

U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress

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U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) announced a major force design initiative referred to as “Force Design 2030,” which is now known as “Force Design.” As part of this 10-year initiative, the Marine Corps plans to redesign the service for naval expeditionary warfare and to better align itself with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, focusing on strategically competing with China and Russia. Force Design initiatives are informed by two operational concepts: Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO). In support of these concepts, the Marines would eliminate or reduce certain types of units and do away with certain military occupational specialties (MOS). The Marines also plan to reorganize higher echelon Marine formations and get smaller by reducing forces by 12,000 personnel by 2030. The Marines have published formal updates in 2021, 2023, and 2025 highlighting both accomplishments and outlining future planned activities.

Since 2020, the Marines have eliminated and reorganized units in accordance with Force Design and have divested a number of capabilities that the Marines believed did not support their expeditionary mission. These major changes have resulted in public opposition from some retired senior Marine Corps officers, national security analysts, as well as former executive branch officials. Proponents of Force Design argue that current Marine Corp force design is outdated and that new forces and operational concepts are required to prevail against China. Critics of Force Design contend the Marines would lose effectiveness as a combined arms force. Moreover, they argue Force Design’s new warfighting concepts are unproven and the distributed operations proposed by the Marines are not logistically supportable.

Congress has been actively involved in the Force Design debate, as well as debates over the Navy’s amphibious ship requirements needed to support operations proposed under Force Design.

Oversight considerations for Congress include

- Force Design’s applicability to NATO commitments in Europe, as well as potential commitments in the Middle East and Africa;
- Force Design and Contested Logistics;
- the Navy’s and Marines’ differing requirements and acquisition priorities for Medium Landing Ships (LSMs);
- the operational impact of eliminating tank battalions, large numbers of towed artillery and manned aircraft;
- the Marines’ ability to participate in future sustained land operations; and
- the impact of emerging lessons from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Marine Corps thinking and approach to Force Design.

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Background

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) announced a major force design initiative referred to as “Force Design 2030.”¹ As part of this 10-year initiative, the Marine Corps plans to redesign the service for naval expeditionary warfare to better align itself with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, focusing on strategically competing with China and Russia. Force Design 2030 initiatives are informed by two operational concepts: Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE)² and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO).³ In support of these concepts, the Marines eliminated or reduced certain types of units and did away with certain military occupational specialties (MOS).⁴ The Marines also plan to reorganize higher echelon Marine formations and get smaller by reducing forces by 12,000 personnel by 2030. In early 2024, the Marines dropped “2030” from Force Design 2030 to reflect the concept that force design modernization was to be “a continuous journey” and that 2030 was not an endpoint.⁵ For the remainder of this report, Force Design 2030 will be used to describe activities prior to 2024 and Force Design will be used to describe activities from 2024 onwards.

Force Design 2030 Major Initiatives

Described as “an ambitious overhaul of the Marine Corps” intended to “make the service more nimble and less vulnerable,”⁶ Force Design 2030, as originally presented, comprised a number of major initiatives, summarized in the following sections.

Major Ground Force Eliminations/Reductions/Realignments

Planned Marine ground force eliminations/reductions/realignments included

- eliminating all Marine Corps Tank Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminating all Law Enforcement Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminating all Bridging Companies and associated MOSs;

¹ Press Release, U.S. Marine Corps Communication Strategy and Operations Office, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Release 002-2020, “Marine Corps Announces New Force Design Initiatives,” March 23, 2020.

² As defined by the Marines, “Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) is a concept that describes the integrated application of Navy and Marine Corps capabilities to overcome emerging threats within littoral areas that are rapidly expanding in operational depth, complexity, and lethality.” For detailed information, see Headquarters, Marine Corps, *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment*, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/160/LOCE%20full%20size%20edition.pdf?ver=2018-06-20-095003-177>, accessed June 6, 2023.

³ As defined by the Marines, “EABO are a form of expeditionary warfare that involve the employment of mobile, low signature, persistent, and relatively easy to maintain and sustain naval expeditionary forces from a series of austere, temporary locations ashore or inshore within a contested or potentially contested maritime area in order to conduct sea denial, support sea control, or enable fleet sustainment.” For detailed information, see Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO)*, <https://www.mcwl.marines.mil/TMEABO/>, accessed June 6, 2023.

⁴ According to the Marines, “There are hundreds of these roles available for aspiring Marines, roles the Marine Corps refers to as Military Occupational Specialties (MOS).” A listing of MOS is available at <https://www.marines.com/about-the-marine-corps/roles/military-occupational-specialty.html>, accessed June 28, 2023.

⁵ Irene Loewenson, “Marine Leaders Drop ‘2030’ from Name of Ambitious Overhaul Plan,” *Marine Corps Times*, February 1, 2024.

⁶ Irene Loewenson, “Marine 3-Star ‘Myth-Busts’ Notions about Force Design 2030,” *Marine Corps Times*, November 22, 2022.

- 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

Planned Marine aviation force deactivations included

- Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 264,
- Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462,
- Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 469,
- Marine Wing Support Groups 27 and 37, and
- Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367.

The Marines also intend to reduce the number of F-35 B and C aircraft in each squadron from 16 to 10.⁷

Reorganization at Higher Echelons

In accordance with Force Design 2030, 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)⁸ organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish sea denial and control within contested maritime spaces as part of the modernized III MEF.
- The Marines would augment the III MEF's Pacific posture by fielding three globally deployable Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) possessing both traditional and Expeditionary Advanced Base capabilities that can deploy with nonstandard Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs).⁹
- I MEF (Camp Pendleton, CA) and II MEF (Camp Lejeune, NC) were to generate forces to support MLRs and MEUs.¹⁰

Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs)¹¹

The MLR includes about 1,800 to 2,000 Marines and sailors and includes three main elements: a Littoral Combat Team (LCT), a Littoral Anti-Air Battalion, and a Littoral Logistics Battalion. The LCT is organized around an infantry battalion along with a long-range anti-ship missile battery.

⁷ For additional information on the F-35, see CRS Report RL30563, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, by John R. Hoehn.

⁸ For additional information on the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), see CRS In Focus IF12200, *The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR)*, by Andrew Feickert.

⁹ For additional information on Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs), see CRS In Focus IF10571, *Defense Primer: Organization of U.S. Ground Forces*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon and Andrew Feickert.

¹⁰ Press Release, U.S. Marine Corps Communication Strategy and Operations Office, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Release 002-2020, "Marine Corps Announces New Force Design Initiatives," March 23, 2020.

¹¹ Megan Eckstein, "Marines Testing Regiment at Heart of Emerging Island-Hopping Future," *U.S. Naval Institute (USNI) News*, June 12, 2020.

The Littoral Anti-Air Battalion employs air defense, air surveillance and early warning, air control, and forward rearming and refueling capabilities. The Littoral Logistics Battalion provides tactical logistics support to the MLR. A regimental headquarters provides the MLR with enhanced signals and human intelligence, reconnaissance, communications, logistics planning, civil affairs, cyber, and information operations capabilities.

In March 2022, the Marines reportedly redesignated the 3rd Marine Regiment as the 3rd MLR.¹² The Marines reportedly planned to convert the 12th Marine Regiment into the 12th MLR in Okinawa, Japan, by 2025¹³ and also planned for a third MLR, possibly to be stationed on Guam.¹⁴

Proposed Future Capabilities of the Redesigned Force

As part of the redesigned Marine Corps for 2030, the Marines intended to develop the following capabilities:¹⁵

- **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:** Develop 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:** Develop a variety of systems and 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.

Force Design 2030 Annual Update 2021

In April 2021, General David Berger, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, provided the status of the 2020 Force Design initiatives.¹⁶ The Commandant's 2021 update highlighted that the Marine Corps had

¹² Aidan Quigley, "Marine Corps to Formally Stand Up First Marine Littoral Regiment this Week," *Inside Defense*, February 28, 2022.

¹³ Joe Gould, "Japan to O.K. New U.S. Marine Littoral Regiment on Okinawa," *Defense News*, January 11, 2023.

¹⁴ Nick Wilson, "Marine Corps Prepares to Stand Up Third MLR, Eyes Guam as Potential Location," *Inside Defense*, March 14, 2023.

¹⁵ Press Release, U.S. Marine Corps Communication Strategy and Operations Office, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Release 002-2020, "Marine Corps Announces New Force Design Initiatives," March 23, 2020.

¹⁶ Headquarters Marine Corps, <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/2021%20Force%20Design%20Annual%20Update.pdf>, accessed June 6, 2023.

- removed all main battle tanks and heavy bridging equipment from the inventory;
- reorganized Marine infantry battalions to provide greater lethality and non-kinetic influence in mobile, distributed operations;
- used the savings from divestments to field long-endurance UASs with payloads for airborne communication, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare;
- eliminated most towed cannon artillery and significant numbers of manned rotary and fixed-winged aircraft from future plans; and
- phased out most legacy logistical capability, previously intended for sustained land operations, and modernized remaining logistical units for distributed maritime operations.

In terms of main battle tanks eliminated under Force Design 2030, 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.¹⁷

In 2020, the Marines divested more than 5,500 pieces of equipment valued at \$494 million.¹⁸ Similar figures for 2021 through 2025 are not publicly available.

The Commandant's Concerns with the Future of Force Design 2030

During a December 2021 meeting at the Center for a New American Security, General Berger, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, reportedly expressed some of his concerns going forward where 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.¹⁹

The Commandant argued that the Navy, the Department of Defense (DOD), which is using “Department of War” as a “secondary title” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025, and Congress should support Force Design 2030 in the next one or two budget cycles.²⁰ The Commandant also noted the requirement for the Navy's Light Amphibious Warship (LAW) - now known as the Medium Landing Ship (LSM) - currently under development, but raised concerns about the LSM's future, given budgetary issues. General Berger also noted that FY2023 force modernization plans called for the fielding of NMESIS (Navy/Marine Corps Expeditionary

¹⁷ Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/410169/force-design-2030-divesting-meet-future-threat>, accessed June 6, 2023.

¹⁸ Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/410169/force-design-2030-divesting-meet-future-threat>, accessed June 6, 2023.

¹⁹ Megan Eckstein, “US Marine Commandant: Fund ‘Force Design 2030, or Leave the Corps in a Lurch,” *Defense News*, December 14, 2021.

²⁰ Federal Register, “Restoring the United States Department of War,” September 10, 2025; <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/09/10/2025-17508/restoring-the-united-states-department-of-war>.

Ship Interdiction System), a ground-based anti-ship missile mounted on an unmanned version of the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV).

Force Design 2030 Annual Update 2023

On June 5, 2023, the Commandant of the Marine Corps Marines released his Force Design 2030 Annual Update covering activities in 2022 and early 2023²¹ The Marine Corps noted that while the update primarily outlines the work ahead, Force Design 2030 had progressed to a point where “operating forces are beginning to use many of the capabilities it describes.”²² In support of further Force Design 2030 development in 2022, the Marines initiated three efforts:

Training and Education 2030²³

According to the Marine Corps, “the current training and education (T&E) system is not preparing the Marine Corps for the future operating environment.”²⁴ In response, the Marine Corps established Training and Education 2030, an initiative that

Sets a new direction, describing how we will transform T&E for the future force. It incorporates best aspects of our time-tested process of making Marines, feedback from Marines in the Fleet Marine Force, and lessons learned from years of force-on-force exercises into explicit guidance for improvements to T&E.²⁵

Installation and Logistics 2030²⁶

The Marines Corps described its logistics challenges as follows

To succeed on tomorrow’s battlefields, we will need a logistics enterprise fully integrated with the broader objectives of Force Design 2030, capable of supporting multi-domain and distributed operations in contested environments. Our stand-in forces (SIF) must be able to persist forward. Currently, our logistical capabilities are under-resourced and do not meet the demands of our future force to succeed on future battlefields.²⁷

Installation and Logistics 2030’s objectives were described as

- creating global logistics awareness,
- diversifying distribution,
- improving sustainment,
- making installations ready for a contested environment, and
- developing logistics professionals for 21st Century.²⁸

²¹ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Annual Update*, at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 6, 2023.

²² Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Annual Update*, p. 2.

²³ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Training and Education 2030*, at <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Training%20and%20Education%202030.pdf>, accessed June 6, 2023.

²⁴ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Training and Education 2030*, p. 2.

²⁵ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Training and Education 2030*, p. 1.

²⁶ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Installations and Logistics 2030*, at <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Installations%20and%20Logistics%202030.pdf>, accessed June 6, 2023.

²⁷ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Installations and Logistics 2030*, p. 1.

²⁸ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Installations and Logistics 2030*, p. 1.

Talent Management 2030²⁹

The Marine Corps noted

To meet future demands, we must immediately pursue technological advancements to our personnel systems to create a holistic talent management system that attracts, develops, incentivizes, and retains the skilled Marines necessary to improve our efficacy as a force.³⁰

In order to accomplish this, the Marine Corps intended to pursue these four lines of effort

- rebalance recruiting and retention,
- optimize the employment of talent,
- establish multiple pathways to career success, and
- develop and employ modern talent management tools.³¹

Selected Future Actions

The Force Design 2030 Annual Update 2023 identified a number of areas needing further analysis, as well as planned actions to be taken in 2023 and 2024. This section summarizes selected areas highlighted in the 2023 Update.

Multi-Domain Reconnaissance

According to the Marine Corps

Wargames, modeling and simulation, experiments, and exercises, along with evidence from the Western Pacific to Ukraine confirm the requirement for littoral, multi-domain reconnaissance capabilities that our light armored reconnaissance (LAR) battalions do not currently provide.³²

In response, the Marines planned to transition current light armored reconnaissance (LAR) battalions into mobile reconnaissance battalions (MRBs). The MRBs are to utilize the Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV)³³ currently under development, but unlike LAR battalions, MRBs are not to be designed around the ARV but instead could include small boats, aerial vehicles, and ultra-light ground vehicles.³⁴ Reportedly, Marine officials suggested ARVs might be too heavy for Pacific-focused MRBs but were necessary in African, European, and Middle Eastern-focused MRBs.³⁵ MRBs were planned to include waterborne maritime reconnaissance companies, light mobile companies, and light armored companies. The Marines further noted MRB design was not yet finalized and additional exercises and analysis were planned to inform the final design.

²⁹ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Talent Management 2030*, at <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Talent%20Management%202030%20Update%20-%20March%202023.pdf>, accessed June 6, 2023.

³⁰ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Talent Management 2030*, p. 1.

³¹ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Talent Management 2030*, at <https://www.marines.mil/Talent-Management-2030/>, accessed June 6, 2023.

³² Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030, Annual Update* at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 8, 2023, p. 7.

³³ For additional information on the Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV), see CRS In Focus IF11831, *Marine Corps Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV)*, by Andrew Feickert.

³⁴ Nick Wilson, “Marine Corps Continues Development of New Recon Units, MLR Capabilities with Force Design Update,” *Inside Defense*, June 5, 2023.

³⁵ Megan Eckstein, “Marine Corps Pushes Dramatic Change for its Reconnaissance Forces,” *Defense News*, June 5, 2023.

Littoral Mobility

The Force Design 2030 Annual Update 2023 noted

After extensive analysis, it was determined a need for nine Landing Ship – Mediums (LSMs)³⁶ to support littoral maneuver of a single regimental sized unit ... Given that current force structure plans call for three Marine Littoral Regiments, the Marines will require 35 LSMs to account for operational availability and mobility for those units. However, current plans for LSM funding (beginning in FY2025) limits the ability to bring this capability online within an operationally relevant timeframe.³⁷

While the Marines were developing “bridging solutions” such as Landing Craft Utility vessels, Expeditionary Fast Transports, and commercial Stern Landing Vessels, the Marines argued that “while these platforms will inform the eventual employment of the LSM, they will fall short of desired capabilities if called upon in an operational setting.”³⁸

Infantry Battalions

As noted earlier, as part of Force Design 2030, the Marines planned to reduce the size of infantry battalions. Toward this end, the Marines undertook extensive analysis and conducted a series of exercises and experiments. According to the 2023 Force Design 2030 Update

These experiments demonstrated that a battalion of 735 Marines—the initial planning factor—was not operationally suitable. We have since adjusted the size of our battalions to 811 Marines. The most recent update to the infantry battalion includes the addition of persistent all-weather surveillance, additional capacity to conduct anti-armor and indirect fire, as well as organic support and services.³⁹

These changes were to be applied to Active and Reserve Marine infantry units and accomplished by September 1, 2023. As part of this restructuring, the Marines also planned to “identify options to accelerate the procurement and training” of loitering munitions to be used by the infantry battalions.⁴⁰

Force Design 2024 Update

Unlike in previous years, the Marine Corps did not release a formal Force Design Update covering 2024. However, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Eric Smith, did provide Congress his thoughts during his May 16, 2024, testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Regarding Force Design, he noted

I remain fully committed to Force Design and all its supporting efforts. The following assumptions inform our modernization efforts: (1) The long-standing trend of increasing dispersion on the battlefield will continue and likely accelerate – frontages will increase,

³⁶ Landing Ship Mediums (LSM) were previously known as Light Amphibious Warship (LAW). For additional information on LSMs, see CRS Report R46374, *Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

³⁷ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Update*, at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 8, 2023, p. 9.

³⁸ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Update*, at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 8, 2023, p. 9.

³⁹ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Update*, at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 8, 2023, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030 Update*, at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_2030_Annual_Update_June_2023.pdf, accessed June 8, 2023, p. 10.

battlefield depth will increase, and sanctuary will be difficult to achieve; (2) winning the all-domain reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance fight provides significant warfighting advantage and losing this fight will be increasingly difficult to overcome; (3) the Marine Corps' ability to task-organize for specific missions will continue to be a source of competitive advantage for the service; and (4) the future operating environment requires threat-informed modernization of Marine Corps capabilities.⁴¹

In the Commandant's 2024 Planning Guidance, he further elaborated

As we move Force Design forward, we must continually assess where we are, and we must commit our resources in ways that reinforce success. There are no "untouchable" programs – we will assess each program based on its effectiveness and applicability to the future fight. Through our Campaign of Learning we will identify and transition resources away from good ideas that are either ahead of their time or have been proven ineffective after additional experimentation. It is imperative that we continually refine our modernization through experimentation, force-on-force exercises, data, and analysis. Our Campaign of Learning is continuous, and the Service has proven willing to adjust where necessary – including refinements to our quantity of cannon artillery, the size and shape of our infantry battalions, capacity within our Marine Aircraft Wings, composition of our Marine Wing Support Squadrons, and our gap crossing capabilities.⁴²

Force Design 2025 Update

In October 2025, the Commandant released his Force Design 2025 Annual Update covering the period from August 2024 until the present.⁴³ The Commandant stated that "The Marine Corps is in the implementation phase of Force Design, integrating new technology, refining organizational structure, and strengthening naval and Joint Forces," and highlighted a number of activities

- Participation in Balikatan 25, an exercise designed to "enhance interoperability between the Marine Corps, Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. For the first time, the 3rd MLR integrated the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), Marine Air Defense Integrated System (MADIS), and AN/TPS-80 Ground/ Air Task-Oriented Radar (G/ATOR) into this exercise, all within the First Island Chain."⁴⁴
- Participation in Kamandag 9 and Talisman Sabre 25 exercises with Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom designed to "to fuse intelligence and operations for faster and more precise target engagement."⁴⁵
- Participation in Resolute Dragon 25 where the III MEF and the JSDF rehearsed Expeditionary Advanced Basing Operations (EABO).
- Participation in Atlantic Alliance 25 where the II MEF and 2nd Fleet exercised distributed littoral warfare in a contested environment with "Dutch, Canadian,

⁴¹ Statement of General Eric Smith Commandant of the Marine Corps, to the Senate Armed Services Committee on The Posture of the United States Marine Corps, May 16, 2024.

⁴² 39th Commandant's Planning Guidance, August 2024, p. 24.

⁴³ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025.

⁴⁴ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 3.

and United Kingdom forces both afloat and ashore. This event was the largest amphibious exercise in the Western Atlantic in over a decade.”⁴⁶

Force Structure Updates

As part of the Commandant’s 2025 Force Design Update, the following force structure-related status updates were provided⁴⁷

- **MLRS:** Two MLRs were established in III MEF—the 3rd MLR and the 12th MLR. The 3rd MLR achieved Initial Operating Capability (IOC) in December 2023 and the 12th MLR is projected to achieve IOC in 2026.
- **4TH Marine Regiment:** The Marines have decided that the “4th Marine Regiment will be retained in III MEF as a reinforced Marine Infantry Regiment, preserving its core mission while preparing to respond to potential crisis and conflict. We determined through the Campaign of Learning that two MLRs and one reinforced Marine Infantry Regiment in III MEF is the optimal force composition to meet III MEF’s missions and objectives. The Marine Corps will provide previously programmed MLR-associated equipment and personnel to III MEF to be task organized in support of the commander’s objectives.”⁴⁸ It should be noted that this is a change to the Marines’ original intent to establish three MLRs.
- **Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs):** “Just as our MLRs are being equipped with NMESIS, MADIS, resilient command and control, unmanned systems, and advanced sensing networks, those same capabilities are now being fielded across the MEUs. This modernization strengthens the MEU’s role as a versatile, multi-domain naval expeditionary force from the sea, able to project power, seize and hold key maritime terrain, sense and make sense of the operating environment, integrate with the fleet, and directly contribute to joint kill webs. Recent deployments by the 15th, 24th, and 31st MEUs have showcased the enhanced capabilities of the MEU.”⁴⁹
- **Infantry Battalions:** The Marines “made two in-stride adjustments to the Infantry Battalion’s structure based on feedback from the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) and observations gathered through the Campaign of Learning. Further informed by our Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) led Infantry Battalion Experimentation (IBX) efforts, over the next year we will recommend further changes that preserve our infantry battalions’ combat advantage as the character of war evolves.”⁵⁰ These two adjustments are:
 - **Fires and Reconnaissance Company:** The Marines “directed the establishment of a Fires and Reconnaissance company that enables the

⁴⁶ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Information in this section is taken from Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

integration of manned and unmanned intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) assets with organic fires capabilities.”⁵¹

- **Infantry Squad:** Reportedly, as part of the Force Design experimentation process, the Marine have experimented with rifle squads with as few as 12 Marines to as many as 15.⁵² The 2025 Force Design update stated that the Marines had “made the decision to return to the 13-Marine rifle squad, three fire teams led by a school-trained Sergeant with an added precision fires Marine to operate our small lethal drones.”⁵³

Force Design and the Public Debate

The 2020 release of Force Design 2030 resulted in a great deal of public debate. Many critics of the original Force Design 2030 were retired senior Marine Corps officers, national security analysts, as well as former executive branch officials.⁵⁴ One report noted

An influential group of over two dozen retired generals has launched a counteroffensive against plans to transform the Marine Corps, and is using their clout in a high-power pressure campaign to get Congress to slam on the brakes. The roster of personalities includes every living former commandant, along with a slew of other retired four-star generals revered within the Corps. And all of them are bristling at different aspects of foundational changes introduced by Commandant Gen. David Berger, who aims to make the Corps lighter, faster and more capable of doing everything from electronic warfare to sinking ships at sea The group of retired generals includes former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, former Joint Chiefs Chair Joe Dunford and John Kelly, a former Homeland Security chief and White House chief of staff.⁵⁵

Force Design 2030 critics argued that

- the Marines would no longer be an effective combined arms force because of divestments in armor, artillery, and aviation capabilities;⁵⁶
- Force Design 2030’s focus on China downplays the possibility of conflicts elsewhere;⁵⁷
- Force Design 2030’s new warfighting concepts are unproven;⁵⁸

⁵¹ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

⁵² Jeff Schogol, “The Marine Corps Has Settled the Debate Over the Size of a Rifle Squad,” *Task and Purpose*, April 7, 2025.

⁵³ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Paul Mc Cleary and Lee Hudson, “How Two Dozen Retired Generals are Trying to Stop an Overhaul of the Marines,” *Politico*, April 1, 2022.

⁵⁵ Paul Mc Cleary and Lee Hudson, “How Two Dozen Retired Generals are Trying to Stop an Overhaul of the Marines.”

⁵⁶ Lt. Gen. Paul K. Van Riper (Retired), “Jeopardizing National Security: What is Happening to Our Marine Corps?” *Marine Corps Times*, March 21, 2022.

⁵⁷ Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2022: Marine Corps,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2021, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁸ Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2022: Marine Corps.”

- a force designed for an island campaign in the Western Pacific will not be successful if deployed to another region and employed in a different kind of campaign;⁵⁹
- Force Design 2030 does not address logistics support;⁶⁰
- Force Design 2030 does not take into account other missions and limits ground mobility;⁶¹ and
- the Marines would be less capable fighting in urban environments.⁶²

Conversely, a number of Force Design 2030 supporters publicly stated their support. Selected arguments in support of Force Design 2030 included

- the current Marine Corp force design is outdated;⁶³
- Force Design 2030 is how the Marines must operate to prevail against China;⁶⁴
- Force Design 2030 and associated operational concepts more closely conform to the Marines' Title X mission;⁶⁵
- Force Design 2030 is more cost-effective;⁶⁶
- Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) create a dilemma for adversaries;⁶⁷
- Force Design 2030 would result in reduced dependency on manned aircraft;⁶⁸ and
- Force Design 2030 facilitates greater competition and deterrence.⁶⁹

While the criticisms and merits of Force Design continue to be debated both publicly and privately, the Marines have stated they are in the “implementation phase of Force Design,” and it

⁵⁹ Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2022: Marine Corps.”

⁶⁰ Stephen W. Miller, “All Change at the Corps: Force Design 2030,” *Armada International*, October 25, 2021.

⁶¹ Stephen W. Miller, “All Change at the Corps: Force Design 2030.”

⁶² Bing West, “Ukraine’s Tragedy Should Refocus the U.S. Marine Corps,” *National Review*, March 13, 2022.

⁶³ U.S. Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030*, March 2020, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Tom Rogan, “The Marines Are Reforming to Prepare for War with China; General David H. Berger Seeks a More Agile Force,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2022.

⁶⁵ According to 10 U.S.C. §5063, *United States Marine Corps Composition; Functions*, “The Marine Corps, within the Department of the Navy, shall be so organized as to include not less than three combat divisions and three air wings, and such other land combat, aviation, and other services as may be organic therein. 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.” For additional discussion, see Carl Forsling, “The Commandant of the Marine Corps is Charging into the Future, But Some Aren’t Ready for Change,” *Task and Purpose*, July 21, 2021.

⁶⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, “Still First to Fight? Shaping The 21st Century Marine Corps,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2020, p. 6.

⁶⁷ General Eric Smith, USMC, “Stand-In Forces: Adapt or Perish,” Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute, vol. 148, April 2022.

⁶⁸ Frank G. Hoffman, “Still First to Fight? Shaping The 21st Century Marine Corps,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2020, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2022: Marine Corps,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2021, p. 5.

appears the majority of Force Design's original initiatives have been or are in the process of being implemented.

Force Design and the Navy Medium Landing Ship (LSM)

Marines are dependent on Navy amphibious shipping for maritime transport, resupply, and amphibious assault operations. As previously noted, the LSM plays a critical role in Force Design planning and strategic execution. According to the Marines

The LSM is central to providing mobility for fires, sensors, command and control, and sustainment across contested littorals. We are pursuing this program through a three-phased approach. First, we are filling today's gap with interim solutions under the Littoral Maneuver Bridging Strategy. Second, we are procuring LSM Block 1, a proven non-developmental vessel, to achieve initial operational capability. Third, we will procure LSM Block Next, a fully mature, optimized solution that incorporates advanced technologies. Working aggressively with the Navy, we are moving to field this capability as soon as possible.⁷⁰

Reportedly, the Navy had planned to acquire from 18 to 35 ships to support three MLRs, with the Navy's FY2026 Budget Request calling for \$1.96 billion for the procurement of an initial nine LSMs.⁷¹ The Navy had planned to acquire an original LSM design, but the "plan was abandoned in late 2024 when industry bids far exceeded the allocated budget."⁷² Reportedly, the Navy is "now pursuing a revised acquisition strategy based on the accelerated procurement of a commercial/non-developmental item (CNDI) design."⁷³

Congress and Force Design

Throughout the Force Design process, Congress has played an active role. Some reports suggested that initially

In general, while some former military officials vehemently disagree with Berger's plan for the Marine Corps, he's gotten high marks publicly from lawmakers during hearings for his efforts on Force Design 2030, despite the public challenges....⁷⁴

Some Members have questioned Force Design 2030. For example, a member noted the following during May 2, 2023, testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on "The Current Readiness of the Joint Force."

I have also spent dozens of hours studying and asking questions about Marine Corps Force design of current and former Marine Corps leaders. But more from the Congress needs to be done on an initiative of this consequence and magnitude. Tough probing questions are required from this committee. No plan is perfect, especially military plans. And no general is infallible. Force design needs rigorous oversight, not out of disrespect for the Marine

⁷⁰ Headquarters Marine Corps, Force Design Update 2025 at https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/Force_Design_Update-October_2025.pdf, accessed November 20, 2025, p. 12.

⁷¹ Richard Scott, "US Navy Takes Next Steps for New LSM Medium Landing Ship Class," *Naval News*, August 18, 2025.

⁷² Richard Scott, "US Navy Takes Next Steps for New LSM Medium Landing Ship Class."

⁷³ Richard Scott, "US Navy Takes Next Steps for New LSM Medium Landing Ship Class."

⁷⁴ Justin Katz, "Lawmakers Rev Up Support for Marine Corps' Force Design 2030 in Letter to Appropriators," *Breaking Defense*, May 18, 2023.

Corps, but out of an abiding respect for this exceptional and unique American institution and the critical role it has played and will continue to play in our nation's defense.⁷⁵

On May 27, 2022, a group of Senators and Representatives sent a letter to the chairmen and ranking members of the Subcommittee on Defense, Senate Committee on Appropriations, and Subcommittee on Defense, House Committee on Appropriations, requesting “support of budgetary items that invest in the Marines Corps Force Design 2030 initiative.”⁷⁶ On May 15, 2023, a group of Senators and Representatives again sent a letter to the same House and Senate subcommittees requesting “support of budgetary items that invest in or accelerate the Marine Corps Force Design initiatives.”⁷⁷

Some in Congress wanted an independent assessment of Force Design. In the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (P.L. 118-31) Congress directed

**NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024
CONFERENCE REPORT TO ACCOMPANY H.R. 2670**

SEC. 1076. COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF MARINE CORPS FORCE DESIGN 2030. (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 90 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Defense shall seek to enter into an agreement with a federally funded research and development center for the conduct of an independent review, assessment, and analysis of the modernization initiatives of the Marine Corps.⁷⁸

A CRS examination of both the FY2025 NDAA and the FY2026 NDAA did not find any similar or related Force Design-related provisions.

Potential Considerations for Congress

Oversight questions Congress could consider include the following

- If Force Design is focused on China and the Indo Pacific region, will the redesigned force be suitable/adequate to support future NATO commitments in Europe as well as commitments in the Middle East and Africa?
- With Force Design focused on China and the Indo Pacific region, what are the Marines' plans to address Contested Logistics?⁷⁹ Are there concerns that much of the responsibility for successfully operating in such an environment falls outside the control of the Marines and rests largely on the Navy and Air Force?
- How would apparent differences between the Navy and Marines regarding requirements and acquisition priority for LSMs affect the Marines' ability to execute Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), as well as operational concepts put forth in Force Design?

⁷⁵ Senate Armed Services Committee, *To Receive Testimony on the Current Readiness of the Joint Force*, at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/23-42_05-02-2023.pdf, p. 7, accessed June 13, 2023.

⁷⁶ Marine Corps Association, <https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/220527-USMC-Force-Design-Dear-Colleague-Letter2.pdf>, accessed June 13, 2023.

⁷⁷ See <https://www.kaine.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/51523lettertosenateappropriatorsonmarinecorpsforcedesign.pdf>, accessed June 13, 2023.

⁷⁸ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2670, December 6, 2023, p. 1177.

⁷⁹ Megan Eckstein, “Navy, Marines Will Need Recapitalized Sealift, Logistics Capabilities to Succeed in Pacific Operations,” *USNI News*, December 2, 2020.

- How will the Marines' decision not to establish a third MLR and instead retain the 4th Marine Regiment affect the requirement for LSMs? Will fewer ships be required and, if so, how might this impact program cost and developmental and fielding timelines?
- How does the elimination of the Marines' two tank battalions affect their ability to defend against enemy mechanized and armored forces? Is it realistic to expect the Army to provide armor support to the Marines if the Marines are called upon to confront enemy mechanized and armored forces?
- How does the elimination of most towed artillery affect their ability to provide fire support if air or naval assets are unable to deliver fire support to infantry units due to nonavailability, range limitations, or adverse weather?
- How does the elimination of significant numbers of manned rotary and fixed winged aircraft affect their ability to transport personnel and supplies by air and to provide close air support to ground forces?
- If the Marines phase out most of their legacy sustained land operations-specific logistics capability, will the Marines be able to participate in sustained land operations in the future if required?
- How do emerging lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine inform Marine Corps' thinking and approach to Force Design?

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