in part on the F-35 Lightning fifth-generation aircraft, the MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aircraft, and the development of Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs).

Evaluated against the two existing requirements for the Marine Corps—to provide three Marine Expeditionary Units every day of the year and to support one major regional contingency (MRC)—the Marine Corps is evaluated as "strong" both overall and for capacity, capability, and readiness. The capacity rating is an increase from the *2024 Index of Military Strength* and is largely due to changing the unit of measure from single infantry battalions to composite MAGTFs and not measuring the Marine Corps against the other services' directive to support two MRCs.

However, capacity, capability, and readiness are all affected by a shortage of amphibious shipping, recurring budget uncertainty, and an austere recruiting environment. The shortages of amphibious shipping, sealift, long-distance transportation, and sustainment, while addressed in other chapters, particularly affect the Marine Corps but not to the point that they prevent the Corps from completing its assigned missions. Additionally, the technological gains being made by the PRC and other potential adversaries pose challenges to the entire Joint Force, not just the Marine Corps.

Service Overview

2025 marked the 250th anniversary of the United States Marine Corps. On November 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress directed that two battalions of Marines be established to seize and defend advanced naval bases. In the days of wooden sailing ships, the ability to go ashore to get fresh water and food was critical, as was the ability to board other ships and repel boarders, and the Marines were able to perform all of those essential tasks for the nascent United States Navy. Five months later, the Marines conducted their first amphibious landing, capturing cannons, muskets, and ammunition from the British garrison at Nassau in the Bahamas. George Washington would later use those captured arms and munitions against the British at the battles of Trenton and Lexington.

From that start, Marines have earned distinction in every American war. Their defense of Washington, DC, in the War of 1812 earned such respect from the British that, as a sign of admiration for fellow warriors, they did not burn the Commandant's house when they sacked the city. Marines served on both sides during the American Civil War and notably fought each other at both battles for Fort Fisher. The Marines seized key objectives in the 1898 Spanish–American War, and all remain today as part of America. World War I found the Marines assigned in desperation to the most difficult areas. Blanc Mont, Soissons, and Belleau Wood went from nearly lost causes to legendary Marine victories. For their tenacity at Belleau Wood, their adversaries named them "devil dogs" because they fought like hounds

U.S. MARINE CORPS AT A GLANCE

EST. 1775

MOTTO
***Semper Fidelis*, "Always Faithful"**

John Phelan
Secretary of Navy

Gen. Eric Smith
Commandant

MAJOR BASES

1. Camp Pendleton
2. MCAS Miramar
3. Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms
4. Marine Corps Air Station Yuma
5. MCB Quantico
6. Camp Lejeune
7. Camp Foster

CURRENT BUDGET

IN BILLIONS FOR FY 2025

$52.7

CURRENT PERSONNEL

ACTIVE-DUTY MILITARY

170,000

RESERVE MILITARY

33,000

CIVILIAN

18,000

KEY EQUIPMENT (estimated current inventory)

LAV-25 (488)

Amphibious Combat Vehicle (324)

JLTV (6,100)

M142 HIMARS (47)

NMESIS (18)

MV-22B Osprey (297)

F-35 (171)

F-18 (110)

MQ-9 Reapers (18)

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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from hell. The nickname remains today. World War II found the Marines adding to their renown with key victories at Guadalcanal, Saipan, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. The Korean War is famous for the Marines' actions at the Chosin Reservoir and the epic amphibious landing at Inchon. One of the high points of the Vietnam War was the Marines' successful Combined Action Program with their South Vietnamese allies. In the Persian Gulf War, the Marines captured the Kuwaiti airport while simultaneously conducting one of the largest amphibious feints in history. In Iraq, Marines liberated Baghdad, Tikrit, and Fallujah. In Afghanistan, Marines were again sent to and excelled in the most dangerous place on the planet at that time, Helmand Province.

Throughout its 250-year history, the United States Marine Corps has gone where others could not or would not go and has excelled in the most austere environments. It remains the nation's expeditionary force and ready to deploy again on short notice anywhere in the world, wherever America's enemies choose to threaten American interests. As the 34th Commandant of the Corps, General James T. Conway, has said, "The Greeks had their Spartans. The Romans had their Centurions. The French had their Imperial Guard. America has her Marines."[1]

Current Construct

The United States is a maritime nation, flanked by two oceans, and "the seas are the lifeblood of our economy, our national security, and our way of life."[2] The United States Marine Corps, in the words of 39th Commandant General Eric M. Smith, serves "as our Nation's expeditionary force in readiness and as its elite soldiers from the sea."[3] Consequently, many of the USMC's challenges are tied to the Navy's plan for amphibious shipping.

In 2020, 38th Commandant General David Berger realized that "the Marine Corps [was] not organized, trained, equipped, or postured to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment."[4] Accordingly, he directed that the Marine Corps' structure and capabilities be revised to ensure that the Corps was better aligned to support the National Defense Strategy and Defense Planning Guidance. Force Design 2030 directed change away from "20 years of operations in the Middle East" to "preparing to counter a near-peer adversary in the Indo-Pacific: China,"[5] an adversary that "continues to grow in capability, capacity, and boldness."[6] The essence of—and inherent challenge posed by—Force Design is "[a]ccepting near-term risk for long-term gain."[7]

Something that has not changed is that Marines prefer to deploy and fight as composite units known as Marine Air Ground Task Forces. A MAGTF is built around a ground combat unit with supporting aviation and logistics units and a command element (a single commander) over the top of the organization. When combined in this fashion, a MAGTF's effectiveness and combat power are more than the sum of its components, bringing a synergy of combined arms "to create single-battle effects."[8] "The greatest strength of this warfighting system," according to General Smith, "is its ability to be rapidly tailored-to-purpose and subsequently scaled in accordance with the changing operating environment or threat."[9] At the tactical level, MAGTFs are commanded by colonels (O6).

When these MAGTFs are assigned to Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs), they are known as Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs). MEUs have been called the "crown jewel" of the Marine Corps and are in high demand because they "respond to crises all over the globe and prevent crises from turning into a larger conflict."[10] MEUs form the primary source of strategic advantage to Combatant Commanders and assure allies and partners.[11] According to General Smith:

> When an ARG/MEU is not present, it puts Americans at risk.... [E]very time you have a gap, you as an American citizen, a gap in an ARG/MEU off the coast of Africa, you have to consider is now the time to take the safari to Kenya? Is now the time that I want to go into West Africa? America should not have to pick and choose what windows its citizens travel. It should be able to evacuate its citizens from war torn countries 24x7x365. And that's what we do as Marines.[12]

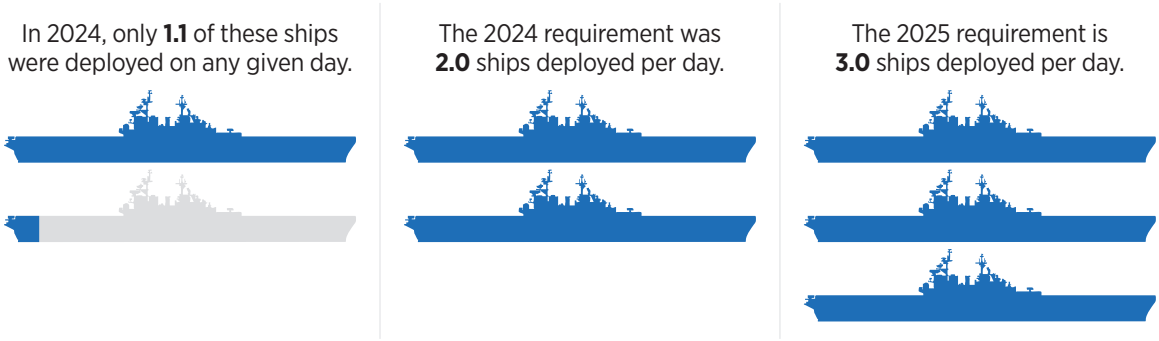
Challenges

Amphibious Shipping. If ARG/MEUs are "the coin of the realm,"[13] they are having some problems with exchange rates. Force Design 2030 (now known as Force Design) specifies that "[a]mphibious warfare ships are the cornerstone of maritime crisis response, deterring adversaries, and building partnerships."[14]

FIGURE 2

Amphibious Assault Ships: Availability vs. Requirement

The U.S. Navy has 9 amphibious assault ships (LHDs and LHAs) currently in inventory.



SOURCE: Lieutenant Colonel James W. Hammond III, "U.S. Marine Corps Year in Review," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Vol. 151/3/1,465, March 2025, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/march/us-marine-corps-year-review (accessed January 21, 2026).

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One of the main challenges the Marine Corps faces is the dearth of capable and reliable amphibious shipping. Other parts of this *Index* examine in detail how and why the United States is at this point and what a get-well plan could look like. With respect to the Marine Corps, "We can't employ what we don't have ready."[15] The Corps would benefit from more amphibious shipping and a level of maintenance that ensures its ability to meet existing, scheduled commitments.

Congress has "demonstrated its support for the Marine Corps" and its continued role in crisis response by establishing a minimum requirement of 31 amphibious ships: 10 Landing Ships, Helicopter Assault (LHA) or Landing Ships, Helicopter Dock (LHD) (known as "big decks") and 21 smaller Landing Ships, Platform Dock (LPD) and Landing Ships, Dock (LSD).[16] As General Smith has stated, anything less than 31 amphibious ships means "we risk being caught short when the Nation calls."[17] Yet the U.S. amphib program faces considerable challenges.

ARG/MEUs are designed to relieve each other "heel to toe," which means there always is an ARG/MEU on station in a particular part of the world, allowing no opportunity for a potential adversary. However, there are not enough amphibs ready to meet that requirement. For example, there was a gap of two months between ARG/MEUs in the Mediterranean in the spring of 2024.[18] Did this gap embolden Hamas in their continuing conflict with Israel? Did the lack of an MEU/ARG off the coast discourage the Israelis? It can't be known for certain, but deterrence and combat power have an effect, and their absence does as well.

In 2024, significant maintenance challenges affecting the USS *Boxer* (LHD-4) prevented the 15th MEU from deploying with its F-35 detachment, and maintenance issues affecting the USS *America* (LHA-6) similarly kept the 31st MEU from "fully support[ing] their presence and exercise commitments."[19]

Moreover, it looks as though the problem is going to become more serious. The challenge is twofold, and each aspect exacerbates the other: More ships are needed, and those that exist need better maintenance reliability. If maintenance reliability is not consistently maintained, we need more ships. If we don't have enough ships, we must cover the gap by increasing the use of our existing ships, which means extending the intervals between their scheduled maintenance.

An example of this shortage took place in 2024 when ARG/MEU deployments were only 50 percent of the Combatant Commanders' desired tempo; "of the eight amphibious assault ships (LHDs and LHAs) that form the core of deploying ARGs

from Norfolk, Virginia, and San Diego, California, on average, only 1.1 were deployed at any time during the year—less than the desired 2.0 and about 14 percent of the available CONUS-based force."[20] The 2025 requirement from the Geographic Combatant Commanders is 3.0, further underscoring these challenges.[21] As one analyst recently put it, amphibious ships form 64 percent of the Navy's remaining ship population that use antiquated, steam-powered technology from the 1980s.[22]

The drumbeat of warnings about the state of America's amphibious warships has been steady. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2024 that "[h]alf of the Navy's amphibious ships are in poor condition" and "not currently on track to meet their expected service lives," and the Navy "is likely to face difficulties meeting a statutory requirement to maintain a fleet size of at least 31 operational amphibious warfare ships between 2032 and 2040."[23] Additionally, "[i]n some cases, ships within the amphibious warfare fleet have not been available to support Marine Corps operations and training for years at a time."[24] The Commandant of the Marine Corps testified in April 2024 that "steady procurement for our amphibs is...the most vital thing...for our expeditionary warfighting capability."[25]

While the shortage of amphibious shipping is a Navy problem, the consequences fall on the Marine Corps. Accordingly, the Corps is working to mitigate the shortage of amphibs. One potential option is to construct Landing Ship Mediums (LSMs). However, because of concerns about costs and survivability requirements, the LSM program is not currently active.[26] As the Commandant recently put it, "This is a wicked, hard problem because we're trying to find the knee in the curve between affordability and utility. I don't want something that's affordable that I can't use."[27] The Corps is currently experimenting with another option: stern landing vessels.[28] The need for such a transportation capability has been described by General Smith:

> I've evacuated two embassies in my life. One in Monrovia, Liberia; and one in Freetown, Sierra Leone and they happen when they happen. They required evacuation and they required it immediately. When an ARG/MEU is not present, it puts Americans at risk. It puts the combatant commander at a disadvantage because he doesn't have a credible, capable combat force that's capable of spanning the ROMO—the Range of Military Operations.[29]

Aside from the obvious transportation and employment challenges that a lack of amphibious shipping represents, the Marine Corps faces an additional maritime challenge: sustainment. The Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) is a program of ships that are filled with Marine equipment, stationed around the world, and able to respond rapidly to crises. These preloaded ships in their forward locations shorten the time needed to transport and equip Marines and are organized in two squadrons, each of which can support a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) of up to 16,000 Marines for 30 days.[30]

The challenge comes in the reduction of squadrons and corollary lack of support to MEBs. Since 2014, the MPF fleet has been reduced from 16 ships to seven, and the result has been nearly a million square feet of lift reduction and the loss of an entire squadron. As the Marine Corps has three standing MEBs and can field nine other MEB-equivalent units on any given day, there is an MPF shortage of up to 10 squadrons. In the past, each of the three standing MEBs had its own dedicated MPF squadron of ready equipment. Congress should therefore fund the construction of a third MPF squadron (four ships) to ensure that each of the Marine Corps' existing MEBs has the equipment needed to respond on short notice to crises anywhere in the world.

Congressional Funding. The Marine Corps also faces other challenges, chief among them being consistent funding from Congress. Congress's recent habit of approving continuing resolutions instead of budgets has deleterious effects on all of the services, but it is particularly acute for the Marine Corps as it works to enact Force Design, modernize, and conduct ongoing operations simultaneously. By law, continuing resolutions limit spending to the previous year's level and prohibit "any *new activities* not funded in the previous fiscal year."[31]

General Smith has been consistent in his request that Congress pass a budget and not rely on continuing resolutions. In May 2024, for example, he appeared before the House Armed Services Committee and was asked, "what can Congress do to help?" His response: "Congressman, the steady, reliable funding is—is really important, frankly.

When we go into…continuing resolutions…we have to spend at last year's rate. And…all of our advancements are in the current year." This "retards…our progress and it slows us down."[32]

In January 2025, he told a group of journalists that "[w]ith a continually delayed budget we're losing years on force design.… Whenever we have Continuing Resolutions we're capped at the previous year's spending numbers, and that doesn't get you ahead of the pacing threat of the PRC who is moving at a cyclic rate."[33] And in April 2025, he told the Sea-Air-Space Symposium that "we need predictable, on-time funding that only Congress can provide. Meaning, continuing resolutions aren't continuing anything, *they stop our progress*."[34] The 2026 Congress appears to be willing to address this liability.

The problem takes on a generational focus when one realizes that Congress has not passed a budget in seven of the past 15 fiscal years.[35] How many of those years were consecutive? If a continuing resolution limits spending to last year's amount and last year we had a continuing resolution, are we four years behind the PRC's military investment or seven? While Congress has authorized $1 billion more than the Marine Corps requested in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year (FY) 2025,[36] robust appropriations are necessary to meet Marine Corps requirements. Congress's addiction to continuing resolutions must stop; it must pass the budget and appropriate the money the Marine Corps needs to do what Congress told it to do.

Recruiting. Not unique to the Marine Corps but perhaps affecting it more because of the Corps' higher physical standards for entry, fewer Americans are qualified to enter the military. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Defense found that 77 percent of Americans who were 17–24 years old were not eligible for military service because of "being overweight, medical/physical disqualifiers, and mental health;" also discouraging, these trends appear to be increasing with the largest change over a 10-year period being in mental health.[37] Not only are fewer people eligible to join the Marine Corps, but fewer people are even *interested* in joining the Corps (or other services). The Commandant of the Marine Corps recently explained the problem:

> What I know is you can't recruit a hundred percent of your force from [5[38]] percent of your population. The math just doesn't work. The propensity to serve is going down. It is going down. That's a fact. And that's an annual study, an annual survey that asks young people, would you consider the military as a career. That number is going down. Again, what I know is you can't get 100 percent of your force from [5] percent of the population. That math just doesn't work.…[39]

General Smith summed up the challenge succinctly: "Recruiting is existential to our Corps. If we don't recruit, then we don't have Marines, end of story."[40] The Marine Corps made its 2025 recruiting objectives and is on its way to making the 2026 goals, but the environment remains challenging.

Keeping Pace with Potential Adversaries' Developments. On top of these internal-to-America challenges, the Marine Corps must keep up with and prepare to defeat potential adversaries. In his last speech as Secretary of the Navy, Carlos Del Toro highlighted that the PRC, Russia, and Iran have all made "consistent strides" in their unmanned attack capability investment and that the Marine Corps and Navy team "must continue to do the same."[41] Current Secretary of the Navy Richard Phelan has said that America is operating "in one of the most dangerous strategic environments in our nation's history."[42] The Marine Corps Commandant has echoed these views:

> Every day the PRC practices illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive tactics designed to slowly erode the international rules-based order and advance its own revisionist view of the world. The counter to these tactics requires a whole-of-government approach, in which our expeditionary forces play a critical role through campaigning, deterrence, rapid response to crisis, and contributing to joint and combined combat operations.[43]

At the close of 2024, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) launched its first big deck amphibious ship with great celebration.[44] This capability will be central to any PRC invasion of Taiwan.

Keeping pace with adversaries' development remains a necessary task for the United States Marine Corps. The PRC is both rapidly developing technological advantages and rehearsing their application. The Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

(INDOPACOM), Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, testified in April 2025 that:

> China continues to pursue unprecedented military modernization and increasingly aggressive behavior that threatens the U.S. homeland, our allies, and our partners. China is developing and integrating cutting-edge technologies—AI, hypersonic and advanced missiles, and space-based capabilities—at an alarming pace. China's anti-access/area denial capabilities are designed to prevent U.S. forces from operating within the first and second island chains. China is outpacing the U.S. in testing not only these critical technologies but also technologies from across their military industrial base.[45]

Similarly, "[the PRC's] aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises—they are dress rehearsals for forced unification. The PLA [People's Liberation Army] escalated military pressure against Taiwan by 300% in 2024."[46]

According to General Smith, "there's a saying... that if America sends her Army, they're going to change your zip code. We're just going to change your attitude if you send the Marines. They're there to change your attitude."[47] The Marine Corps is working to change the PRC's attitude about invading Taiwan. Other parts of this *Index* address the propensity of the Chinese to take what they want, coerce access under the guise of short-term payments, export their population to areas of interest to exert majority control, and disregard international laws and norms. When this becomes more than America and her allies are willing to stand, the United States Marine Corps likely will be called in to correct China's attitude. "What I do know," says General Smith, "is [that] every time you give China a foot they take a mile. They only understand one thing, which is a credible deterrent force. And that credible deterrent force has to be present to win, which to me means being in the First Island Chain."[48]

Admiral Paparo knows that China, Russia, and North Korea are cooperating and consequently increasing security threats in the Pacific.[49] Specifically, "China has provided 70% of the machine tools and 90% of the legacy chips to Russia to help Moscow 'rebuild its war machine.'"[50] Even "[m]ore troubling...is North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia. North Korea has supplied Russia with ballistic missiles, rockets, and thousands of containers of munitions since late 2022 to support Russia's war against Ukraine. North Korea expanded its support in October 2024 with at least 12,000 combat forces."[51]

Capacity

Former Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal has been quoted as saying that "[i]n the last and final analysis, it is the guy with the rifle and machine gun who wins the war and pays the penalty to preserve our freedom."[52] In past issues of the *Index*, the number and size of infantry battalions have been used as a measure of capacity. While infantry battalions remain important, perhaps a better measure of capacity are the MAGTFs that can be built around those infantry battalions.

There are 22 infantry battalions in the Marine Corps active-duty force.[53] Two of these, in the 3rd and 12th Marine Littoral Regiments, are constructed differently. Most of the Marine infantry battalions have 811 people in them and include specialists to conduct "persistent all-weather surveillance," "anti-armor and indirect fire," and "organic support and services."[54] The two outliers are in the Marine Littoral Regiments and named Littoral Combat Teams (LCTs). They are about the same size as typical infantry battalions but have their own engineer, reconnaissance, and surveillance platoons and a medium missile battery.[55] MAGTFs are built around these infantry-type battalions.

The aviation element of a MAGTF is purpose-built around attack and heavy lift helicopters (AH-1Z Vipers and CH-53E/K Super or King Stallions); long-range medium lift tilt-rotor aircraft (MV-22 Ospreys); long-range refueler and transport aircraft (C-130 Super Hercules), which support from ashore or are assigned to land-based MAGTFs; and fixed wing attack aircraft (AV-8B Harriers, F-18C/D Hornets, and F-35B/C Lightning). New to the Marine Corps inventory since the 2024 edition of the *Index* is the multi-role, attack, and reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicle (MQ-9A Reaper).

Logistics elements of MAGTFs are frequently purpose-built and come in three types. Combat Logistic Battalions (CLBs) that support MEUs and their (mostly) scheduled deployments are standing headquarters with specialists and capability

sourced from Marine Logistic Groups (MLGs). These are known as "double-digit" CLBs (CLB-11, 22, 31, etc., named to match their supported MEUs). MLGs are commanded by brigadier generals and include battalions of specialists across all functions of logistics. Seven double-digit CLBs are commanded by lieutenant colonels. Seven single-digit CLBs average around 625 people and conduct direct logistic support to infantry regiments (whose name they match: CLB-5 goes with 5th Marines, for example). Two other logistic battalions are part of the Marine Littoral Regiments and are designated Littoral Logistics Battalions.[56]

Adding to the Corps' capacity is the Marine Corps Reserve (MARFORRES). The Marine Corps uses its reserve as a true operational reserve: to mitigate gaps or reinforce success by "augmenting and reinforcing the Active Component with trained units and individual Marines."[57] MARFORRES includes eight infantry battalions,[58] four CLBs,[59] and nine assorted squadrons of Super Cobras and Vipers, Super Stallions, Ospreys, and Hornets.[60]

Based on these numbers, the Marine Corps has the capacity to produce seven MEUs and nine other regiment-level MAGTFS simultaneously (counting the two MLRs as standing MAGTFs) with an ability to surge four more from the reserves. Regimental-level MAGTFs are defined as a colonel commander with an infantry battalion, a logistics support battalion of whatever type, and a composite squadron of the necessary aircraft. Current Marine Corps capacity is 16 simultaneous MAGTFs with a surge capability to 20.

Aside from the shortage of amphibious shipping, this meets the Combatant Commanders' stated requirement of a 3.0-MEU presence[61] and the ability to address one MRC. The problem, as General Smith has said, is that "there is one thing everyone wants more of: Our Marines."[62] The FY 2025 NDAA caps the Corps at 172,300 active-duty Marines, the same number authorized in the FY 2024 NDAA, and 32,500 reserve Marines, 500 more than authorized in the FY 2024 NDAA.[63]

Capability

The Marine Corps' prowess in combat is both legendary and historic. The reasons for this were aptly summed up many years ago by former Assistant Commandant General Michael Williams:

> No Service executes operationally better than the Marine Corps. In my opinion we are the best in the world at putting combined arms forces into the field with speed and precision. Once we are committed, we execute. Our reputation is that we can deliver on our promises. That's why the Combatant Commanders want Marines. I attribute this excellence to our expeditionary mindset. We arrive ready to go to work. We can sustain ourselves with what we bring to the fight. This is not a slam on any other Service. We cannot do what the Army or the Air Force do; but what we *can* do, we do better than any other force. Operational excellence is a hallmark of our Corps.[64]

At the same time, however, as the former chief executive officer of both The Home Depot and Chrysler has said, "the things that can derail us are arrogance and complacency. This isn't Hollywood; we don't get paid royalties for something that we already did."[65] Thus, the Marine Corps is working to avoid complacency and improve its lethality and effectiveness: It is not "watch[ing] warfare evolve—it is driving it forward."[66] "Investment is necessary," according to General Smith, "but innovation is mandatory."[67]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "capability" as "the ability or qualities necessary to do something" and "the power or weapons a country has for war or military action."[68] Both definitions fit this discussion because the Marine Corps "does not have the luxury of focusing on a single threat, to the exclusion of all others."[69]

At the heart of any discussion of Marine Corps capability is the trade-off between capability and capacity: trading quantity for quality or "more" for "more capable." Generally, but consistently, Marine Corps leaders have chosen to trade on the side of "more capable but less of." Could the Marine Corps be more capable if it had more widgets? Probably. Could it have more capacity if it had more Marines? Absolutely. But the Marine Corps, with congressional endorsement, has chosen to structure itself as an eminently capable but relatively small force. The Corps is working to increase its capability by increasing the range of weapons systems, lowering electronic signatures, increasing lethality, and becoming more distributed and dispersed in its operations.[70] According to General Smith:

> To fight and win against a peer adversary, combined arms must now be all-domain, incorporating effects in and from cyberspace, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum.... This challenge will require a greater proliferation of capabilities that can provide those all-domain effects down to the lowest level. This requirement includes autonomous systems; precision fires; intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting (ISR-T); integrated command and control; and increased ground and maritime mobility.[71]

The Marine Corps tackles the capability-vs.-capacity trade-off by investing in select technologies and concepts to become more lethal and survivable. Marine Littoral Regiments, for example, are well on their way to becoming the most capable of MAGTFs. MLRs are designed to survive and thrive in the Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ) with their organic air defense battalion, precision long-range fires, and anti-ship missile batteries. Littoral Anti-Air Battalions have the Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS), which is built around a pair of Joint Light Tactical Vehicles, one with a turret-launched Stinger anti-aircraft missile and the other with the necessary radars, optics, and communications equipment. MADIS provides a "credible, integrated, layered defense against threats from unmanned aerial systems, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and cruise missiles."[72] For threats with smaller cross sections (rockets, mortars, and artillery), the Corps uses a Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR).[73] In 2024, the Marine Corps deployed the G/ATOR system on a Japanese island only 68 miles from Taiwan in "the kind of presence that gets noticed."[74]

In addition to the reinforced infantry battalion, an MLR has its own long-range strike capability in the form of HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) and the Navy–Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS). HIMARS has a range of more than 300 miles,[75] and NMESIS can hold ships at risk from a distance of 100 miles.[76] In April 2025, the Marine Corps sent NMESIS "into the heart of one of the world's most strategic and tense bodies of water—the Luzon Strait," 220 miles from Taiwan, as part of the 40th anniversary of exercise BALIKATAN with the Philippines.[77] The exercise included live fire and a ship sinking exercise (SINKEX), and Marine Corps Forces Pacific Commander Lieutenant General James Glynn described it as a "full battle test...intended to take into consideration all of the regional security challenges that we face today, beginning with the South China Sea."[78]

As former Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro told the House Armed Services Committee, "Our Marines need to move around long distances...in the Pacific as well as island to island and we need to give them the capabilities to do so."[79] In April 2025, the Congressional Research Service advised that the Landing Ship Medium "remains a critical requirement."[80]

The Marine Corps is increasing its aviation capability by adding two aircraft to every F-35 squadron with associated pilots and maintenance personnel.[81] Additionally, the Corps in 2025 positioned MQ-9 Reapers in all three Marine Aircraft Wings for worldwide availability.[82] As General Smith has stated, the Corps' Reaper capability "is growing quickly."[83]

Reinforcing General Smith's point that innovation is mandatory, the Deputy Commandant for Aviation has stated that "linear incremental change will not be sufficient"[84] and has directed investment in logistics, unmanned platforms, and aircraft survivability as well as manned-unmanned teaming in which pilots control detachments of unmanned aircraft and that send their sensor data to the pilots of manned aircraft. The challenge for the Corps continues to be "balancing crisis response and modernization," particularly in aviation.[85]

The Marine Corps is working to improve its capability in the logistics arena as well. Marines are modernizing and certifying World War II airfields in the Pacific[86] and investing in "unmanned platforms that support logistics."[87]

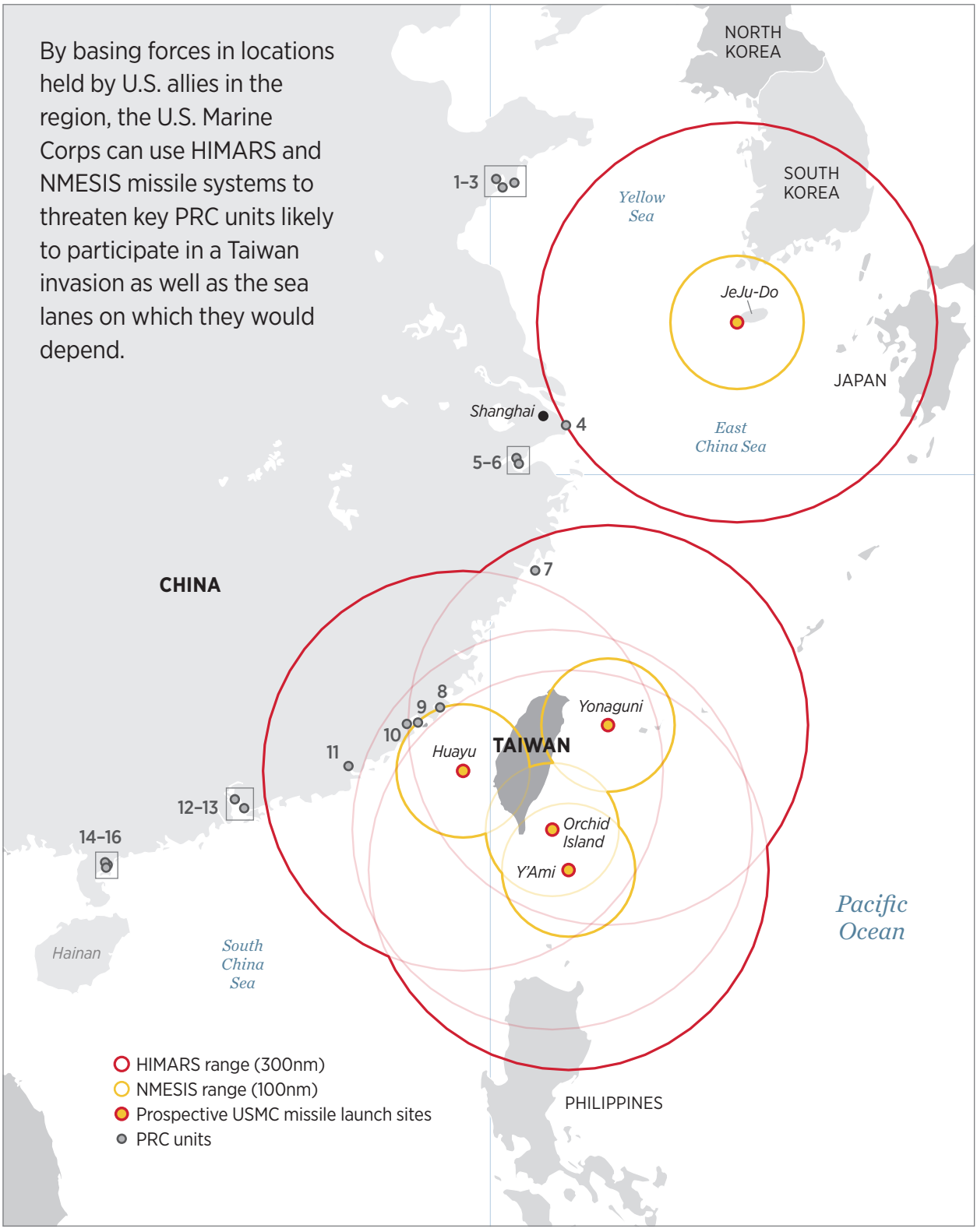
It is also worth noting that the Marine Corps has increased its portfolio investment in classified capabilities by 435 percent over the past four years.[88] These capabilities enhance the ability of the Corps to fight inside the WEZ, accelerate force modernization, and keep pace with rapidly changing battlefield technologies and "will only be apparent to our adversaries at a time and place of our own choosing."[89]

Readiness

As noted in 1997 by former Congressman Floyd Spence (R–SC), "The Marine Corps has followed congressional direction that it 'remain most ready

MAP 15

USMC Precision Missile Ranges and Likely PRC Participants in Defense of Taiwan Scenario (Page 1 of 2)



USMC Precision Missile Ranges and Likely PRC Participants in Defense of Taiwan Scenario (Page 2 of 2)

PRC UNITS

1 5th Marine Brigade
2 6th Marine Brigade
3 1st Landing Ship Group
4 5th Landing Ship Flotilla
5 5th Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
6 124th Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
7 3rd Landing Ship Group
8 3rd Marine Brigade
9 14th Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
10 91st Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
11 4th Marine Brigade
12 1st Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
13 125th Amphibious Combined Arms Brigade
14 1st Marine Brigade
15 2nd Marine Brigade
16 6th Landing Ship Flotilla

PROSPECTIVE USMC MISSILE LAUNCH SITES

Yonaguni—Westernmost Japanese island
Y'Ami—Northernmost Philippine island
Orchid Island—Easternmost Taiwanese island
Huayu—Westernmost Taiwanese island
JeJu-Do—Southernmost Republic of Korea island

SOURCES: Andrew S. Erickson, Conor M. Kennedy, and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *Chinese Amphibious Warfare: Prospects for a Cross-Strait Invasion* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2024), p. xxi; Lockheed Martin, "HIMARS: The Long-Range, Mobile, Precision Fires Launcher," https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/products/himars.html (accessed January 21, 2026); and Raytheon, "Naval Missile Strike," https://www.rtx.com/raytheon/what-we-do/sea/naval-strike-missile (accessed January 21, 2026).

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when the nation is least ready.'"[90] Readiness is a function of how much, how frequently, and how quickly a capability needs to be repaired so that it can complete its assigned tasks. The Department of War has a standardized readiness reporting system, the outputs of which are necessarily classified.[91] It is helpful to understand that (1) the department measures readiness in general terms of resources and training and (2) the best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago, but the second-best time is today. With those concepts in mind, readiness can be defined as what you need to do today to fight today, continue to fight tomorrow, and fight again in the future.

Aviation. The Air Force tends to care only about "flying things," the Army evaluates its rotary-wing aircraft in terms of its appropriately preeminent ground combat mission, and the Navy has a high-yield aviation component but must split its focus to include the priority of "floating things." Only for the Marine Corps is the combination of air and ground power the focus of the optimal way to fight. Accordingly, aviation successes and concerns are essential to measuring Marine Corps readiness, and the F-35 aircraft is key to the readiness score. By the end of 2025, the Marine Corps will have taken delivery of 65 percent of its Program of Record allotment of F-35B (Vertical/Short Takeoff and Landing capable) and 37 percent of its F-35Cs (tailhook capable) for a total of 183 F-35B and 52 F-35C aircraft.[92] These will fill out two training squadrons and 11 fleet squadrons.[93] The F-35 now supports all MEU deployments from Japan and the West Coast that previously used AV-8B Harriers.[94]

The Marine Corps also flies F-18s and is phasing out its remaining AV-8Bs. "The Marine Corps F/A-18 inventory includes 161 F/A-18 aircraft," and Fleet Marine Force "will maintain four active squadrons and one reserve squadron through the end of FY25."[95] The Marine Corps has 39 AV-8Bs in two squadrons at Cherry Point, North Carolina, and both squadrons are scheduled to complete transition to F-35 squadrons by 2026.[96] Harrier squadrons support the East Coast MEUs and will continue to do so "until the platform's operational sunset in FY26."[97]

The KC-130J refueling aircraft is a critical enabler for forward deployed MAGTFs across all Combatant Commands; it increases MAGTF

mobility and enhances logistical capacity by operating from austere airfields.[98] "As the sole Marine Corps tactical fixed wing lift and aerial refueling platform," according to the Marine Corps Aviation Plan (AVPLAN), "demand for KC-130Js will remain high."[99] The 75 KC-130Js currently in the Marine Corps inventory are allocated in four active-duty squadrons, one reserve squadron, and one test squadron.[100] The Corps has 80 percent of its allocated KC-130Js and will receive the remainder by 2027.[101]

With respect to the Corps' rotary-wing aircraft, MV-22s and CH-53Ks provide transportation ability, and the AH-1Z viper provides close fire support. "The MV-22 Osprey provides medium lift assault support to ground forces in multiple theaters of operation from expeditionary sites and afloat. It also provides unmatched operational flexibility due to its combination of speed, range, payload, and aerial refueling capability."[102] MV-22B squadrons have conducted 109 operational deployments and flown over 588,000 flight hours since 2007. The MV-22 flies "approximately twice as many flight hours per year as any other Marine Corps rotary-wing aircraft."[103] There are 360 MV-22s across 15 active squadrons, two reserve squadrons, and assorted training squadrons.[104]

The CH-53K heavy lift helicopter's range and payload capacity are three times as great as those of its predecessor.[105] The Marine Corps has 127 CH-53K aircraft of 200 programmed with delivery of all 200 to be completed in 2032.[106] They are allocated in six active-duty squadrons, one reserve squadron, and assorted test and training squadrons.[107] The Corps' 349 AH-1Z Vipers are allocated in six active-duty squadrons, one reserve squadron, and the usual test and training squadrons.[108]

A recent addition to the Marine Corps' aviation capability is the MQ-9 Reaper. The Corps' 2025 Aviation Plan explains that "Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) have become essential assets as a force multiplier in modern military operations."[109] General Smith has said that "[w]e still don't have the volume of them we need, but…the MQ-9 is a vital part of our future."[110] One of the Secretary of the Navy's announced priorities is to "push for more investment in uncrewed systems and enabler technologies—such as autonomy, mission systems and communications—for manned-unmanned teaming by the Navy and jointly with the other military services."[111]

The MQ-9 Reaper is larger and more capable than the older and more famous MQ-1 Predator.[112] The Marine Corps has two active-duty squadrons of MQ-9s and one training squadron for a total of 12 aircraft with 20 more to be delivered by 2026.[113] Starting in 2029, the MQ-9s will be equipped with a "Detect and Avoid System,"[114] which is important because Houthis have shot down more Air Force MQ-9s in Yemen since October of 2023 than the Marine Corps has in its entire inventory.[115] The current Secretary of the Navy noted this fact during his confirmation hearing.[116]

Finally, the aviation community is not exempt from a shortage of appropriate shipping. The two existing aviation support logistics vessels (SS *Wright* and SS *Curtis*) are currently beyond their expected service lives and not planned for retirement until 2030–2033.[117] The Marine Corps has levied a requirement but will face "a critical shortfall" if they are not replaced.[118]

Personnel and Training. People remain the most valuable resource in organizations, and training is one of the best ways to enhance their contributions. The Marine Corps is modernizing and increasing the technical capabilities of its personnel, and the costs go beyond equipment price tags. Marine aviation adds an exponential level of capability to the MAGTFs, but it also adds complexity. Marines need to be trained to operate in complex environments. Similarly, expertise in the multi-domain, data-centric world of autonomous vehicles, satellite communications, cyber operations, and the requirements of massively distributed operations working inside a WEZ demonstrates a "mastery of…evolution in warfare" and allows Marines to "punch above our weight class."[119] As the Marine Corps as a whole and particularly its aviation component become more data-centric and data-enabled, this change will require "investment in infrastructure, personnel, and training"[120] and "a greater proliferation of capabilities that can provide those all-domain effects down to the lowest level."[121]

In 2020, recognizing training's impact on readiness, the Marine Corps elevated its Training and Education Command (TECOM) to a Lieutenant General–level command reporting directly to the Commandant.[122] If the Marine Corps has 18 lieutenant generals, then its investment in training and education represents 6 percent of the

total responsibility the Corps entrusts to its senior leadership.

TECOM has adjusted the training pipeline so that Marines will be better prepared and able to get to their units more rapidly with the necessary qualifications for all-domain operations.[123] The TECOM annual report explains that the Marine Corps does "not have the luxury to wait for the final answers" as it manages "fight tonight" while simultaneously developing new capabilities.[124] It is changing the training and education model to "develop experienced warfighters who are experts in multi-domain and all-domain combined arms" faster.[125]

This rapid maturation is occurring because TECOM is moving away from the "sage on the stage" historical model of platform instruction and "instead developing coaching and mentoring skills for instructors to serve as a 'guide on the side.'"[126] Specifically, TECOM is using technology to maximize instructors' student contact time[127] in order to "mature Marines' technical and leadership skills faster" while providing "them with increased opportunities to think, decide, and act earlier in their careers."[128] To this end, the Corps has launched a pilot program to deploy "digital transformation teams" to accelerate the adoption of "emerging technology."[129]

"[Q]ualified Marines remain key to our ability to meet operational requirements," and "[we] need to ensure the right Marine with the proper training and qualifications arrives to the right unit on time."[130] Marine talent managers fill aviation needs based on the Type/Model/Series (TMS) of aircraft; skillsets and the Marines who possess them are not interchangeable. An Osprey mechanic cannot work on the avionics in an F-35, and an F-18 pilot's qualifications are different from those of a CH-53 pilot. To ensure that each TMS is properly staffed with the necessary skills and experience, Marine Aviation is "reestablish[ing] a manpower analysis branch."[131]

A tiny subset of Marine Corps personnel is made up of its General Officers (GOs). At the beginning of 2025, according to the Defense Manpower Data Center, the Marine Corps had three four-star generals (two are permanent as the Commandant and Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps,[132] and the third is a rotational joint assignment currently filled by a Marine as Combatant Commander of United States Africa Command) and 18 three-star lieutenant generals.[133] As a means of comparison, the Army has more two-star GOs (92) than the Marine Corps has total GOs (88). The Marine Corps' 88 GOs form 0.0001 percent of the total active-duty force in comparison to the other, larger services, in each of which GOs account for 0.0002% of the total force.[134]

Contested Logistics. A large part of readiness is logistics, which involves replacing, repairing, refueling, rearming, and remanning and the necessary transportation to get it all where it needs to be when it needs to be there. Logistics cannot be faked; these skills must be performed daily, whether at peace or at war. According to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, "[t]he ability to conduct logistics in a contested environment will underwrite the success of any future naval campaign."[135] Meeting logistics requirements in a counter-intervention environment therefore remains a Marine Corps priority that "will require a combination of solutions" from across the Joint Force, allies, and partners and "will take a monumental effort across all the services."[136]

The Marine Corps is experimenting with "over a dozen new manned and unmanned technologies and potential future capabilities focused on enabling logistics in a contested environment."[137] Other operational experiments include maximizing use of the CH-53K's heavy lift capability; stern landing vessels; the Tactical Resupply Unmanned Aircraft System (TRUAS); the Medium Aerial Resupply Vehicle for Expeditionary Logistics (MARV-EL); and an autonomous low-profile vessel.[138]

The TRUAS system "can detect obstacles along a delivery route without prior knowledge of the terrain" to "deliver supplies to limited-access environments."[139] It has a range of nine kilometers with a speed of 50 knots and can carry a payload of 120 pounds.[140] The 120 pounds of cargo is not coincidental: It is how much four cans of 5.56 ammunition weigh. The Marine Corps continues to plant trees for the future and is focused on readiness. As former Marine Forces Pacific Commander Lieutenant General Victor Krulak has cautioned, "being ready is not what matters. What matters is winning after you get there."[141]

Scoring the U.S. Marine Corps

Capacity Score: Strong

This score is raised from "weak" in the *2024 Index* to "strong" based on the following calculus. Two stated, simultaneous requirements exist for the Marine Corps. The first is to provide a 3.0-MEU presence for the Combatant Commanders.[142] It takes seven colonel-led MAGTFS built around infantry battalions to meet this obligation. The second requirement is to support one MRC. (The other military services are evaluated against a two-MRC construct.)

The 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) has been designated as responsible for an MRC.[143] The ground combat element of I MEF is the 1st Marine Division (1MARDIV). 1MARDIV has 12 infantry battalions used as components to generate four colonel-led MAGTFs.[144] Therefore, these four MAGTFs are required to meet the Marine Corps' requirements for one MRC. Seven colonel-led MAGTFs (built around seven infantry battalions) complete the MEU requirement, and four MAGTFs (built around 12 infantry battalions) to address an MRC yield a commitment of 11 colonel-led MAGTFs to meet the Marine Corps' twin requirements of supporting one MRC and three simultaneous MEUs deployed every day around the world. This calculus accounts for 19 of the Marine Corps' 22 active-duty infantry battalions.

Two of those remaining are assigned to the colonel-led MLRs (which need an aviation squadron assigned to it to be counted as a "MAGTF"), yielding one unobligated active-duty infantry battalion to add to the eight reserve battalions around which other MAGTFs could be built as needed to contribute to surge operations. The Marine Corps currently has the capacity to meet its two designated tasks.

Capability Score: Strong

The Marine Corps' Capability score remains the same as the *2024 Index* assessment. This assessment is based on the Corps' modernization efforts and investment in critical weapons, technologies, and platforms. The Marine Corps has not yet missed any requirement levied on it by Combatant Commanders and is extremely averse to doing so in the future.

It is important to note that while the Marine Corps is disadvantaged by a lack of amphibious shipping and other transportation and sustainment challenges, it remains capable of accomplishing its assigned missions. The Marine Littoral Regiments are a key factor in maintaining and increasing the Corps' capability as are increases in the numbers and redistribution of F-35s, MQ-9s, and CH-53Ks. As the 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Lemuel Shepherd, once explained:

> [T]he Marines…apply the old maxim: "Bite off more than you can chew—then chew it; promise more than you can do—then do it." It is this challenge and the Marines' ability to meet it that…[enables them to serve] as the nation's basic ready-to-act military organization, responsive specifically and directly to the President's call to meet the crises which occur in both peace and war.[145]

Readiness Score: Strong

This score is determined by the quality and effectiveness of the Marine Corps' personnel, equipment, training, and operational execution. It remains the same as in the *2024 Index*. The Marine Corps has upgraded its aviation fleet, has added new capability with the MQ-9 Reaper, and is addressing head-on the challenge of conducting logistics functions inside a WEZ. The Marine Corps is aggressively improving resilience in both units and individuals while continuing to maintain its traditions of rigorous unit training and high personal standards.

Overall Score: Strong

The Marine Corps' overall score is strong. The Marine Corps is comfortable in its assigned role within the Joint Force, knows its capabilities and gaps, and is actively enhancing its strengths and mitigating challenges. The paired ability of maintaining MEUs and standing up other, purpose-built and event-driven regimental-level MAGTFs allows Combatant Commanders enormous flexibility in responding to, shaping, and deterring world events. Although the MLRs are explicitly focused on the Pacific, their capability and "right fit for the problem set" have led Congress to ask whether they might be equally effective in other theaters as well.[146]

U.S. Military Power: Marine Corps

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity				✓	
Capability				✓	
Readiness				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

ABOUT THE ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES

OVERALL ASSESSMENT. The overall assessment of a military service is measured against its ability to perform its respective role in a two-major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. The assessment of the U.S. Marine Corps is sized against a single major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. This benchmark is the *minimum* standard for U.S. hard-power capacity with the understanding that maintenance, operational tempo, training cycles, crisis response, treaty commitments, and/or strategic reserve considerations can cause some forces to be unavailable. Other factors that influence this assessment are the availability of logistical support to enable combat power (fueling ships, supply ships, cargo aircraft, etc.) and the ability to reconstitute combat power for protracted conflict (defense industrial base capacity, etc.).

CAPACITY. The U.S. military must have a sufficient quantity of the right capability or capabilities to meet its mission sets. Capacity (numbers) can be viewed in at least three ways:

- Compared to a stated objective for each category by each service,
- Compared to amounts required to complete various types of operations across a wide range of potential missions as measured against a potential adversary, and
- As measured against a set benchmark for total national capability.

CAPABILITY. Examining the capability of a military force requires consideration of:

- The proper tools (material and conceptual) with the design, performance characteristics, technological advancement, and suitability that the force needs to perform its function against an enemy successfully;
- The sufficiency of armored vehicles, ships, airplanes, and other equipment and weapons needed to win against the enemy;
- The appropriate variety of options to preclude strategic vulnerabilities in the force and give flexibilities to battlefield commanders; and
- The degree to which elements of the force reinforce each other in covering potential vulnerabilities, maximizing strengths, and gaining greater effectiveness through synergies that are not possible in narrowly stovepiped, linear approaches to war.

READINESS. While capacity and capability considerations are central to the warfighting ability of the U.S. military, readiness performs a crucial role in determining whether combat power is prepared when it is needed. Factors that are considered include (among others):

- Sufficient staffing levels,
- Fulfillment of training requirements, and
- Age and maintenance of equipment.

Conclusion

The 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, was famous for saying, "The two most important things the Marine Corps does for America [are] make Marines and win battles."[147] The 39th Commandant, General Eric Smith, has said, "We became Marines to do hard things."[148] And the 26th Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, has said, "When it's time to move a piano, Marines don't pick up the piano bench—we move the piano."[149]

As for making Marines, the Marine Corps is the only service that has met its annual recruiting goals *every year for the past 30 years*,[150] and it is on track to do it again in 2026.[151]

As for winning battles, only in one battle in 250 years of existence have the Marines taken more casualties than they have given—a little place called Iwo Jima.[152]

As for doing hard things, in 2024, the Marine Corps was the only service to pass an independent audit to ensure that its "financial records were accurate, complete, and compliant with federal law"—and then the Corps did it again for the second consecutive year.[153] "This repeat achievement reinforces the service's reputation for accountability, discipline, and leadership"[154] and confirms that when the Marine Corps is entrusted with "taxpayers['] money, it is money well spent and fully accounted for."[155]

As for the Marine Corps in 2026, just as a journalist cabled home 150 years ago, "the situation is well in hand."[156] Perhaps General Smith has said it best: "As we mark 250 years, we don't know exactly what the next fight will look like. But we know this... Marines will be there. We're still America's 911 force: first in, first to respond, and built to hold the line."[157]

Recommendations

Congress should:

- **Consistently pass** annual budgets to ensure that it does not retard the Marine Corps' transformation plan and innovation efforts.
- **Restore** the priority of amphibious ship construction by both providing Department of the Navy funds that cannot be applied to other expenses while simultaneously incentivizing American companies to accelerate ship construction.
- **Fund** the creation of a third Maritime Prepositioning Force squadron (and the equipment required to fully load out those ships) to restore support to the Marine Expeditionary Brigade in Japan.
- **Fund and incentivize** the accelerated construction of two aviation support logistics ships to replace the SS *Wright* and SS *Curtis*, which are already operating past their expected service lives.

The Department of the Navy should:

- **Resolve** the capabilities dispute regarding the Landing Ship Medium and submit the final design to Congress for funding.
- Once funding is secured, **accelerate** the construction of Landing Ship Mediums to provide the Corps with consistent operational and tactical transportation within the First Island Chain.

The United States Marine Corps should:

- **Continue to invest** in recruiting by assigning its best people to that mission.
- **Continue to experiment** with new technologies and concepts to match the gains made by potential adversaries.

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