

New U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Force Design 2030

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Background

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) [announced](#) a major force design initiative planned to occur over the next 10 years referred to as “Force Design 2030.” In this initiative, the Marine Corps aims to redesign the force for naval expeditionary warfare and to better align itself with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, its focus on strategically competing with China and Russia. These force design initiatives are informed by two operational concepts: [Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment](#) and [Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations \(EABO\)](#). In support of these concepts, the Marines intend to eliminate or reduce certain types of units and eliminate some military occupational specialties (MOS). The Marines also plan to reorganize higher echelon Marine formations and get smaller—reducing forces by 12,000 personnel by 2030.

Major Ground Force Eliminations/Reductions/Realignments

Marine ground force eliminations/reductions/realignments included the following:

- eliminating all Marine Corps Tank Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminating all Law Enforcement Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminating all Bridging Companies and associated MOSs;
- reducing the number of Infantry Battalions from 24 to 21;
- reducing the number of Cannon Artillery Batteries from 21 to 5; and
- reducing the number of Amphibious Vehicle Companies from 6 to 4.

Major Aviation Force Deactivations

Marine aviation force deactivations included the following:

- Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 264;
- Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462;

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- Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 469;
- Marine Wing Support Groups 27 and 37; and
- Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367.

Of particular note, the Marines planned to reduce the number of F-35 B and C aircraft in each squadron from 16 to 10.

Reorganization at Higher Echelons

Per the Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) headquartered at Camp Courtney, Okinawa, Japan, was to be the focal point of higher echelon modernization [described](#) as follows:

- The Marine Corps would establish three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish sea denial and control within contested maritime spaces as part of the modernized III MEF.
- The III MEF's Pacific posture was to be augmented by three globally deployable Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) possessing both traditional and Expeditionary Advanced Base capabilities that can deploy with nonstandard Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs).
- I MEF (Camp Pendleton, CA) and II MEF (Camp Lejeune, NC) were to generate forces to support MLRs and MEUs.

Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs)

The first MLR [reportedly](#) would consist of units from the 3rd Marine Regiment in Hawaii. After a series of exercises and evaluations, the Marines plan to convert two other regiments, the 4th and 12th Marine Regiments currently stationed in Japan into MLRs that are to be stationed in Japan and Guam. The MLR was to include about 1,800 to 2,000 Marines and sailors, and it would include three main elements: a Littoral Combat Team (LCT), a Littoral Anti-Air Battalion, and a Littoral Logistics Battalion. The LCT is to be organized around an infantry battalion along with a long-range anti-ship missile battery. The Littoral Anti-Air Battalion was intended to employ air defense, air surveillance and early warning, air control, and forward rearming and refueling capabilities. The Littoral Logistics Battalion was to provide tactical logistics support to the MLR. A regimental headquarters was intended to provide the MLR with enhanced signals and human intelligence, reconnaissance, communications, logistics planning, civil affairs, cyber, and information operations capabilities. In early March 2022, the Marines [reportedly](#) redesignated the 3rd Marine Regiment to the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment.

Proposed Future Capabilities of the Redesigned Force

As part of the redesigned Marine Corps for 2030, the Marines intend to pursue the following [capabilities](#):

- **Expansion of Long-Range Fires:** Achieve a 300% increase in rocket artillery capacity, which, in conjunction with anti-ship missiles, is intended to significantly expand the Marine Corps' ability to support the fleet commander in sea control and denial operations.
- **Lighter, More Mobile and Versatile Infantry:** Reduce the size of infantry battalions in order to support naval expeditionary warfare and to facilitate distributed and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.

- **Investments in Unmanned Systems:** Double the number of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) squadrons and austere lethal unmanned air and ground systems to enhance the ability to sense and strike targets.
- **Maritime Mobility and Resilience:** Seek new capabilities to increase littoral maritime mobility and resilience, including a new light amphibious warship, as well as more affordable stern-landing and operational support vessels.
- **Mobile Air Defense and Counter-Precision Guided Missile Systems:** Pursue a variety of efforts to include directed energy systems, loitering munitions, signature management, electronic warfare, and expeditionary airfield capabilities and structure to support manned and unmanned aircraft and other systems from austere, minimally developed locations.

Commandant's 2021 Update

In an [annual update](#) published in April 2021, the Commandant of the Marine Corps offered an update on the progress of the 2020 Force Design Initiatives. As of March 2022, the Marines had not published an annual update for 2022. The Commandant's 2021 update included the following highlights:

- removing all main battle tanks and heavy bridging equipment from the inventory;
- reorganizing Marine infantry battalions to provide greater lethality and nonkinetic influence in mobile, distributed operations;
- using the savings from divestments, Marines are fielding long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles with payloads for airborne communication, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare;
- eliminating in future plans, most towed cannon artillery and significant numbers of manned rotary and fixed winged aircraft; and
- phasing out most legacy logistical capability, previously intended for sustained land operations, and modernizing the rest for distributed maritime operations.

In terms of main battle tanks, the Marines [noted](#)

The Marine Corps had more than 450 tanks prior to the deactivation of the tank battalions. To date, Marine Corps Systems Command has transferred more than 400 tanks to the Army. The remaining tanks in the Marine Corps inventory are afloat globally on Maritime Prepositioning Ships and are scheduled for transfer to the Army over the next few years.

In 2020, the Marines [divested](#) more than 5,500 pieces of equipment valued at \$494 million. Similar figures for 2021 and 2022 are not publicly available.

Force Design 2030 Going Forward

During a December 2021 meeting at the Center for a New American Security, the Marine Commandant [reportedly](#) expressed some of his concerns going forward. [Reportedly](#), he remarked

I think this is the deciding point where, in the [Pentagon] and in Congress, are they willing to back an organization ... that is willing to accept risk, willing to move at speed, willing to discard legacy things, learn as fast as we can — are they going to support and enable that to occur or not? Because if they don't, then you're in a bad place because you've already gotten rid of, you've already divested of, you shed the things you don't think you need for the future. But the other things are coming, and if you're left in a lurch there, that's not a good place to be.

His underlying concern was the Marines need the Department of the Navy, the Defense Department, and Congress to support Force Design 2030 in the next one or two budget cycles. Also of concern was amphibious lift, and the Commandant expressed the need for the Navy's Light Amphibious Warship (LAW) currently under development, but concerns were raised about its future, given budgetary issues. General Berger also noted that FY2023 plans call for the fielding of NMESIS (Navy/Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System), a ground-based anti-ship missile mounted on an unmanned version of the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV).

Potential Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress include the following:

- How do emerging lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine inform Marine Corps thinking on Force Design 2030?
- If Force Design 2030 is focused on China and the Indo Pacific region, will the redesigned force be suitable/adequate to support future NATO commitments in Europe?
- With Force Design 2030 focused on China and the Indo Pacific region, what are the Marine's plans to address [Contested Logistics](#)? Are there concerns that much of the responsibility for successfully operating in such an environment falls outside the control of the Marines and rests on the Navy and unmanned naval and air systems?
- How does the elimination of the Marine's two tank battalions impact the ability of the Marines to defend against enemy mechanized and armored forces?
- How does the elimination of most towed artillery affect the Marines' ability to provide fire support if air or naval assets are unable to deliver fire support due to nonavailability, range limitations, or adverse weather?
- How does the elimination of significant numbers of manned rotary and fixed winged aircraft effect the Marines' ability to transport Marines and supplies by air and the provision of close air support?
- If the Marines phase out most of their legacy sustained land operations-specific logistics capability, will they be able to participate in sustained land operations in the future if required?

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