

New U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiatives

Updated October 8, 2020

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. 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. 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. Congress in its regulatory, oversight, and authorization and appropriations roles could take interest in this major proposed force design initiative.

Major Ground Force Eliminations/Reductions/Realignments

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

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

Major Aviation Force Deactivations

Marine aviation force deactivations include 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 plan to reduce the number of F-35 B and C aircraft (see CRS Report RL30563, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, by Jeremiah Gertler) 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, is to be the focal point of higher echelon modernization [described](#) as follows:

- The Marine Corps is to 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 is 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) are to generate forces to support MLRs and MEUs.

First Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) Being Formed

The first MLR is [reportedly](#) being formed in Hawaii, largely from units already stationed there. The 3rd Marine Regiment in Hawaii is to be the first to transform to a MLR, and it is planned to conduct experimentation before converting the other two regiments, the 4th and 12th Marine Regiments, which are stationed in Japan. The MLR is 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 LCT is intended to provide the basis for employing multiple platoon-reinforced-size expeditionary advance base (EAB) sites that can conduct missions such as long-range anti-ship fires, forward arming and refueling of aircraft, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) of key maritime terrain, and air-defense and early warning. The Littoral Anti-Air Battalion is intended to employ air defense, air surveillance and early warning, air control, and forward rearming and refueling capabilities. The Littoral Logistics Battalion is to provide tactical logistics support to the MLR by resupplying expeditionary advance base sites, managing cache sites, and connecting to higher-level logistics providers and provide medical and maintenance capabilities. A regimental headquarters would supplement these organizations with enhanced signals and human intelligence, reconnaissance, communications, logistics planning, civil affairs, cyber, and information operations capabilities.

In September 2020, the 3rd Marine Regiment [reportedly](#) started a three-year test phase for its transition to a MLR. Experiments plan to examine how the MLR will be physically distributed, remain connected through command and control systems, employ fires, see the battlefield, and how it will fit into the Marine's warfighting construct. In addition to new units and operational concepts, new equipment will also be tested.

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.

Potential Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress include, but are not limited to the following:

- The elimination of Marine Tank Battalions represents a significant reduction in the ability to confront enemy armor threats. How will the Marines compensate for the loss of this capability?
- The estimated elimination of 76% of the Marine Cannon Artillery Batteries represents a significant reduction in organic on-shore artillery fire support. How will the Marines compensate for this loss?
- The reduction of F-35s per squadron and the possible reduction in Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs) (see CRS Report RS22942, *Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV): Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert) resulting from unit eliminations/deactivations have implications beyond the Marines, as both are major Joint-Service programs. How might this planned reduction in Marine requirements for F-35s and JLTVs affect the other military service's procurement plans for these systems?
- Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces–Crisis Response units (SPMAGTF-CR) have been used by Combatant Commanders to respond to limited crises in their regions. Will the Marines continue to support SPMAGTF-CRs in its redesigned force structure?
- How do proposed Marine force design changes and intended future capabilities efforts (e.g., long-range fires, smaller infantry battalions) fit into the larger context of changes in Navy and Marine Corps operational concepts and Navy fleet architecture, including the amphibious fleet? (See CRS Report R43543, *Navy LPD-17 Flight II and LHA Amphibious Ship Programs: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, and CRS Report RL32665, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.)

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