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Marine Corps Drawdown, Force Structure Initiatives, and Roles and Missions: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

The Marine Corps characterizes itself as a crisis response expeditionary force which is task organized and able to conduct operations across the entire spectrum of military operations. The Corps is a “middleweight force” that is designed to fill the void in our Nation’s defense structure between light Special Operations Forces (SOF) and heavier conventional units. The Marines’ missions are codified in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 5063, United States Marine Corps: Composition and Functions, and marines are the nation’s primary amphibious force, capable of conducting amphibious assault operations in both permissive and non-permissive environments. Marine operational forces are organized for specific tasks and consist of four elements; a command element; a ground combat element; an aviation element; and a logistics combat element. There are four types of Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs): the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF); the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB); the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU); and the Special Purpose MAGTF.

A number of decisions pertaining to national security strategy, force structure, and declining defense budgets have resulted in a drawdown of the active Marine Corps from 202,000 in 2011 to 174,000 by 2017. On February 24, 2014, Secretary of Defense Hagel announced that the Marines would draw down to a 182,000 Marine active force, but if sequestration-level cuts were reimposed in 2016 and beyond, the Marines would shrink to a 175,000 Marine active force.

The Marines have instituted a number of force shaping programs to reach the 182,000 endstrength. They believe this force level can be achieved through natural attrition as well as voluntary separation programs where Marines who leave the service early can receive financial compensation. Officials caution that if the Marines are required to drawdown lower than 182,000, involuntary separation programs might need to be enacted.

The Marines have instituted a number of force structure initiatives including creating Special Purpose MAGTFs - Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) to respond to a variety of regional crises, including attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities and personnel. In the wake of the September 11, 2012, Benghazi attack, Congress authorized 1,000 additional Marine security guards beginning FY2014. In response, the Marines are in the process of expanding their Marine Corps Embassy Security Group. The Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is also regionally-aligning its operational units and taking steps to begin deploying small MARSOC teams with MEUs.

A sampling of academic discussions focusing on the Marine Corps of the future suggests the Marines and Special Operations Forces (SOF) could be given the lead responsibility for worldwide ground engagement. Another proposal suggests that Marines should operate in small, decentralized units and that the Marines’ focus could shift to company and battalion-sized units, the so-called “sweet spot” for joint ground forces. Others contend that more Marine major war fighting units, such as armor, be moved into the Marine Corps Reserves and that Marine Aviation should be reorganized.

A potential issue for Congress includes should the Marines be given the leading role in the Pacific and should their primary focus be crisis response? Other possible issues for examination include how much amphibious assault capability does the Marine Corps need; should MEUs be reorganized; and should more of the Marines’ major warfighting capability be placed in the Reserves?

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Importance to Congress

The Administration's proposal to reduce the size of the Marine Corps has national security implications that Congress may consider as part of its oversight and authorizations and appropriations roles. In terms of size of the force, Congress sets the endstrength¹ for both the active Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Reserve. Congress also authorizes and appropriates funds needed for Marine force structure initiatives, training exercises, equipment, basing, and infrastructure, as well as the various manpower management tools that could be used to drawdown the force. Administration decisions about the recommended size and basing of the Marine Corps can have a significant impact on Marine bases in a Member's district or state, which can also have economic ramifications for communities near affected bases. The Administration's downsizing and force structure proposals also can have a significant impact on local and state defense-related industries. Lastly, Marines and their families who might be affected by the Administration's decisions constitute a unique element of Members' constituencies.

Background

Marine Corps Roles and Missions

According to the Marine Corps:

The Marine Corps is a crisis response expeditionary force which is task organized and able to conduct operations across the entire spectrum of military operations. Fundamentally, the Corps is a "middleweight force" that fills the void in our Nation's defense structure between light Special Operations Forces (SOF) and heavier conventional units. The Corps provides scalable and adaptive forces that complement the lighter and heavier forces.²

The Marines serve in a variety of capacities but are perhaps best known as America's amphibious force, with various Marine units embarked on U.S. Navy ships that patrol oceans, littorals, and maritime choke points. The Marines' missions are codified in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 5063, *United States Marine Corps: Composition and Functions*, dated January 3, 2012, which states:

The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign. In addition, the Marine Corps shall provide detachments and organizations for service on armed vessels of the Navy, shall provide security detachments for the protection of naval property at naval stations and bases, and shall perform such other duties as the President may direct. However, these additional duties may not detract from or interfere with the operations for which the Marine Corps is primarily organized.

¹ Endstrength is the number of military personnel needed to accomplish a service's statutory mission. It is also the number of personnel that a service is authorized to have by the end of a fiscal year. For additional information on endstrength see CRS Report R43184, *FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act: Selected Military Personnel Issues*, coordinated by (name redacted).

² U.S. Marine Corps Concepts & Programs 2013, *America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness*, 2013, p. 11.

(b) The Marine Corps shall develop, in coordination with the Army and the Air Force, those phases of amphibious operations that pertain to the tactics, technique, and equipment used by landing forces.³

The Marines two fundamental core missions are assuring **littoral access** and conducting highly complex and difficult **crisis response** operations.⁴ In addition to these missions, the Marine Corps has also provided security for overseas U.S. diplomatic missions since 1799 and the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group (MCESG) is responsible for the internal security of these facilities worldwide.⁵ In addition to the aforementioned missions, the Marines also have nuclear, chemical, biological incident response responsibilities, conduct security cooperation activities, and are responsible for presidential security and transportation missions.

Marine Corps Reserve

The Marine Corps Reserve was established in 1916 and provides trained units and individual Marines that can be mobilized for active duty in time of war, national emergency or contingency operations. The endstrength of the Marine Corps Reserves was at 39,600 Marines at the end of September 2013.⁶ The 4th Marine Division headquartered in New Orleans, LA is the Marine Corps Reserve division and consists of Marine infantry regiments, an aircraft wing, a logistics group, tank units, force reconnaissance, units, and civil affairs units to name but a few of the organizations resident in the Marine Corps Reserve. The Marine Corps Reserve saw active service in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and continues to participate in operations world-wide.

Size of Selected Marine Corps Units⁷

Marine Infantry Squad: **13**
Marine Infantry Platoon: **43**
Marine Infantry Company: **182**
Marine Infantry Battalion: **963** personnel
Marine Infantry Regiment: **3,129** personnel
Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU): Approximately **2,200** personnel
Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB): **14,000 – 17,000** personnel
Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF): **40,000 – 80,000** personnel

³ U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 5063, United States Marine Corps: Composition and Functions, January 3, 2012, p. 1962.

⁴ Marine Corps Operating Concepts, Third Edition, June 2010, p. 9.

⁵ U.S. Marine Corps Concepts & Programs 2011, America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness, 2011, p. 54.

⁶ James K. Sanborn, "Restructuring of Active Force Likely Means Big Changes for the Reserves," *Marine Corps Times*, September 30, 2013.

⁷ Information is from Marine Corps Operating Concepts, Third Edition, June 2010 and Marine Legislative Liaison Office. Note these numbers include attached Navy personnel: (corpsmen, religious personnel, etc.)

How the Marines Organize Their Operational Forces⁸

Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF)

The MAGTF is the Marine Corps primary organizational construct for conducting military operations. They range in size from a few hundred to many thousands of Marines and can be embarked on amphibious ships but can also be deployed by other means. They are organized for specific tasks and are comprised of four deployable elements:

- The **Command Element (CE)** which contains the MAGTF headquarters as well as operations, intelligence, logistics, communications, and administrative support.
- The **Ground Combat Element (GCE)** which includes infantry, artillery, reconnaissance, armor, light armor, assault amphibian, engineer, and other forces as needed. In the case of non-combat missions, other types of Marine units can be substituted for combat units.
- The **Aviation Combat Element (ACE)** is comprised of a variety of aircraft and support units needed to support MAGTF operations. Types of support include assault support, anti-air warfare, offensive air support, electronic warfare, control of aircraft and missiles, and reconnaissance. The ACE is also capable of providing support for humanitarian relief and disaster relief operations.
- The **Logistics Combat Element (LCE)** is organized to provide a full range of combat logistics functions and capabilities needed to sustain the MAGTF.

Types of MAGTFs

There are four types of MAGTFs: the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF); the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB); the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU); and the Special Purpose MAGTF.

Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF)

The MEF is the principal warfighting organization for large crises or contingencies. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) the 1st MEF was the major Marine Corps unit deployed as part of the U.S. invasion force. The MEF is normally commanded by a lieutenant general, consists of approximately 40,000 to 80,000 personnel, and can range in size from one division and an air wing to multiple divisions and air wings supported by one or more logistics groups. The Marine Corps is organized with three standing MEFs in both peacetime and wartime, with each comprised of a Marine division, aircraft wing, and logistics group. The 1st MEF is located at bases in California and Arizona; the 2nd MEF at bases in North Carolina and South Carolina; and the 3rd MEF at bases in Okinawa, mainland Japan, and Hawaii with future plans for

⁸ Information in this section is taken from U.S. Marine Corps Concepts & Programs 2013, America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness, 2013, pp. 12-15.

bases in Guam and Australia.⁹ As previously noted, the Marine Corps Reserve 4th MEF is headquartered out of New Orleans, LA.

Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB)

The MEB is a mid-sized MAGTF which consists of from 14,000 to 17,000 personnel and is normally commanded by a brigadier general. The MEB is scalable and can respond to a full range of contingencies. The MEB, when at sea, is normally embarked on 17 amphibious ships and carries with it 30 days of supplies, meaning it can operate ashore for 30 days before it requires resupply. The MEB is normally comprised of a reinforced infantry regiment, a composite Marine Aircraft Group, and a Combat Logistics Regiment. MEBs do not have permanently assigned units but instead maintain a habitual relationship with subordinate units through planning and exercises.

Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU)

MEUs are embarked on Amphibious Readiness Groups (ARG)¹⁰ and operate on a continuous basis in the areas of responsibility of certain Geographic Combat Commanders. A MEU is commanded by a Colonel, can include up to about 2,200 Marines, and deploys with 15 days of accompanying supplies. Before a MEU deploys, it undergoes an intensive six month training program and the MEU is then evaluated and certified for deployment. The types of operations that a MEU is trained and equip to conduct include

- Amphibious assault landing;
- Amphibious raid;¹¹
- Small boat raid (in selected MEUs only);
- Maritime interception operations;
- Advance force operations;
- Noncombatant evacuation operations;
- Humanitarian assistance;
- Stability operations;
- Tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel;
- Joint and combined operations;
- Aviation operations from expeditionary sites;
- Theater security cooperation activities; and
- Airfield and port seizures.

⁹ For information on U.S. naval vessels associated with embarked Marine forces see Appendix A of CRS Report RL34476, *Navy LPD-17 Amphibious Ship Procurement: Background, Issues, and Options for Congress*, by (name redacted).

¹⁰ For information on ARGs see, http://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=148, accessed November 7, 2013.

¹¹ Raids are small, short duration combat operations against specific targets.

Special Purpose MAGTF (SPMAGTF)

A SPMAGTF is organized to accomplish a specific mission, operation, or regionally-focused activity. They can be organized, trained, and equipped to conduct a variety of operations ranging from peacetime missions, training exercises, and responses to contingencies and crises. Because of unique mission requirements, there is no set size or structure associated with SPMAGTFs.

Decisions Impacting Marine Corps Size and Force Structure

January 6, 2011, News Briefing with Secretary of Defense Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen¹²

On January 6, 2011, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen held a news briefing “announcing a number of decisions and measures that mark the next major step in this department’s reform agenda.” These decisions and measures, largely taken in response to fiscal pressures, involved a variety of cross-service actions, including consolidating and eliminating headquarters and organizations, modifying or eliminating weapon systems programs, and force reductions. During this briefing, it was announced the Marines would drawdown between 15,000 and 20,000 Marines - depending on the recommendations of a Marine Force Structure Review Group - with a goal of eventually reducing the Marine Corps to 175,000.

March 14, 2011, Report of the 2010 Marine Corps Force Structure Review Group¹³

In March 2011, the Marines released the results of a force structure review focused on the post-Afghanistan Marine Corps, which was intended to preserve capabilities developed since September 11, 2001; expand on engagement efforts; respond to crisis; and still be capable of projecting power to respond to the most dangerous threats to the nation. In order to achieve this desired end state, the Marines stated they would accept a degree of risk by reducing the active component capacity “for conducting multiple, major sustained operations ashore, relying on an operationalized reserve component to mitigate the risk.”¹⁴ Key recommendations from the review included

- Reduce the endstrength of the active component from 202,000 to approximately 186,800 *following the completion of Marine operations in Afghanistan*;
- Resource five regionally-focused MEB command elements, with habitually aligned subordinate elements in order to improve effectiveness and responsiveness;
- Reduce infantry battalions from 27 to 24;

¹² Information from this section is taken from U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, “DOD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen from the Pentagon,” January 6, 2011.

¹³ Information in this section is taken from “Reshaping America’s Expeditionary Force in Readiness,” Report of the 2010 Marine Corps Force Structure Review Group, March 14, 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

- Reduce artillery battalions from 11 to 9;
- Reduce flying squadrons from 70 to 61;
- Reorganize Marine logistics groups; and
- Increase Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC)¹⁵ by more than 1,000 Marines.

January 26, 2012, Administration Major Budget Decision Briefing¹⁶

On January 26, 2012, senior DOD leaders unveiled a new defense strategy, based on a review of the defense strategy at the time and budgetary constraints. This new strategy envisioned:

- A smaller, leaner military that is agile, flexible, rapidly deployable, and technologically advanced;
- Rebalancing global posture and presence, emphasizing where potential problems are likely to arise, such as the Asia-Pacific region¹⁷ and the Middle East;
- Maintaining presence elsewhere in the world (Europe, Africa, and Latin America), using innovative partnerships, strengthening key alliances, and developing new partnerships;
- Being able to quickly confront and defeat aggression from any adversary anytime, anyplace; and
- Protecting and prioritizing key investments in technology and new capabilities as well as the capacity to grow, adapt, mobilize, and surge when needed.

During this briefing, a number of decisions related to the Marine Corps were announced, including

- The Marines would be a middleweight expeditionary force with reinvigorated amphibious capabilities;
- The Active Marine Corps would decrease from 202,000 Marines to 182,000 over five years (2017);
- There would be no decrease in the size of the Marine Corps Reserve;
- This new strategy envisioned a Navy and Marine Corps that was postured forward; and

¹⁵ For additional information on Marine Special Operations Command see CRS Report RS21048, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

¹⁶ Information in this section is taken from U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, “Major Budget Decisions Briefing from the Pentagon,” presented by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey, January 26, 2012; U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, “Major Budget Decisions Briefing from the Pentagon,” presented by Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James A. Winnefeld Jr., January 26, 2012; and U.S. Department of Defense Publication, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012.

¹⁷ For additional information on the Pacific strategy see CRS Report R42448, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s “Rebalancing” Toward Asia*, coordinated by (name redacted).

- The Marines would sustain their level of presence in the Pacific and enhance their presence by partnering with Australia and others, such as the Philippines.

2013 Strategic Choices and Management Review (SCMR)¹⁸

In April 2013, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced that DOD would conduct a Strategic Choices and Management Review (SCMR) to help insure that the Defense Department would be prepared to face what he called “unprecedented budget uncertainty.”¹⁹ The three stated specific objectives of the SCMR were to:

- Help DOD prepare for how to deal with sequestration if it continues into FY2014;
- Inform the fiscal guidance given to the Services for their FY2015 through FY2019 budget plans; and
- Anchor the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) which plans to assess our defense strategy in light of new fiscal realities and the many threats and complexities and uncertainties of this new century.

In a July 31, 2013, statement, Secretary Hagel, commenting on the results of the SCMR, described two strategic approaches to reducing force structure and modernization that would be used to inform planning for sequester-level cuts. These approaches would trade off capacity—measured in Army brigades, Navy ships, Air Force squadrons, and Marine battalions—and capability, that is, the ability to modernize weapon systems and maintain the military’s technological edge. In the approach that would trade away size for high-end capacity, Secretary Hagel suggested that the Marines would draw down from 182,000 to between 150,000 and 175,000 active Marines.

2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)²⁰

The Quadrennial Defense Review or QDR, “a congressionally mandated²¹ review of national defense strategy, force structure, modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plans, and other elements of defense strategy,” is presently underway and is due to Congress in February 2014.

The 2014 QDR will likely have very specific guidance as to Marine Corps force size and organization, among other things, and results from the 2013 SCMR will likely heavily influence

¹⁸ Information in this section is taken from U.S. Department of Defense, “Statement on Strategic Choices and Management Review,” July 31, 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Information in this section is taken from Donna Miles, “Senate Appoints Four Members to the QDR Panel,” American Forces Press Service, March 6, 2013.

²¹ The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 1997 established the requirement for a QDR in 1997. “The Secretary of Defense shall every four years, ...conduct a comprehensive examination (to be known as a “quadrennial defense review”) of the national defense strategy, force structure, force modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plan, and other elements of the defense program and policies of the United States with a view toward determining and expressing the defense strategy of the United States and establishing a defense program for the next 20 years. Each such [QDR] shall be conducted in consultation with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” USC 10, §118(a). http://www.defense.gov/qdr/QDR_101_FACT_SHEET_January_2010.pdf, accessed November 12, 2103.

decisions coming from the 2014 QDR. Congress is also required to conduct an independent review of the QDR's force structure and resource requirements and submit an assessment to the congressional defense committees no later than May 2014.

Planned Drawdown Levels

In a November 7, 2013, Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) hearing on the effects of sequestration, Commandant of the Marine Corps General James Amos testified:

The President's National Security Strategy is optimized with a Marine Corps of 186.8K. The BCA [Budget Control Act of 2011, P.L. 112-25] forced us to 182.1K. Our examination determined that an end strength of 174K was the best we could do in addressing the operational requirements of steady state deployments, crisis response activities, and potential major combat operations, while preserving institutional health and readiness. As we actively participate in the QDR, this is the force that the Marine Corps will use as the recommended basis for our contribution to the nation's defense. Based on extensive analysis, falling below this force structure number will significantly increase risk in to our steady state security posture, crisis response and major combat operations.²²

The 174,000 Active Marine Corps endstrength figure cited by General Amos will be the Marines' planning endstrength as the QDR process progresses. While the Marines did not offer specifics about force structure reductions needed to reach the 174,000 active Marine endstrength by 2017, reports suggest that an additional five infantry battalions would be eliminated and, at this force level, the Marines would only be able to respond to one major contingency.²³ Also at this level, any planned growth in the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC)²⁴ would reportedly be frozen and the three-star Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) headquarters—II MEF from Camp Lejeune, NC—would be absorbed by Marine Forces Command in Norfolk, VA.²⁵

As previously noted, Secretary Hagel in discussing the SCMR suggested Marines could draw down from 182,000 to between 175,000 - 150,000 active Marines. Marine officials have reportedly concluded that a 150,000 Marine force would be a "dangerously small force" and "unviable" for accomplishing the Marine's current mission.²⁶

DOD's FY2015 Budget Preview²⁷

On February 24, 2014, Secretary of Defense Hagel held a press conference to announce key decisions he had recommend to the President for DOD's FY2015 budget. Regarding the Marine Corps, Secretary Hagel noted:

²² Statement of General James F. Amos, Commandant of the Marine Corps Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Sequestration, November 7, 2013, p. 7.

²³ James K. Sanborn, "A Force of 174,000," *Marine Corps Times*, September 30, 2013.

²⁴ For additional information on MARSOC, see CRS Report RS21048, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

²⁵ Hope Hodge Seck, "What Stays, What Goes at 174,000 Marines," *Marine Corps Times*, November 4, 2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Information in this section is taken from Remarks by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel FY2015 Budget Preview, Pentagon Press Briefing Room, Monday, February 24, 2014.

The Marine Corps' inherent agility, crisis response capabilities, and maritime focus make it well-suited to carry out many priority missions under the President's defense strategy. Accordingly, if the President's budget levels are sustained for the next five years, we could avoid additional reductions in end strength beyond those already planned. Today the Marines number about 190,000, and they will draw down to 182,000. If sequestration-level cuts are re-imposed in 2016 and beyond, the Marines would have to shrink further to 175,000. Under any scenario, we will devote about 900 more Marines to provide enhanced embassy security around the world.²⁸

Regarding Secretary of Defense Hagel's recommendations on the size of the Marine Corps, analysts note DOD opted for a higher-than anticipated active endstrength—182,000 as opposed to 174,000—perhaps suggesting the Marines had made a convincing case for their role crisis response operations.

Force Reduction and Shaping Programs

Reportedly, Marine officials believe they can achieve active duty cuts without having to force Marines out of service before their contracts expire.²⁹ To date, the drawdown has reportedly been achieved through normal attrition and early out incentives; including premature retirements and cash buyouts which have permitted the service reduce active endstrength by about 5,000 personnel per year.³⁰ In order to retain key capabilities such as special operations and cyber operations, cuts would primarily come from infantry and artillery battalions and aviation squadrons.

Marine officials suggest, however, if force cuts are accelerated or if the Marines are required to cut to a 150,000 active endstrength, that involuntary measures would need to be taken in addition to voluntary programs currently being used.³¹ Some involuntary measures include

- Ending a “de facto” guarantee of 20 years of service for all enlisted Marines who reach the grade of staff sergeant;
- Convening an early retirement board for senior enlisted Marines;
- Using enlisted retention boards to cut Marines before their contracts expired;
- Ending a 20 year service promise to all Marine officers who make the grade of major; and
- Selective Early Retirement Board for lieutenant colonels and colonels.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁹ James K. Sanborn, “A Force of 174, 000,” *Marine Corps Times*, September 30, 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Information in this section is taken from James K. Sanborn, “Cutting to 174,000—Or Below,” *Marine Corps Times*, October 28, 2013.

Force Structure Initiatives

As the Marines drawdown, a number of force structure-related initiatives are underway or under consideration. These initiatives are seen as a means to address both a post-Afghanistan world and reduced force levels resulting from budgetary constraints.

Special Purpose MAGTFs—Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR)³²

In the wake of the September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities in Benghazi, Libya, DOD reportedly approved the creation of a new 550 person Marine crisis-response force centered on a reinforced Marine rifle company, six MV-22B Ospreys and two KC-130J Hercules tanker planes. This unit is under the control of the Commander of U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) and has elements based in Moron Airbase in Spain and Sigonella Naval Air Station in Italy. This response force is not reliant on U.S. naval ships and is designed to be able to fly quickly for missions such as embassy reinforcement to humanitarian assistance. In July 2013, during a period of intense tension in Egypt, this unit was reportedly put on alert to help secure the U.S. embassy in Cairo or to help U.S. citizens leave the country, if required.

Reports further suggest that additional SPMAGTF-CRs might be stood up for South America and the Middle East as well. It is not known if these additional SPMAGTF-CRs be smaller than 550 personnel, where they will be stationed or when or if these units will be established. In all cases, these SPMAGTF-CRs are not viewed as replacements for MEUs or other Marine forces but are instead envisioned as assets that a geographic combatant commander can call upon with little or no notice to help respond to a potential crisis or in the aftermath of an attack or humanitarian crisis.

Expansion of Marine Security Guard Program

As a result of September 11, 2012, Benghazi attack, Congress authorized 1,000 additional Marine security guards beginning FY2014.³³ From a CRS Report.³⁴

A provision in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, P.L. 112-239 [Title IV, Subtitle A, Section 404] directs the Secretary of Defense to grow the Marine Security Guard Program in order to increase the number of detachments at U.S. embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic facilities by up to 1,000 Marines during fiscal years 2014 through 2017, and reassess program's focus on the protection of classified information. The measure also requires the President to separate the Program's budget request from that of the Marine Corps as a whole, and it requires reexamination of the Marine units' rules of engagement.

³² Information in this section is taken from Dan Lamothe, "3-Star Details New Marine Crisis-Response Force," *Marine Corps Times*, April 21, 2013; Dan Lamothe, "Crisis-Response Force Put on Alert for Egyptian Unrest," *Marine Corps Times*, July 15, 2013; Gina Harkins, "U.S. Crisis-Response Force Coming to Central, S. America," *Marine Corps Times*, August 29, 2013; and Dan Lamothe, "Preparing for Chaos," *Marine Corps Times*, September 30, 2013.

³³ Gina Harkins, "Expert: USMC Embassy Guard Boost Will be Tough," *Marine Corps Times*, December 21, 2012.

³⁴ CRS Report R42834, *Securing U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel Abroad: Background and Policy Issues*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted), May 7, 2013, p. 20.

These additional guards are to be assigned to the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group in Quantico, Virginia and will augment the approximately 1,200 Marine security guards currently assigned to U.S. diplomatic facilities in over 130 countries.³⁵ In theory, these Marines are to be used to increase the size of the Marine Corps Security Detachments at embassies and consulates in what the State Department deems high threat countries. Given the potential and current levels of unrest in some countries in the USAFRICOM and USCENTCOM regions, it is likely that additional Marines will be sent to U.S. diplomatic facilities in selected countries in Africa and the Middle East. A report suggests that three such posts already identified for enhanced Marine presence include Juba, South Sudan; Casablanca, Morocco; and Freetown, Sierra Leone.³⁶

Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) Regional Assignments and Potential Return to Sea³⁷

The Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is a component command of the U. S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and constitutes the Marine Corps' contribution to U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). MARSOC is reportedly realigning the responsibilities of its three operational battalions to better support geographical combatant commanders. As part of this realignment, the 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion (MSOB) from Camp Pendleton, CA will align to the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) region while the 2nd and 3rd MSOBs out of Camp Lejeune, NC will align with USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM respectively. These units are to receive appropriate language and cultural training so they will be better attuned to their areas of operation. In another initiative designed to get special operations forces back at sea with MEUs—a common practice prior to September 11, 2001 when Navy SEALs would deploy with MEUs—MARSOC began training with the 11th MEU to facilitate future deployments with Marine expeditionary forces. A timetable for when MARSOC units will be integrated with deploying MEUs has not yet been made public and the relationship with Marine Force Reconnaissance units (who had assumed special operations missions in the absence of the Navy SEALs) has not yet been established.

Selected External Perspectives: Marine Corps Roles, Missions, and Force Structure

While there has been a great deal of Marines Corps introspection as to future roles, missions, and how the force should be structured, other institutions are also examining these very same questions. Far from a purely academic exercise, this examination is bounded by the budgetary constraints facing the Marine Corps and its sister services. A sample of some proposals that might merit future discussion includes

³⁵ Gina Harkins, "Expert: USMC Embassy Guard Boost Will be Tough," *Marine Corps Times*, December 21, 2012.

³⁶ Gina Harkins, "Marine Security Guards Stand Up New Posts in Africa," *Marine Corps Times*, June 28, 2013.

³⁷ Hope Hodge Seck, "MARSOC Battalions Get New Regional Assignments," *Marine Corps Times*, September 30, 2013, and Dan Lamothe, "MARSOC Returns to Sea with the 11th MEU," *Marine Corps Times*, June 9, 2013.

The Marines and Special Operations Forces (SOF) Responsible for Worldwide Ground Engagement³⁸

This article in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, published by the National Defense University, proposes that U.S. SOF and Marine MAGTFs should be the lead instruments for land engagement operations with other countries. Engagement activities are viewed as both indirect and preventative in nature and run the gamut from training other nation's military forces, participating in military exercises, and other activities which involve constructive interaction between U.S. and foreign military personnel. In terms of land-oriented engagement operations, the U.S. Army is focusing a significant level of effort in world-wide engagement activities - particularly aspiring to operations in the Asia-Pacific region - in order to "prevent" future conflicts and, if unable to prevent a conflict, at least "shape" its outcome.

The article's authors argue that U.S. SOF and Marine MAGTFs should instead take the lead in DOD engagement activities on land. They contend that SOF and the Marines "both possess capabilities and cultures for early and successful initial ground engagement in the exceedingly complex, unpredictable, and unstructured world that confronts the U.S. military."³⁹ They envision the Marines and SOF undertaking such engagement activities designed to avoid larger and more costly interventions. The Marines, they suggest, are optimally configured in their expeditionary role to provide rapid response not just to engagement opportunities but to humanitarian crises, traditional power projection operations, and forced entry operations if required.

Restructuring the Operational Force⁴⁰

Distributed and Decentralized Forces

A study conducted by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (2008) and an article in the *Naval War College Review* (2012) propose the Marines improve their ability to operate with smaller and more independent units in a highly distributed geographic manner. These small teams would be designed to be highly mobile and capable of conducting low-signature amphibious landings and could also designate targets for airstrikes as well as naval gunfire and missile strikes. These smaller, distributed units could be ideal in dealing with pirates and small, non-state terrorist organizations and would be well-suited for conducting raids and other short duration operations. In a less lethal role, these units could also conduct train-and-advise operations with friendly military forces operating in a remote field environment. These types of units could also meet the U.S. strategic intent of conducting "light foot print" operations whenever possible.

³⁸ Information in this section is taken from Kevin D. Stringer and Katie M. Sizemore, "The Future of U.S. Landpower, Special Operations Versatility, Marines Corps Utility," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (JFQ), Issue 69, 2nd Quarter 2013, pp. 84-90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ Information in this section is taken from Robert P. Kozloski, "Marching Toward the Sweet Spot: Options for the U.S. Marine Corps in a Time of Austerity," *Naval War College Review*, 2012 and Dakota L. Wood, "The U.S. Marine Corps: Fleet Marine Forces for the 21st Century," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC, 2008.

Focus on Company and Battalion-Sized Forces⁴¹

Both the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments study and the Naval War College article support and expand on the findings of the Marine's 2010 Force Structure Review Group study⁴² which contends the Marines should occupy a "sweet spot" with respect to joint forces, lying between an Army regiment [in actuality this would be an Army Brigade Combat Team (BCT) as the Army does not typically organize for combat as a regiment] and a special operations team (about a platoon-sized organization). This "sweet spot" is further defined as the company to battalion level and the authors suggest the Marines should emphasize company and battalion level operations and should focus their efforts and resources at this lower level of employment. This lower level emphasis could not only address DOD's "light foot print" aspiration but might also be more cost efficient in an era of budgetary constraints. The recent creation of SPMAGTF-CRs built around a reinforced Marine rifle company could prove to be a model for this lower level focus. In terms of Marine forces afloat, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments⁴³ suggests the creation of a littoral operations MAGTF consisting of a reinforced Marine rifle company embarked on an LPD-17⁴⁴ amphibious transport and two or three Littoral Combat Ships (LCS).⁴⁵ The author contends that this particular force mix would be well-suited for the types of operational challenges likely to be faced by the Naval Services in the future.

Marine Aviation⁴⁶

In "Marching Towards the Sweet Spot: Options for the U.S. Marine Corps in a Time of Austerity," the author acknowledges the contentious issue of Marine Aviation, noting that questions as to the need for the Marines to have their own dedicated air arm have been in existence since the post-World War II unification movement and continue to this day. The Marines have argued the justification for having their own tactical air force is the "uniqueness" of the Marine Corps combined arms team and if their air arm was reduced or eliminated, the other services would have to fill the void.

Given DOD's current and anticipated fiscal austerity, one suggestion would be to eliminate "high-end" fixed wing aircraft such as the F-35B short takeoff and vertical landing variant of the Lightning II multi-role fighter⁴⁷ and instead rely on Navy aircraft for fixed-wing close air support. Aside from fixed-wing air support, in keeping with the Marines' focus on smaller infantry unit operations, a more affordable mix of tactical air support might be adopted, using rotary-wing, unmanned platforms, and modified cargo aircraft such as the KC-130J Harvest Hawk gunship

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See "Reshaping America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness," Report of the 2010 Marine Corps Force Structure Review Group, March 14, 2011.

⁴³ Dakota L. Wood, "The U.S. Marine Corps: Fleet Marine Forces for the 21st Century," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC, 2008, p. xv.

⁴⁴ For additional information on the LPD-17 see CRS Report RL34476, *Navy LPD-17 Amphibious Ship Procurement: Background, Issues, and Options for Congress*, by (name redacted).

⁴⁵ For additional information on the LCS see CRS Report RL33741, *Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

⁴⁶ Information in this section is taken from Robert P. Kozloski, "Marching Toward the Sweet Spot: Options for the U.S. Marine Corps in a Time of Austerity," Naval War College Review, 2012.

⁴⁷ For additional information on the F-35 see CRS Report RL30563, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, by (name redacted).

variant or modified MV-22 Ospreys might be pursued. This new mix might be more in keeping with the types contingency operations that the Marines are more likely to face in the future as opposed to major theater wars which many experts feel are a much more remote possibility.

Move Selected Capabilities into the Reserves⁴⁸

Some analysts believe the Marines are attempting to balance three identities: a forward-deployed amphibious force; the small-wars force of choice; and a force that fights the nation's major land wars. Some believe that twelve years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Marines were tasked to function as a second land army, made the Marines "become too heavy, too removed from their expeditionary, amphibious roots, and the unique skill sets those missions require."⁴⁹ If the Marine Corps opts for a more expeditionary, crisis response type of force, many of the capabilities needed for fighting a major land war could be shifted to the reserve component. The Marine Corps Reserves have been touted as a success story during Operation Iraqi Freedom as they did not require an extensive train up period to achieve an acceptable level of operational effectiveness. Some of the major warfighting capabilities viewed as candidates for being moved into the reserves include tank, artillery, and aviation command and control units that support wing-level task forces.⁵⁰ In addition, fixed-wing Marine aviation units needed to support major theater operations could also be moved to the Marine Corps Reserve as operations of this nature have historically permitted time to buildup forces.⁵¹

Potential Issues for Congress

Marine Corps Roles and Missions

Historically, eras of declining or constrained defense budgets have served as "forcing functions" ushering in changes in service's roles and missions and force structure. Perhaps in the current era of sequestration, redundancies between the Marines and the Army are an issue worth examination.

Should the Marines Be Given the Leading Role in the Pacific?

The Administration's 2012 strategic shift to the Pacific region could present an opportunity to both focus resources and eliminate redundancies. The U.S. Naval Institute notes:

Former Marine Corps deputy commandant for aviation Lt. Gen. George Trautman agreed that the service will return to its traditional role in the vast stretches of the Pacific. "The presence of strength breeds prosperity and peace," he said.

⁴⁸ Information in this section is taken from Robert P. Kozloski, "Marching Toward the Sweet Spot: Options for the U.S. Marine Corps in a Time of Austerity," *Naval War College Review*, 2012; Dakota L. Wood, "The U.S. Marine Corps: Fleet Marine Forces for the 21st Century," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC, 2008; and Marc Gunzinger, "Shaping America's Future Military," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC, 2013.

⁴⁹ Gunzinger, p. 47, quoting a Secretary of Defense Robert Gates lecture.

⁵⁰ Kozloski, p. 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

The Marines have been in the Pacific theater continuously over the past 70 years to keep the peace, he said, and that presence will continue to grow as the United States rebalances its forces to the region. Anytime a crisis emerges, the Marines are usually the first to respond, be it a humanitarian disaster or some kind of unanticipated military crisis.

The service plans to keep a force of Marines deployed to Darwin, Australia, as part of the renewed interest the region, for example, Trautman says. Additionally, forces are being redistributed from Okinawa, Japan, to both Guam and Hawaii. Meanwhile, the doors are being reopened to training in Thailand and the Philippines, he added.

“Marines will be used all over the Pacific in small packets,” Work said. Those units will respond to any number of different types of contingencies. Moreover, the Marine Corps has strong ties with partners in the region. One example is the island nation of Singapore. “The partnership between Marine Aviation and Singapore air force is as solid as can be,” Trautman said. Meanwhile, the service also has historic ties with the South Korea’s Marine Corps, which is closely modeled on its American counterpart.⁵²

In a similar effort, the U.S. Army is seeking to assert itself in the region, with some analysts suggesting that in a post Iraq and Afghanistan world—where few foresee the U.S. getting involved costly, long term land operations—the Army is in search of a mission and has decided to make engagement in the Asia-Pacific region a priority. Other than a significant presence in South Korea, the Army does not have the history or presence that Marines enjoy in the Pacific.

One recent report suggests Army efforts to reassert itself in the Pacific are being undertaken to develop a strategic narrative and an argument to prevent future Army personnel cuts.⁵³ While some have asserted the Army is trying to create a second Marine Corps in the Pacific and building a force that the nation doesn’t need, the Army claims that it has a long, unbroken history in the Pacific. This situation has evolved into what has been described as a “turf war” in the Pacific, a not uncommon occurrence between the Army and Marines, particularly during post-war periods when forces are reduced and defense budgets decline.

Perhaps, instead of competing for missions in the Pacific where the Marines are currently established, the Marines could be allocated the lead role in the Pacific region and the Army could be assigned the lead in another region better suited to the Army’s land-centric focus. Such an allocation might help to avoid redundancy and associated costs and perhaps help the Army reallocate resources that it would use to expand its Pacific presence to other areas such as training and maintenance that are suffering due to decreased funding.

Should the Marines’ Focus Be Primarily Crisis Response?

Assigning the leading role of crisis response to the Marines could help to decrease redundancy and also achieve a level of cost savings for both the Army and Marine Corps. As previously noted, in addition to MEUs stationed at sea around the world, the Marines have created a SPMAGTF-CR for the USAFRICOM region and could possibly create additional units to support other geographic combatant commanders. In a similar move, the Chief of Staff of the Army has reportedly directed the creation of company-sized unit quick-response forces for each geographic

⁵² Dave Majumdar, “The Future of the Marines Corps, U.S. Naval Institute, June 14, 2013.

⁵³ Information in this section is taken from Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “Army’s Pacific Pathways’ Sets up Turf Battle with the Marines,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2013.

combatant commander to perform essentially the same tasks as the Marines SPMAGT-CRs.⁵⁴ These Army units, formed around a conventional infantry company, would be required to respond within 18 to 24 hours, but such a response could prove to be difficult as the vast majority of the Active Army will be based in the continental United States after 2014. In contrast, in addition to the MEUs afloat, the Marines envision stationing their crisis response units forward in theater where they would likely have a better response time than Army units and would also have the benefit of their own organic CV-22 and KC-130 aircraft to self-deploy their forces.

If the Marines are to focus primarily on crisis response, this could provide them with the opportunity to perhaps “slim down” the force by focusing instead on what types of force structure and equipment would be required for response to natural disasters, enhanced protection of U.S. diplomatic facilities and personnel, and limited raid-like combat operations. A clear delineation of who has the lead responsibility for crisis response might also permit the Army to eliminate some of its crisis response force structure and instead focus its limited budget resources on post-crisis follow-on operations and traditional land combat. For example, the Army reportedly has a requirement for 49,000 paratroopers according to the 2012 Defense Planning Guidance, with one entire division—the 82nd Airborne Division from Ft. Bragg, N.C.—devoted primarily to crisis response.⁵⁵ While a need for an Army airborne assault capability exists from a joint perspective, perhaps a large scale, “ready to deploy at a moment’s notice” capability might no longer be appropriate given anticipated future security challenges.⁵⁶ If the Marines were designated the lead service for crisis response, both services might be presented with an opportunity to better focus their resources and training and thereby increase overall effectiveness. While some defense officials might argue that the Marines and Army must have separate and distinct crisis response capabilities and associated forces, an argument might be made that a degree of specialization could actually be more effective and cost efficient over time.

How Much Amphibious Assault Capability Does the Marine Corps Need?

According to the 2010 report of the Marine Corps Force Structure Review Group, the Marines require the forces, ships, and equipment to accommodate the assault echelons of two MEBs.⁵⁷ In April 2012, the Marine Corps published the results of an Amphibious Capabilities Working Group study on naval amphibious capability. The study, *Naval Amphibious Capability in the 21st Century: Strategic Opportunity and a Vision for Change*, states the United States is a maritime nation with critical maritime interests, noting 90% of global commerce that travels by sea is most vulnerable where sea meets land in the littorals.⁵⁸ The study further finds “for a maritime nation with global interests, a minimal two brigade amphibious force represents a sound investment in ensuring access for the rest of the joint force.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Michelle Tan, “Army Quick-Response Forces Stood Up Around the World,” *Army Times*, November 11, 2013.

⁵⁵ Brett Barrouquere, “Army Drops Number of Paratroops,” *Army Times*, November 30, 2013.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that in terms of a short notice, world-wide airborne capability, the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment also has such a capability and, as a special operations force, is extensively trained to conduct a variety of operations in demanding environments.

⁵⁷ “Reshaping America’s Expeditionary Force in Readiness,” Report of the 2010 Marine Corps Force Structure Review Group, March 14, 2011, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Information in this section was taken from “Naval Amphibious Capability in the 21st Century: Strategic Opportunity and a Vision for Change,” a report of the Amphibious Capabilities Working Group, April 27, 2012.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

While U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 5063 sets out the requirements for the Marines and Navy to maintain an amphibious assault capability, there is discretion as to “how much” of this capability is required. If the Marines choose to focus on smaller, battalion and company-level operations based on analysis of likely future threats, then there might be an opportunity to look at this requirement for two MEB’s worth of capability which could have an impact on Marine Corps force structure and equipment programs⁶⁰ and Navy shipbuilding.

Marine Corps Force Structure

If the Marine Corps draws down to a 182,000 or lower active endstrength, there might be opportunities to modify force structure to reflect both a smaller Marine Corps and the types of future threats that it might face.

Marine Forces Afloat

As previously discussed, the Marines maintain two to three MEUs at sea to respond to crises as well as other military operations as directed. As the Marine Corps adapts to accommodate a smaller active force, a strategic shift to the Pacific, and an emerging security environment where smaller, localized threats to U.S. security interests are more likely than major theater conflicts, a reexamination of the traditional MEU might be in order. Marine leadership may have already taken the first step by creating forward-deployed, land-based SPMAGTF-CRs. To provide a ship-based complement, perhaps littoral operations MAGTF consisting of a reinforced Marine rifle company embarked on a LPD-17 accompanied by a couple of LCSs as previously proposed might be appropriate in some circumstances. While the littoral MAGTF might not be the Marines chosen solution, a smaller MEU construct might permit the Marines and Navy to provide more global coverage than the existing two to three embarked MEUs.

Emphasis on Battalion and Company-Sized Units

In order to fill the “sweet spot” between special forces and an Army BCT, the Marines might choose to make company and battalion-sized units the focus of its force structure initiatives. This force level could prove to be appropriate for the types of crisis response missions the Marines could be asked to respond to as well as any engagement or security assistance operations they might be asked to perform. A potential benefit of this focus could be the elimination or reduction of higher echelon headquarters and support units (possibly regimental-level) which could also greatly facilitate both decentralized and distributed operations. This emphasis also recognizes the claim that military technological innovations over the past decade such as information technology, unmanned systems, and precision weaponry have given smaller units of action significantly more capability than their predecessors.

⁶⁰ For information on Marine amphibious assault vehicles see CRS Report R42723, *Marine Corps Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV) and Marine Personnel Carrier (MPC): Background and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

Should More of the Marines' Major Warfighting Capability Be Placed in the Reserves?

If the Marines are determined to return to their expeditionary roots and avoid becoming a de facto "second land army" perhaps one course of action might be to place an increased portion of forces and weapons systems that are more suited for major regional conflicts into the Marine Corps Reserve. Such realignment could permit the Marines to pursue material solutions better suited for crisis response operations. More expensive systems such as tanks, artillery, and high performance aircraft - which would probably be of little use in embassy security or humanitarian support missions - might prove to be better suited for placement in the Marine Corps Reserves. A number of DOD and civilian studies suggest that reserve forces when not deployed are a more affordable alternative than maintaining these forces on active duty, particularly those types of units that do not have a great deal of utility except in certain scenarios, such as armor units. In this regard, such a rebalancing of the Marine Corps active and reserve components might enable the Marine to avoid additional cuts in infantry and aviation units if the decision is made to reduce the Marines active endstrength below 182,000.

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