

U.S. Marine Corps Ground Combat Element 2040 Initiative

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Introduction

In March 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps [announced](#) a major force design initiative it referred to as “Force Design 2030,” now known as “Force Design.” As part of this 10-year initiative, the Marines planned to redesign the service to prioritize naval expeditionary warfare as part of U.S. military plans to strategically compete with China and Russia. Since 2020, the Marines have eliminated and reorganized units in accordance with Force Design and have divested several capabilities that the Marines consider no longer support their expeditionary mission.

In June 2026, the Marines released *Ground Combat Element (GCE) 2040 for FY2026* (GCE 2040). As part of Force Design, GCE 2040 is intended to provide a roadmap for further transformation of Marine ground combat forces.

Congress may consider various issues relating to the initiative, including potential changes to military occupational specialty (MOS) fields, end-strengths of the Marine Corps and/or Navy, organization of Marine infantry units, developmental timelines of active and/or reserve components, the ability to deploy forces, developmental systems, and technological disciplines.

Force Design and GCE Changes: 2020-2026

In a [July 2026 Marine Corps unclassified concept paper on GCE 2040](#), the Marines summarized Force Design ground combat forces-related activities prior to the GCE 2040 rollout:

Since 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps has transformed elements of its GCE under Force Design 2030 to counter peer-level [anti-access/area denial] A2/AD threats as part of Naval Expeditionary Forces. The centerpiece of this redesign is the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), a GCE formation optimized for persistent reconnaissance, sea denial, and Joint kill-web integration inside contested littorals. The future Third Marine Division is purpose-built, and littoral in nature with two MLRs that are being manned, trained, and equipped for expanded missions and crisis response. While MLRs fill a unique stand-in role, they do not replace the GCE’s enduring requirement to seize, hold, and defend key terrain. Accordingly, the GCE continues to balance the specialized functions of the MLR with the requirement to field task-organized, maritime-oriented ground forces organized, trained, and equipped for multi-domain operations. These forces are poised to fight for, from, and to retain key littoral terrain, and win across the competition continuum while preserving the Corps’ fundamental purpose: to close with and defeat the enemy in battle.

GCE 2040 Intent and Guidelines for Development

[According to the Marines](#), the intent of GCE 2040 is to develop

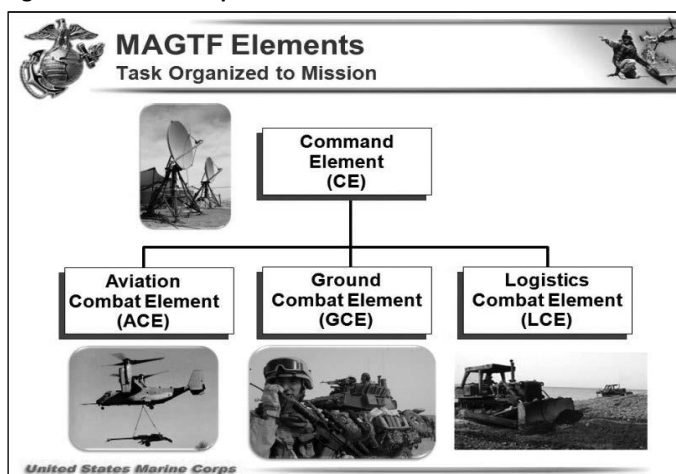
a modular, task-organized, multi-domain force that combines dispersed operations, lethality, information dominance, and

resilient command and control to seize and defend contested littoral terrain.

The Marines’ “[five interconnected pillars](#)” intended to guide the GCE’s transformation are as follows:

1. **Human-Centered Warfighting.** Emphasize the individual Marine as the central focus of GCE 2040 whereby “training, education, and ethos” will be needed to “succeed on a complex, high-tech battlefield.”
2. **Lethality.** “[I]ncrease the GCE’s ability to deliver kinetic and non-kinetic effects in all domains by enhancing organic fire support, integrating Joint fires, and expanding sensing capabilities.”
3. **Endurance.** Protect “the force through all-domain defense, resilient logistics, tactical deception, and [electromagnetic] signature management to ensure the GCE can sustain combat operations against a [technologically capable] peer adversary.”
4. **Decision Advantage.** “[A]chieve dominance through Human-Machine Teaming,” which comprises “employing [artificial intelligence] AI and autonomous systems to accelerate the decision-making” process and alleviate “Marines from the most dangerous tasks.”
5. **Modularity.** Develop “scalable and adaptable force organizations, centered on the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF), that can be tailored to specific missions and threats” (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. MAGTF Composition



Source: Marine Corps Association, “What Is the Corps?,” accessed July 17, 2026, <https://www.mca-marines.org/what-is-the-corps/>.

Capabilities Required for GCE 2040 Forces

According to the Marines, the following capabilities need to be either developed or enhanced to facilitate the establishment of GCE 2040 forces:

- new or modified force structure, including manning, training, educating, and equipping;

- multidomain (i.e., land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace) lethality and targeting capabilities and systems;
- tactical and littoral mobility systems, such as the Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV), Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV), and the Navy's [Landing Ship—Medium \(LSM\)](#);
- Combined [Joint All-Domain Operations/Joint All-Domain Command & Control \(CJADC2\)](#) integration;
- contested logistics environment capabilities and platforms—crewed and uncrewed;
- ground-based air defense (GBAD);
- robotics, autonomy, and Human-Machine Teaming;
- distributed data processing and resilience;
- electromagnetic, cyber, and space resilience; and
- deception and camouflage/signature management.

Proposed GCE 2040 Development Timeline

The [Marines propose the following timeline](#) to achieve GCE 2040 operational capability:

- **Near-Term (2026-2030).** Focus on refining ongoing Force Design modernization efforts in accordance with original Force Design 2030 objectives and address “the immediate threat of drones.”
- **Mid-Term (2031-2035).** Invest “in AI and autonomous systems ... enhancing headquarters functions, streamlining logistics, and improving operational tempo.” The service anticipates drone/uncrewed formations and layered counter-uncrewed aerial systems (c-UAS) capabilities to “become critical.”
- **Long-Range (2036-2040).** The GCE is planned to be “transformed by AI-enabled command and control, widespread Human-Machine Teaming, and resilient, dispersed formations.” The Marines expect such a transformation to enable GCEs to operate “with increased combat power and survivability, providing the Joint Force with a decisive advantage on key littoral terrain.”

GCE 2040 Technology Requirements

[According to the Marines](#), “achieving the 2040 vision requires targeted investment in materiel solutions across the warfighting functions,” including

- **Fires and Maneuver.** “Long-range surface-to-surface fires, all-weather direct and indirect fires, advanced mobility platforms [ACV, ARV], and layered GBAD down to the squad level.”
- **Command, Control, Intelligence, and Information.** “Resilient and scalable command posts, multi-domain sensing networks, counter reconnaissance capabilities, and integrated data systems to enable CJADC2.”
- **Logistics.** Uncrewed “ground, air, and surface platforms for expeditionary distribution, mobile power systems to support emerging technologies, and advanced medical capabilities.”

Infantry Battalion Force Structure Changes

On September 1, 2026, the [Marines announced](#) plans to increase the Marine Corps by 6,500 Marines over the next five years. As

part of this plan, the Marines intend to “add[s] personnel to 19 Infantry Battalions and two Littoral Combat Teams to formalize crew-served weapons resiliency, establish heavy guns platoons, and expand precision fires and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).”

Potential Issues for Congress

Congress, in its oversight, authorization, and appropriation roles, can help shape the development of GCE 2040. Oversight and budget hearings, as well as observation of GCE 2040-related exercises and war games, offer Congress the opportunity to provide input to Marine leadership that could inform GCE 2040 developmental efforts, related weapon systems, and supporting programs. Potential oversight considerations for Congress could include personnel, organizational, deployment, technology, and equipment-related issues. Potential questions may include the following:

- Will the Marines require new MOS fields in the areas of air defense, cyber, robotics, autonomy, AI, Human-Machine Teaming, information operations, and electronic warfare (EW) to support GCE 2040 formations?
- How might GCE 2040 affect the organization of current Marine infantry units? Will new types of units need to be incorporated, and will some existing units be eliminated or modified?
- Will Marine Reserve Component (RC) forces also be included in the GCE 2040 initiative? If so, how might the RC developmental timelines align or not align with the active component's timelines?
- How might the potential addition of new personnel, units, and equipment affect the ability of GCEs to deploy by naval vessels and by aircraft? Will additional amphibious ships and transport aircraft be required to accommodate the sea and air movement of GCEs?
- What are some of the systems that the Marines plan to develop to address AI-enabled command and control, Human-Machine Teaming, CJADC2 integration, GBAD, robotics, and uncrewed platforms?
- What technological disciplines needed by the Marines to fulfill their GCE 2040 vision are considered immature and at risk for full development and implementation in the field? Do the Marines have contingency plans if envisioned required technologies are not fully mature/capable or incorporated by 2040?

Related CRS Products

CRS In Focus IF10571, [Defense Primer: Organization of U.S. Ground Forces](#) by Andrew Feickert

CRS In Focus IF12200, [The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Littoral Regiment \(MLR\)](#) by Andrew Feickert

CRS In Focus IF11755, [The Marine Corps' Amphibious Combat Vehicle \(ACV\)](#) by Andrew Feickert

CRS In Focus IF11831, [Marine Corps Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle \(ARV\)](#) by Andrew Feickert

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