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The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR)

Background

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) announced a major force design initiative planned to occur over 10 years originally referred to as "Force Design 2030" which is now known as "Force Design." As part of this initiative, the Marines are redesigning forces to place a stronger emphasis on naval expeditionary warfare to better align with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, the strategy's focus on strategic competition with China and Russia. As part of the redesign, the Marines plan to establish at least three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish a number of missions within contested maritime spaces.

MLR Missions

According to the Marines, the MLR is to be capable of the following missions:

- Conduct Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), a form of expeditionary warfare involving the employment of naval expeditionary forces with low electronic and physical signatures, which are relatively easy to maintain/sustain. Selected Marine and Navy forces are to be arrayed in a series of austere, temporary locations ashore within a contested or potentially contested maritime area to conduct sea denial, support, sea control, and fleet sustainment operations.
- Conduct strike operations with a variety of systems.
- Coordinate air and missile defense operations.
- Support maritime domain awareness.
- Support naval surface warfare operations.
- Support information operations.

The MLR's Operational Environment

The Commandant of the Marine Corps' May 2022 Force Design 2030 Annual Update stated

> The security environment is characterized by proliferation of sophisticated sensors and precision weapons coupled with growing strategic competition. Potential adversaries employ systems and tactics to hold the fleet and joint force at arm's length, allowing them to employ a strategy that uses contested areas as a shield behind which they can apply a range of coercive measures against our allies and partners.

Operating in this environment, MLRs are envisioned to serve as what the Marines call a "Stand-In Force (SIF)," intended to help the fleet and joint force win the reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance battle within a contested area at the leading edge of a maritime defense-in-depth.

MLR Employment

According to a May 25, 2022, Marine Corps Association article "Missions, MAGTFs, Force Design & Change," by Colonel Michael R. Kennedy, USMC (Retired), MLRs are intended to

> Deploy to islands, coastlines, and observation posts along chokepoints where their networked sensors and weapons can surveil the air and surface (and, potentially subsurface) waterways. The timing of their insertion is implied to be in the "competition" phase before hostilities start. The duration of their stay is less clear, and potentially challenging as resupply over long distances … will be challenging.… Host nation support (if it exists) will be critical as will prepositioned supplies and even "foraging. The MLR's purpose will be to observe and prevent any "grey zone" activities that lead to fait accompli actions.

MLR Organizational Structure

As currently envisioned, the MLR is to consist of approximately 1,800 to 2,000 Sailors and Marines composed of four elements:

- A **Command Element.** A regimental headquarters with enhanced signals and human intelligence, reconnaissance, communications, logistics planning, civil affairs, cyber, and information operations capabilities.
- A **Littoral Combat Team** consisting of an infantry battalion and an anti-ship missile battery. The Littoral Combat Team is to provide the basis for multiple reinforced platoon-sized expeditionary advanced base sites capable of conducting a variety of missions.
- A **Littoral Anti-Air Battalion** designed to conduct air defense, air surveillance and early warning, air control, and forward rearming and refueling operations.
- A **Combat Logistics Battalion** designed to resupply expeditionary advanced base sites, manage cache sites, and connect with higher-level logistics providers. The Combat Logistics Battalion is also to provide limited purchasing authority, medical support, ammunition and fuel distribution, and field maintenance.

Selected MLR Systems

In order to accomplish the wide range of MLR missions, the Marines and Navy are pursuing a number of essential systems including, but not limited to, the following:

Navy-Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS)

NMESIS consists of the Naval Strike Missile mounted on the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV). It is a ground-based anti-ship capability intended to facilitate sea denial

and control. Reportedly, NMESIS batteries will be composed of 18 launchers, separated into two platoons of nine launchers each. The Marines plan to field 14 batteries, three of which are planned to be deployed to MLRs, while 11 will be deployed to the continental United States to support of rotational Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) deployments. The Marines plan to declare Initial Operating Capability (IOC) for NMESIS by 2025, once four batteries are fully equipped. After the 14 batteries are deployed in 2030, NMESIS is to reach full operational capability (FOC). Reportedly, the 3rd MLR received its NMESIS fire units in late November 2024, which are to be assigned to the 3rd MLR's Medium-Range Missile Battery stationed in Oahu, HI.

MQ-9 Reaper Unmanned Aerial System (UAS)

The MQ-9 Reaper is a medium-to-high altitude, long-endurance UAS. The MQ-9's primary mission is to serve as a persistent hunter-killer against enemy targets. The MQ-9's alternate mission is to act as an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platform. In August 2023, the Marines activated the MQ-9-equipped Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron 3 (VMU 3) at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. The Marines plan to field a total of 18 Reapers between two Active and one Reserve squadron by 2025. On November 21, 2024, Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Training Squadron (VMUT) 2 conducted its first MQ-9A Reaper flight at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina.

Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS)

According to the Marines,

> MADIS is a short-range, surface-to-air system that enables [MLR] Low Altitude Air Defense Battalions to deter and neutralize unmanned aircraft systems and fixed wing/rotary wing aircraft. Mounted aboard two JLTVs, the system is a complementary pair. MADIS includes multiple disparate systems, including radar systems, surface-to-air missiles, and command and control elements.

MADIS Initial Operational Test and Evaluation (IOT&E) is scheduled for FY2024. The 3rd Littoral Anti-Air Battalion is planned to be the first unit to receive MADIS.

Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM) (Previously Light Amphibious Warship [LAW])

A Navy program, the LSM is intended to fill a capability gap between large, multipurpose amphibious warfare/L-class ships and smaller, short-range landing craft. The LSM is planned to be a low-signature, beaching, shore-to-shore vessel with intra-theater endurance capable of operating independently or with other surface ships in contested environments in support of EABO.

MLR Establishment

On March 3, 2022, the Marines redesignated the 3rd Marine Regiment as the 3rd MLR at Marine Corps Base Hawaii. Reportedly, the 3rd MLR achieved IOC by the end of FY2023 after a Force Design Integration Exercise in September 2023, where Pacific-based Marines, including the 3rd MLR, practiced distributed operations and other Stand-In Force capabilities around the Hawaiian Islands. The 3rd MLR is expected to achieve FOC in FY2025.

Reportedly, the 12th Marine Artillery Regiment stationed in Okinawa is to be reorganized into the 12th MLR by 2025. On December 5, 2024, the 12th Littoral Anti-Air Battalion was activated at Camp Hansen Okinawa, Japan. The Marines also reportedly plan to transfer the 4th Marine Regiment from Okinawa to Guam, where it is scheduled to be reorganized into the 4th MLR in 2027. Reportedly, this Guam-based MLR is to rely on rotational forces as opposed to permanently stationed Marines.

Potential Issues for Congress

The Marine Corps Force Design and the creation of MLRs raise a number of potential issues for Congress, including but not limited to the following:

MLR Utility Outside the Indo-Pacific

While Marine leadership have noted MLRs are being designed to operate in the Indo-Pacific region, the Marines have global security responsibilities. Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has arguably changed the global security environment and raises potential questions about what role MLRs might play outside of the Indo-Pacific region. Are MLRs structured and equipped to successfully operate in support of U.S. NATO responsibilities if required? If three Indo-Pacific MLRs are needed to support operations in the region, are there plans to develop MLRs for other regions? Congress might decide to examine MLR structure and capabilities in regards to how MLRs might support potential NATO operations and if additional force structure and systems should be dedicated to create MLRs to support operations outside the Indo-Pacific region.

Role of the Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM)

The Marines have noted Stand-In Forces require organic operational mobility, such as the LSM, to deploy and sustain MLR elements in support of EABO. The Navy envisions procuring up to 35 LSMs and had planned procuring the first LSM in FY2023, but deferred the procurement of the first LSM to FY2025. While Navy leadership has stated procuring the LSM is a priority, it has been suggested the Marines and Navy have differing views about required LSM numbers and capabilities, with one report suggesting the Marines require nine LSMs for each MLR. Pending delivery of the first LSMs, the Marines are examining options for other platforms. Given uncertain and shifting Navy shipbuilding plans and the Marine's reliance on the procurement of LSMs, Congress may examine risks associated with MLR deployment and sustainment if fewer LSMs are procured or if fielding timelines are extended. If Congress deems such risks unacceptable, Congress might decide to reprioritize Navy shipbuilding plans or provide additional funding for the LSM program.

Additional Reading

- CRS Report R47614, *U.S. Marine Corps Force Design 2030 Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert.
- CRS Report R46374, *Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM) (Previously Light Amphibious Warship [LAW]) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

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