

## The Marine Corps' Radical Shift toward China

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*This commentary has been updated to incorporate material from the Marine Corps' Force Design 2030 report.*

Last July, General Berger electrified the national security community with planning guidance that proposed to align the Marine Corps with the National Defense Strategy (NDS) by making major changes to forces, equipment, and training. Though dramatic in concept, the guidance lacked specifics. General Berger has now provided those specifics, and they are as radical as the concepts. Gone are tanks and capabilities for sustained ground combat and counterinsurgency. Instead, the corps focuses on long-range and precision strike for a maritime campaign in the Western Pacific against China. But this new Marine Corps faces major risks if the future is different from that envisioned or if the new concepts for operations in a hostile environment prove more difficult to implement than the Marine Corps' war games indicate.

### Background

For many years, strategists have yearned to refocus the military services on the Pacific and China. China, with its growing economy, modernizing military, and evident desire to reassert regional hegemony, has loomed as the primary long-term challenge to the United States. The Obama administration talked about a [“rebalance” to the Pacific](#) but was unable to put many specifics against the concept before it was dragged back to Europe and the Middle East in 2014 with the Russian occupation of Crimea and ISIS's campaign in Syria and Iraq.

The Trump administration's [NDS](#) focused on great power competition with China or Russia, —but China seemed to have priority. In 2019, acting secretary of defense Patrick Shanahan stated that DOD's focus was [“China, China, China.”](#) To meet this new challenge, the NDS called for changes in military forces: “We cannot expect success fighting tomorrow's conflicts with yesterday's weapons or equipment.” The NDS also signaled that modernization was more important than the size of the force, implying a willingness to get smaller in order to build the capabilities needed for great power conflict. However, the NDS was vague on specifics about what changes were required, and many observers criticized the administration for not making sufficient changes in subsequent budgets.

### General Berger's Guidance

General David Berger [became commandant](#) of the Marine Corps on July 11, 2019. He immediately published his [Commandant's Planning Guidance](#), which laid out his vision for where the Marine Corps needed to go. New service chiefs typically produce such documents, but most are exhortations to seek excellence in the services' traditional missions and to implement a few targeted reforms that the new chief desires to focus on. General Berger's vision was different in that it implied major changes in many areas.

This vision aligned with the NDS and focused exclusively on China. This was not surprising since General Berger had commanded Marine forces in the Western Pacific. The vision sought to meld the Marine Corps' traditional “force in readiness” role with that of readiness for great power conflict: “The Marine Corps will be trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness and prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations.”

Central to Berger's vision is the ability to operate within an adversary's (read China's) bubble of air, missile, and naval power (which the Marine Corps calls the weapons engagement zone, or WEZ). The concept is that the Marine Corps will be a “stand-in force” that will operate within this WEZ, not a stand-off force that must start outside and fight its way in. As the guidance states: “Stand-in forces [are] optimized to operate in close and confined seas in defiance of adversary long-range precision ‘stand-off capabilities.’”

This requires developing “low signature, affordable, and risk worthy platforms” because existing ships and aircraft are the opposite—highly capable but expensive, few, and highly visible.

Another element of the new concept is “distributed operations,” the ability of relatively small groups to operate independently rather than as part of a large force, as in previous wars. “We recognize that we must distribute our forces ashore given the growth of adversary precision strike capabilities . . . and create the virtues of mass without the vulnerabilities of concentration. ” Thus, small Marine forces would deploy around the islands of the first island chain and the South China Sea, each element having the ability to contest the surrounding air and naval space using anti-air and antiship missiles. Collectively, these forces would attrite Chinese forces, inhibit them from moving outward, and ultimately, as part of a joint campaign, squeeze them back to the Chinese homeland.

A third element was institutional: the Marine Corps would leave sustained ground combat to the Army and focus on the littorals. Ground wars in the Middle East, North Korea, and Europe would be Army responsibilities.

The final element was political: General Berger judged that defense budgets are likely to be flat for the foreseeable future. “My assumption is flat or declining [budgets], not rising. . . . If [an increase] happens, great, but this is all built based on flat or declining [budgets].” Thus, unlike in the previous five years, when rising budgets allowed new investment and stable force levels, trade-offs would now be necessary. If the Marine Corps wanted to invest in new capabilities, it had to cut some existing units.

### **The Implementation**

General Berger’s guidance proposed new concepts and approaches but lacked specifics. At the time, he noted that the Marine Corps was conducting analysis and war games and would later lay out how it would implement the guidance. Details of that implementation are becoming clearer with a short press release, [a major report in the Wall Street Journal](#), and, finally, a Marine Corps 13-page report, [Force Design 2030](#).

Implementation will be a 10-year effort that makes the radical changes that the guidance implied. The restructured Marine Corps will focus single-mindedly on a conflict with China in the Western Pacific, build capabilities for long-range and precision engagement in a maritime campaign, eliminate capabilities for counterinsurgency and ground combat against other armies, and get smaller to pay for the new equipment. The table below captures by element what the planning guidance said, what the Marine Corps has now, where it will move to, and what that means. (For a detailed discussion of current Marine Corps plans and structure, see CSIS [U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: Marine Corps](#) . A few of the planning guidance items come from [General Berger’s December article in War on the Rocks](#).)

## Ground Forces

	Commandant's Planning Guidance	Current Structure	Proposed Structure	Analysis
Infantry	[No specific guidance]	24 active-duty infantry battalions	21 active-duty infantry battalions, each about 15 percent or about 125 marines smaller.	This cut appears to be a bill payer. The press release says that the battalions will be more "mobile" and reportedly "commando-like." That implies deleting some of the heavy weapons such as mortars and anti-tank missiles. Cutting infantry battalions also allows proportional cuts in supporting capabilities—aviation, logistics, fire support. The infantry has long been the heart of the Marine Corps, so this is a major institutional as well as force structure change. The three active-duty divisions would have 27 infantry battalions at full strength. The infantry battalions have been getting smaller over time, having totaled over 1,000 during the Vietnam War. This change will take them down to about 725.
Fire Support	"We remain woefully behind in the development of ground-based long-range precision-fires that can be fielded in the near term . . . [Artillery] has fixated on those capabilities with sufficient range and lethality to support infantry and ground maneuver. This singular focus is no longer appropriate or acceptable."	21 cannon batteries; 7 rocket batteries	5 cannon batteries; 21 missile/rocket batteries	The artillery community may be roughly the same size after the restructuring, but it will be dramatically different. Some of the new batteries will be HIMARS, which fire LR guided and unguided missiles at land targets. Some will be a new system that fires tactical Tomahawk anti-ship missiles. Because of their precise munitions, missile and rocket batteries can hit ground targets and ships at long range. However, they do not support the infantry with massed and area fires as cannon batteries do. This radical shift is a statement that the Marine Corps does not expect to face adversary armies on the ground but will instead fight maritime campaigns.
Tanks	"The Marine Corps is overinvested in . . . manned anti-armor ground and aviation platforms." "The U.S. Army needs tanks. The Marine Corps does not need tanks."	7 tank companies	0 tanks, no capability retained	This is probably the most significant change. Tanks have been part of the Marine Corps since the World War II and have fought in every conflict since then. As with changes to the artillery, it is a dramatic statement that the Marine Corps does not plan to participate in ground conflicts in the future as it did in, for example, Desert Storm or the 2003 invasion of Iraq.
Combat Logistics	"The Marine Corps is over-invested in capabilities and capacities purpose-built for traditional sustained operations ashore . . . including manned ground transportation."		The new war-fighting concepts would seem to require different logistical capabilities but none are announced.	Logistics is a work in progress. Report: "I do not believe our [study] efforts gave logistics sufficient attention. Resolving these two areas must be a priority for the [next] phase."
Bridge Companies	"The Marine Corps is over-invested in capabilities and capacities purpose-built for traditional sustained operations ashore . . . including manned ground transportation."	3 bridging companies (active and reserve)	0 bridging companies	Useful for ground combat maneuver but not on islands. No mention of reductions to truck units, but the guidance implies a long-term shift to unmanned vehicles.
Law Enforcement (Military Police) Units	"The Marine Corps is over-invested in capabilities and capacities purpose-built for traditional sustained operations ashore . . . including manned ground transportation."	3 battalions	0 bridging	These units are useful for counterinsurgency but would have little role in a Pacific maritime campaign. The fact that the Marine Corps retains no capability shows the focus on the Western Pacific scenario and an unwillingness to hedge.

## Aviation

	Commandant's Planning Guidance	Current Structure	Proposed Structure	Analysis
Rotary Wing—Tiltrotor	[No specific guidance]	17 squadrons	14 squadrons	These three squadrons were cut because they mainly support infantry, which is getting smaller. The reduction may create some stress on the remaining squadrons since MV-22s have been used so heavily. The Marine Corps has purchased all 360 MV-22 aircraft, so it is unclear where the cut aircraft will go, perhaps retained for the training base (which has used older models) and future attrition.
Rotary Wing—Light Attack	"The Marine Corps is overinvested in . . . manned anti-armor ground and aviation platforms."	7 squadrons	5 squadrons	The Marine Corps' light-attack helicopters (AH-1Zs) are most useful against enemy armor and infantry. Although the helicopters have enough range to participate in sea control, they lack a long-range stand-off weapon and would need to get close to their target. Because the Marine Corps just recently completed the buy of these aircraft, they will likely go into storage for later use. The reduced size and role for attack helicopters raises questions about whether the Marine Corps will participate in the Army's Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft program.
Rotary Wing—Heavy	"The Marine Corps is overinvested in . . . exquisite platforms with unsustainable manpower/personnel requirements; and Vehicles, aircraft, and systems that the service can neither afford to procure nor afford to sustain over their anticipated lifespans."	8 squadrons, currently aging CH-53Es	5 squadrons, implies a 1/3 cut to the replacement CH-53K program, which is just entering production	The stated reason is that with less heavy equipment and less infantry, the Marine Corps can cut the number of heavy lift helicopters. However, it is likely that General Berger considered the cost to maintain these large and expensive helicopters as unsustainable.
Fixed Wing—F-18, F-35	"It is unlikely that exquisite manned platforms represent a complete answer to our needs in future warfare." Report: "I am not convinced that we have a clear understanding yet of F-35 capacity requirements for the future force."	18 total squadrons; <a href="#">Planned acquisition</a> 353 F-35Bs (STOVL version) and 67 F-35Cs (carrier version)	No change to number of squadrons, but number of F-35s per squadron reduced from 16 to 10. Because some squadrons were already planned for 10, total reduction would be about 45, with another 15 or so cut from training and maintenance overhead.	Cutting F-35s will be controversial because of the program's strong support in Congress, which has annually added aircraft to the budget. Nevertheless, the commandant's guidance clearly signaled such a move. The report points to a pilot shortage and the Marine Corps' inability to fix the shortage as a key reason for the reduction. The report's statement about "not having a clear understanding of requirements" indicates that further changes to the F-35 community are likely.
C-130 Cargo Aircraft	[no specific guidance]	3 squadrons	4 squadrons	This increase likely recognizes the challenge of supporting geographically widespread teams in distributed operations. Because C-130 aircraft can land in rough airfields, they can supply forces in austere, forward locations. The increase would therefore be for the cargo mission and not for the refueling mission since the number of Marine aircraft would decline.
Unmanned Aviation Systems	"We will prioritize short-term fielding of proven technology, and will significantly increase our efforts to mature unmanned capabilities in other domains."	3 squadrons unarmed ISR	Add three-armed UAV squadrons, but apparently waiting for USMC-developed UAV (called MUX) because of its ship board capabilities; not buying existing Reaper MQ-9s. The report indicates that existing MQ-21s will be divested. "We need to transition from our current UAS platforms to capabilities that can operate from ship, from shore, and be able to employ both collection and lethal payloads."	The Marine Corps has fallen far behind Air Force and Army in fielding armed UAVs as a result of its focus on manned aircraft such as the F-35. This change is long overdue but apparently delayed further by waiting for a developmental system. Armed UAVs in FY 2020, USMC: 3, AF: 284. Divesting the MQ-21s would be a dramatic step since the fleet is so young, the last system having arrived in 2019.
Air/Cruise Missile Defense, Counter Precision Guided Munitions	"[P]rioritize investments in modern, sophisticated air defense capabilities."	As with Army, MC deactivated most capabilities after the Cold War.	"directed energy, electronic warfare, loitering munitions"	Surprisingly, the announced plan does not include recreating ground-based anti-air/anti-cruise missile units as the Army is doing, given that the Marine Corps proposes to operate in deep inside adversary air and missile zones. Directed energy is still many years away from being a fielded capability. Unclear whether future phases will propose action here.



## Supporting Capabilities

	Commandant's Planning Guidance	Current Structure	Proposed Structure	Analysis
Reserve Structure	"The Marine Corps is overinvested in . . . surge-layer capacity resident within the reserve component."	The Marine Corps reserve mirrors the active-duty structure and thus has a full set of logistics units.	Two reserve infantry battalions cut (from 8 to 6). Artillery reorganized with the active-duty artillery and tanks deactivated. No other changes specified.	The guidance implies a cut to reserve logistics capabilities but does not appear to break with the custom of organizing the reserves as a mirror image of the active-duty force, unlike the other services. Similarly, no use of the reserves as a hedge. However, future changes are likely. Report: "Those follow-on efforts include a comprehensive assessment of our Reserve Component. . . ."
Reserve Command and Control	"We will examine the merits of formalizing command relationships between Active and Reserve Component units."	In peacetime, all reserve units come under <a href="#">Marine Forces Reserve</a> and transfer to active command on mobilization.	Unclear; possibly being considered in the future reserve "comprehensive assessment."	The Marine Corps has long been interested in aligning reserve units with active-duty units in peacetime. Such an approach was tried briefly in the 1980s but abandoned. It created two competing reporting chains, and in a time of conflict reserve units were sent where needed and not necessarily where aligned in peacetime.
War Reserve Material	"The Marine Corps is overinvested in . . . the current maritime prepositioning force [and] excess equipment maintained in administrative storage."	2 brigades of material afloat; 1 prepositioned site in Norway	Changes unclear but signaled	The maritime prepositioning force is useful for large operations because of its ability to rapidly deploy large amounts of equipment. It was used for Desert Storm and the invasion of Iraq. However, it would not have a place in a war-fighting concept of small forces conducting distributed operations. Reductions in stored equipment save money but make the Marine Corps vulnerable to attrition in a great power conflict that goes beyond a few weeks. The prospective reduction seems to conflict with the report's statement that "there is no avoiding attrition" since much of the Marine Corps' war reserve equipment is in these forces.

## Personnel

	Commandant's Planning Guidance	Current Structure	Proposed Structure	Analysis
End-Strength	"If provided the opportunity to secure additional modernization dollars in exchange for force structure, I am prepared to do so."	FY 2020: Active: 184,700 Reserve: 38,500	Active: ~170,000 Reserves: Unclear	Of all the services, the Marine Corps is the only one to come out of the wars larger than it went in. This cut will return it to approximately where it was in 2000. Guidance implies a smaller reserve force, but this is not stated explicitly. There is some inconsistency regarding end-strength as early statements cited 170,000 but the published plan stated a "cut of 12,000," which implies an end-strength of about 173,000.
Talent Management	"Talent management and talent retention efforts must be executed with precision." High standards, separation of non-performing Marines, longer assignments, flexible assignments, more parental leave		Not yet released	A large part of the commandant's guidance dealt with the training, selection, promotion, and career management of personnel. Nothing released on this so far. Expect some statement in the future.

## Supporting Navy Capabilities

	Commandant's Planning Guidance	Current Structure	Proposed Structure	Analysis
<b>Amphibious Ship Requirement</b>	"We will no longer use a '2.0 MEB requirement' . . . We will no longer reference the 38-ship requirement."	Current goal for LT shipbuilding: 38 large amphibious ships; <a href="#">current inventory 33</a> , all large	No new target; awaiting results of the much-delayed <a href="#">Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment (INFSA)</a> Report rejects "improved version of today's 3-ship ARG/MEU."	Extensive interest because of the implications for shipbuilding budgets and shipbuilding industrial base. The goal might potentially be for more ships but a mix of large and small.
<b>Amphibious Ship Design</b>	"The global options for amphibys include many more options than simply LHAs, LPDs, and LSDs." "We must continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few when conceiving of the future amphibious portion of the fleet." The amphibious fleet must be diversified in composition and increased in capacity by developing smaller, specialized ships, as a complement to the existing family of large multipurpose ships.	No small amphibys currently in fleet today since last <a href="#">LST retired in 2002</a> ; Non-amphibys such as AKEs, ESBs, and EPFs sometimes act in an amphibious role by moving troops and participating in exercises.	General Berger recently called for a " <a href="#">light amphibious ship</a> ," but its exact nature is unclear.	The Navy included \$30 million in its FY 2021 budget request to design such a ship and has briefed industry on its goals. However, the key question is whether such a ship appears in the INFSA. If it does, then such a ship might eventually be produced. If it does not, then it is a figment of the Marine Corps' imagination. A light amphibious ship would open up the number of yards that could build amphibious ships beyond the existing set of yards that specialize in large, highly-capable but also highly expensive amphibious ships. The Marine Corps might push for procurement of more auxiliaries as complements to "L"-class amphibys.
<b>Naval Integration</b>	"[S]hift from traditional power projection . . . to enable sea control and denial operations." "Our groundbased fires must be relevant to the fleet and joint force commanders, or they risk irrelevance . . . long range precision fires with no less than 350NM ranges – with greater ranges desired."	No current capabilities facing seaward; all face landward	"Littoral regiments" created; details unclear	These new units harken back to a pre-World War II capability, <a href="#">Marine defense battalions</a> , which were designed to protect forward bases from naval and air attack. They gradually transitioned during the war to solely air defense as allied sea dominance reduced the chances of Japanese naval attack.
<b>Absorbing Navy Missions</b>	"We must engage in a more robust discussion regarding naval expeditionary forces and capabilities not currently resident within the Marine Corps such as coastal / riverine forces, naval construction forces, and mine countermeasure forces. We must ask ourselves whether it is prudent to absorb some of those functions, forces, and capabilities to create a single naval expeditionary force."		No steps announced.	Poaching on another service's missions is always sensitive. The capabilities cited in the planning guidance have traditionally not received high priority in the Navy, and this may be General Berger's way of saying to the Navy, if you do not pay attention to these missions, I will step in.

### The Risks

Radical change brings risks, and this effort is no different. Risks arise from the lack of hedging, the movement away from current operations, and the uncertain viability of the new war-fighting concepts. If the Marine Corps has misjudged the future, it will fight the next conflict at a great disadvantage or, perhaps, be irrelevant.

### No Hedging

When these proposed changes are fully implemented, the Marine Corps will be well structured to fight an island campaign in the Western Pacific against China. Although the NDS allows hedging against other adversaries and conflicts—North Korea, Iran, counterterrorism—the Marine Corps does not plan to do that. As General Berger stated in his guidance: "[This] single purpose-built future force will be applied against other challenges across the globe; however, we will not seek to hedge or balance our investments to account for those contingencies."

The lack of hedging means that the Marine Corps will not field the broad set of capabilities it has in the past. It will be poorly structured to fight the kind of campaigns that it had to fight in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. The history of the last

70 years has been that the United States deters great power conflict and fights regional and stability conflicts. Although forces can adapt, as seen during the long counterinsurgency campaigns in the Middle East, there is a delay and an initial lack of expertise. The Marine Corps might plan to defer these conflicts to the Army, but that has not worked in the past. Army forces have been too small to keep the Marine Corps out of sustained ground combat. Marine Corps officials have argued privately that other kinds of conflicts would be lesser included capabilities of this focus on high-end conflict in the Western Pacific. This is misplaced. History is littered with examples of militaries that prepared for one kind of conflict and then had to fight a very different kind of conflict. In the best circumstances, militaries adapt at the cost of time and blood. In the worst circumstances, the result is catastrophic failure. For example, in the 1950s and early-1960s the U.S. Army focused on great power conflict in Europe against the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. That Army then had to fight a counterinsurgency conflict in Southeast Asia. As [Andrew Krepinevich argued](#), the Army was “a superb instrument for combating the field armies of its adversaries in conventional wars but an inefficient and ineffective force for defeating insurgent guerrilla forces.” The Army and Navy use their reserve components to hedge against unexpected demands. Thus, their reserve components do not look like the active component but are imbalanced. For example, most of the Army’s medical, transportation, engineering, civil affairs, and psychological operations units are in the reserve component. The new Marine Corps structure might have kept some tanks, towed artillery, bridging units, military police, or logistics in the reserves as a hedge against a future war involving ground combat against a national army or a counterinsurgency campaign. However, the plan does not include such hedges.

#### **Moving Away from Current Operations**

Unacknowledged in this new Marine Corps approach, as it is across the entire department, is the tension between preparing for a conflict against a great power adversary and the need to maintain day-to-day commitments for ongoing conflicts, allied and partner engagement, and crisis response. The Trump administration, like the Obama administration before it, has chosen capability overcapacity in its strategy documents. However, the press of operational demands has been unrelenting despite the DOD’s intention to prioritize and cut back on them. This has pushed the other services—especially the Navy and Air Force—toward a high-low mix in order to cover both: advanced, and often very expensive, technologies for great power conflict and less expensive elements in relatively large numbers for less demanding threats. The Marine Corps has opted not to do this. Its smaller size will put stress on the remaining forces if deployments continue at the current level.

#### **The Uncertain Viability of New War-fighting Concepts**

The final risk is whether this new war-fighting concept of distributed operations within the adversary’s weapons engagement zone will work. The Marine Corps has sensibly conducted a lot of war-gaming and satisfied itself that the concept will succeed. However, as Marines note, the enemy gets a vote. Maintaining small and vulnerable units deep inside an adversary’s weapons engagement zone will be challenging. Even small units need a continuous resupply with fuel and munitions. If that is not possible, or if the Chinese figure out a way to hunt these units down, the concept collapses.

#### **A Process, Not a Destination**

The *Force Design 2030* report emphasizes that this restructuring is not fixed and unalterable but a process where the destination is open to modification and revision. Thus, there will be a “phase III” after additional analysis and experimentation. Further changes will unfold and gaps in the current plan—for logistics, the reserves, and amphibious ships, for example—will be filled. This on-going process will also provide opportunities to reduce risk, and the Marine Corps should take advantage of that.

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