

**October 2023**

# Marine Corps 2030: Realignment Without Breaking the Bank



Marine Corps Ball in celebration of the 247th anniversary of the U.S. Marine Corps  
November 2022 / U.S. Embassy of Ghana / Wikimedia

At the end of the Cold War, the Pentagon was forced to reexamine itself as it began moving roles, missions, and force structure away from the two-superpower model that dominated planning and budgets for almost fifty years. The emphasis then was on “transformation;” developing a new vision of a military better suited to meet the emerging post-Cold War challenges to U.S. national security – asymmetry, (counter) terrorism, etc.

Now the Marine Corps is again revisiting its roles and missions. On March 23, 2020, Gen. David Berger, former Commandant of the Marine Corps, unveiled “Force Design 2030,” a major initiative planned to occur over the coming decade.<sup>1</sup> Under this initiative, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) intends to redesign its naval expeditionary force and to better align itself with the Pentagon’s 2018 National Defense Strategy. Following years of developing a force focused on conducting inland operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2018 National Defense Strategy directed the Marine Corps to shift its mission focus on a great/near peer competitor (Russia/China) with special emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region; often referred to as the “Pacific Pivot.”<sup>2</sup>

Notably, FD 2030 calls for funding this transformation through a “divest-to-deliver” or “divest-to-invest” approach, in other words divesting from existing programs in the Marine Corps budget to pay for the cost of new programs called for in the transformation. This fiscally responsible approach will allow the Marine Corps to transform to meet new mission parameters outlined in FD 2030 without turning to taxpayers to foot the bill.

Troublingly, Gen. Berger's presumptive successor, Acting Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith, has called for an accelerated pace of implementation for FD 2030 and is asking for more taxpayer dollars to accomplish this, threatening the "divest-to-invest" approach outlined in the original plan.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of FD 2030 is to "redirect the Marine Corps' mission focus from countering violent extremists in the Middle East to great power/peer-level competition, with special emphasis on the Indo-Pacific."

When announcing the new plan, Gen. Berger declared that "the current force is unsuited to future requirements in size, capacity, and specific capability..." As part of the initiative, the Marines intend to reduce or eliminate certain types of units and eliminate some military occupational specialties (MOS's). The Marines also plan to reorganize higher echelon Marine formations and to become smaller—reducing forces by 12,000 personnel by 2030, a roughly seven percent reduction based on active personnel as of 2020.<sup>4</sup>

FD 2030 envisions a light, highly mobile naval expeditionary force that is self-reliant and able to operate in littoral areas within an adversary's Weapon's Engagement Zone (WEZ), i.e. under hostile fire.

*We must continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few when conceiving of the future amphibious portion of the fleet.*

– Then-Marine Corps Commandant General Berger

The new focus requires significant changes in Marine Corps organization and equipment. FD 2030 calls for the elimination of some units, such as those equipped with main battle tanks, and the restructuring of others, such as shifting from traditional cannon artillery to rockets and missiles. The current fleet of large amphibious ships in the U.S. Navy would be reduced from the 2019 target level of 38 ships to 31 and would be augmented by a new expeditionary ship. The new ship – the Light Amphibious Warship – would be cheaper, smaller, and more difficult to detect. As Gen. Berger put it in his July 2019 planning guidance, "We must continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few when conceiving of the future amphibious portion of the fleet."<sup>5</sup>

FD 2030 calls for substantial changes in the operations, organization, size, training, and equipping of the Marine Corps, and this has caused outcries from a range of institutional interests. Opposition from former military leaders has centered largely on operational capabilities and impacts on the Corps' traditional role as a force capable of operating independently in remote locations. Congressional opponents have focused their concerns more on the proposed troop cuts and cancellation and deactivation of "legacy" weapons programs. Together, these vested interests discussed later in this report represent a potent force against change, which the Marines must overcome if they are to succeed in their latest efforts at transformation.

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## The Next Marine Corps

FD 2030 would be implemented in four phases:

- Phase 1 presented an overall vision of the future force.
- Phase 2, which began in September 2019, used Integrated Planning Teams to assess and provide force design recommendations for reconfiguring Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs), the design for Marine Littoral Regiments, changes to the Corp’s Maritime Prepositioning Forces and logistics. The teams also looked at changes to Marine Corps aviation, anti-ship and anti-air capabilities, infantry battalion organization, and the force mix for manned and unmanned systems. The review also included infantry battalion organization, personnel training and education requirements and a review of the role of the Marine Corps Reserves.
- Phase 3, expected to begin in 2024, involves war gaming, experimentation, and analysis.
- Phase 4 will subsequently refine, validate, and implement what has been achieved
  - FD 2030 is envisioned as an evolutionary process that will incorporate lessons learned and findings from ongoing efforts. Updates to the original FD 2030 plan have been released annually in April 2021,<sup>6</sup> May 2022<sup>7</sup> and June 2023<sup>8</sup>. These updates include progress to date on implementation, lessons learned, “Directed Actions” which lay out next steps in the process, and identification of “issues requiring further analysis.”

## Key Components of FD 2030

The “Objective Force” proposed under FD 2030 requires significant changes in the size, equipment, and organization of the Marine Corps, which the Marines feel are essential to developing the capabilities needed to meet current and future threats.



M1A1 Main Battle Tank | The Marines have transferred 400 of their 450 tanks to the Army and will transfer the remainder in the near future. Oct. 1, 2012 / Cpl. Tommy Bellegarde, United States Marine Corps / Wikimedia

## Major Ground Force Changes

- Reduce Marine Corps “end strength” by 12,000 Marines by 2030
- Eliminate all seven Marine Corps Tank Battalions
- Eliminate all three Law Enforcement Battalions
- Eliminate all Bridging Companies
- Reduce the number of Active Infantry Battalions from 24 to 21; redesign the remaining infantry battalions for greater lethality and flexibility with reductions of approximately 200 Marines per battalion
- Reduce the number of Reserve component infantry battalions from eight to six
- Reduce the number of Cannon Artillery Batteries from 21 to five

- Reduce the number of Amphibious Vehicle Companies from six to four
- Increase the number of rocket artillery batteries from seven to 21
- Increase the number of Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) companies from nine to 12

## Major Aviation Force Changes

- Reduce the number of Marine Medium Tiltrotor (VMM) squadrons from 17 to 14
- Reduce the number of heavy lift helicopter (HMH) squadrons from eight to five
- Reduce the number of light attack helicopter (HMLA) squadrons from seven to five
- Increase the number of aerial refueler transport (VMGR) squadrons from three to four
- Increase unmanned aerial vehicle (VMU) squadrons from three to six
- Retain 18 active fighter attack (VMFA) squadrons, and reduce the number of F-35 B and C aircraft per squadron from 16 to ten

Because the Navy is responsible for making budget requests relating to shipbuilding, FD 2030 largely refrains from detailing plans for amphibious force changes, despite the transformation's focus on expanding the Marine Corps' amphibious capabilities. Yet while some of the Navy's FY 2024 shipbuilding plans appear to support the Marine Corps Transformation, the Marine Corps did voice concerns over certain decommission requests that would impact the total number of amphibious ships the Marine

Corps and Navy have at their disposal at any given time.<sup>9</sup> This tension is discussed in greater detail later in the report.

## Force Structure Reorganization

The III Marine Expeditionary Force ("MEF"), headquartered in Okinawa, Japan, is the focus of FD 2030 "Higher Echelon" reorganization. There are three MEFs in the Marine Corps, but only III MEF is forward-deployed (I MEF is at Camp Pendleton, CA, and II MEF is at Camp Lejeune, NC).

FD 2030 creates a new type of unit, the Marine Littoral Regiments (MLR). The Marine Corps will establish three MLRs as part of III MEF. An MLR will include about 1,800 to 2,000 Marines and sailors, in 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 Littoral Anti-Air Battalion will provide air defense, air surveillance and early warning, and support forward air operations. The Littoral Logistics Battalion will provide the MLR with logistical support to the MLR while deployed. The first of these new units, the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment, was formed in Hawaii in March 2022, out of the former 3rd Marine Regiment.

## Future Capabilities of the Redesigned Force

As part of FD 2030, the Marines plan to develop a range of capabilities:

- Expansion of Long-Range Fire - A 300 percent increase in rocket artillery capacity. This, together with anti-ship missiles, is

intended to provide the Marine Corps with the ability to perform sea control and denial operations – a new mission for the Marines.

- Lighter, More Mobile and Versatile Infantry – Smaller, more easily deployed infantry battalions better able to support the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept.
- Investment in Unmanned Systems – Double the number of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) squadrons and combat unmanned air and ground systems to improve the Corps’ ability to detect and strike targets.
- Maritime Mobility and Resilience – Develop new capabilities to increase littoral maritime mobility and flexibility, including a new light amphibious warship and additional support vessels.
- Mobile Air Defense and Counter-Precision Guided Missile Systems – Provide a range of “air” defense capabilities designed to operate in close support of combat operations. These include directed energy systems, loitering munitions, electronic warfare, expeditionary airfield capabilities and operational support for manned and unmanned aircraft and other systems.

## Backlash from the Generals

Not surprisingly, the plan has caused considerable backlash from the many vested interests that support maintaining the USMC’s traditional orientation as a heavy expeditionary force. An influential group of over two dozen retired generals has launched a counteroffensive against plans to transform the Marine Corps.<sup>10</sup> The group includes every living former Marine Corps commandant apart from the recently retired Gen. Berger, along with other retired four-star generals. It also reportedly includes civilian leaders from the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the White House. The group is nominally led by Jim Webb, a former Secretary of the Navy and a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War.

Some of the arguments being made by opponents of the sweeping changes proposed in FD 2030 include:

- The strength of the Marine Corps has long been its flexibility, which is essential for responding to unpredictable and changing threats. FD 2030 opponents contend that it focuses overwhelmingly on a conflict with China in the Western Pacific while neglecting other contingencies, which risks turning the Marine Corps into a niche force focused on what this group considers an unlikely conflict at the expense of its ability to meet actual threats. This is not what the nation needs or expects from the Marine Corps.
- The Marine Corps will be left with too many space experts, cyber warriors and other specialists and insufficient numbers of Marines trained and equipped to conduct traditional military operations.



Marines lower an RQ-21A Blackjack unmanned aerial system  
July 5, 2019 / U.S. Pacific Fleet / Flickr

- Insufficient analysis has been done to support the radical changes in force structure called for by FD 2030.

In responding to these criticisms, Gen. Berger has pointed out:

- His [Berger’s] predecessor, Gen. Robert Neller, told Congress in June 2017 that the Marine Corps was “not currently organized, trained and equipped to face a peer adversary in the year 2025.” Gen. Neller pointed to the use of electronic warfare, precision weapons, and cyberattacks that would confront Marines on future battlefields against China and Russia, adding, “I’m worried that we’re going too slow and that we’re afraid of change.”<sup>11</sup>
- The types of capabilities the Marine Corps plans to reduce or eliminate in FD 2030, for example, heavy tanks, are capabilities “found in abundance elsewhere in the joint force inventory, and I am confident that we can rely on them to be there to support Marines in any...combat scenario into which we may find ourselves.”<sup>12</sup>
- The initiatives included in FD 2030 are the product of many years of evaluation predating Gen. Berger’s tenure as Commandant. The Marine Corps “Force Design 2030” website lists 21 “Studies & Analysis,” 23 “Wargaming” exercises and 13 “Experimentation” projects that have been conducted from 2020-2022.<sup>13</sup>

Congress has also been another source of institutional resistance to the Marine Corps’ plan. Members bring their own priorities to the table, based not just on national security concerns but traditional parochial politics focused on potential changes in force structure (i.e.



Former Commandant of the Marine Corps General David H. Berger  
July 10, 2023 / U.S. Secretary of Defense / Wikimedia

basing) and equipment (i.e. defense contractors). This is not surprising, given that the size of the Corps, where units are based and trained, and how they are equipped have a much more direct impact on an elected official’s constituents (and their jobs) than operational considerations. Further, these are issues that drive budget decisions, and therefore are the ones over which Congress has the most significant control. How Congress treats the budgetary changes requested by the Marine Corps will be a strong indication of whether the Marines will actually be allowed to reform. And nowhere are the traditional tensions between Congressional politics and Pentagon planning – and even the simmering rivalries between the Navy and Marine Corps – more evident than on the issue of shipbuilding.

## **Navy Shipbuilding**

Shipbuilding is the highest priority in the Navy’s annual procurement budget. At \$27.9 billion, shipbuilding accounts for 42 percent of the Navy’s \$65.9 billion total FY 2023 procurement request. Aircraft procurement is second, at 25 percent (\$16.8 billion).<sup>14</sup>

While the Marine Corps is part of the Navy both organizationally and budgetarily, as a result of their fundamentally different missions there

has traditionally been a rivalry, even a tension, between the two branches of the service. Historically this has played out in many ways, none more significant and obvious as during the annual budget process.

Both the Marines and the Navy are vying for dollars from the same pot of Pentagon money – the Navy budget – and in a world of finite resources and competing interests this becomes a source of tension. Similar competitions exist within the other branches of the military, but because of their unique relationship, the rivalry between the Navy and the Marine Corps is generally more contentious than those within the Army or the Air Force. (This may change as the Space Force is carved out of the Air Force and the two services vie for resources within the Department of the Air Force.)

Nowhere is this organizational tension more obvious than in the debate over Navy shipbuilding. Because of the Navy’s emphasis on its traditional missions of global force projection and protecting access to international seas, the Marines often feel, not unjustifiably, that their shipbuilding needs are not as high a priority.

According to the mission statement posted on the Navy’s website, “The United States is a maritime nation, and the U.S. Navy protects

America at sea.”<sup>15</sup> As part of this mission, the Marine Corps constitutes the land forces serving with the Navy fleet. For Navy shipbuilding, this translates into an emphasis on surface combatants (primarily aircraft carriers and destroyers in the current fleet) and submarines (attack submarines and the ballistic missile submarines that make up one third of the nation’s nuclear “triad.”) For example, according to the Navy’s FY 2023 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan, “[the ‘Columbia’ Class ballistic missile submarine] represents the Navy’s most important program and largest fiscal challenge over the next 15 years.”<sup>16</sup> Less significant, budgetarily if not strategically, are the landing and assault vessels needed to support the Marine Corp’s amphibious capability.

### **Marine Corps Planning and the Light Amphibious Warship (LAW)**

In addition to FD 2030, the Marine Corps and Navy are looking at ways to improve their ability to perform various joint missions in the coming years. Together the Navy and Marine Corps are planning to implement a new operational concept called Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO).<sup>17</sup> This concept calls for the Navy and Marine Corps to operate at sea in a more dispersed, less concentrated manner. The goal is to make it more difficult for a potential adversary



USS Pearl Harbor, left, and USS Makin Island, embarked with Marines and sailors serving with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit. May 8, 2012 / U.S. Marine Corps

to detect and engage U.S. forces, while still allowing the Navy and Marines to bring lethal force to bear against opposing forces.

To support DMO, and with particular emphasis on possible conflict against Chinese forces in the Pacific, the Marine Corps has developed two supporting operational concepts – Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO). Under the EABO concept, the Marine Corps envisions small, well-equipped units moving through a combat theater and operating from advanced base sites performing a wide variety of missions – including direct fire on enemy vessels using anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) – to support Navy efforts to deny control of the sea to Chinese forces. Having Marine Corps units contribute to U.S. sea-denial operations against an opposing navy by using ASCMs would represent a new mission for the Marine Corps.

In order to enable its forces to move quickly and undetected in close quarters with the enemy, the Marine Corps is developing new organizational structures and tactics and, more importantly from a budgetary standpoint, acquiring new equipment. Two of the most important new additions are the Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV) which will replace the Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAV), and the Light Amphibious Warship (LAW), sometimes referred to by the Marine Corps as the Landing Ship Medium.

The Navy proposed purchasing 18 to 35 new amphibious ships for the Marine Corps under the LAW program. The Corps has indicated that it wants a LAW fleet of 35 ships – including nine for each of the three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) envisioned under FD 2030, with eight additional LAWs to account for maintenance

schedules and other factors. LAWs would be much smaller and much less expensive to procure and operate than the Navy’s current amphibious ships. The Marine Corps hopes to be able to acquire LAWs for \$150 million each. The Navy had previously planned on procuring the first LAW in FY 2023, but the Navy’s FY 2023 budget submission put off procurement of the first LAW until FY 2025.<sup>18</sup>

Part of the delay is due to disagreements between the Navy and Marine Corps over the capabilities each wants for the new ship, with a key issue being the amount of combat survivability to be incorporated into ship’s design. The Marine Corps is looking for a lighter, faster ship that is easier to build and maintain, while the Navy is concerned about what weapons and how much armor should be included to protect its sailors who operate the ships as they sail under hostile fire. These design decisions will have an impact on the LAW’s cost, as adding more weapons and armoring would make the ship more expensive. So, while the Marine Corps wants LAWs to cost around \$150 million apiece so it can buy more of them, the more survivable ship the Navy is pushing for would end up costing \$300 million or more. This higher price would certainly impact the number of ships the Navy could afford to purchase. The Marines consider having LAWs available in sufficient numbers is a key component to their ability to implement their new EABO strategy.

The Navy’s current amphibious fleet is made up of 31 ships, consisting entirely of large amphibious ships. These include the so-called “big-deck” amphibious assault ships, such as the “America” class (LHA 6), which look like medium-sized aircraft carriers, and smaller vessels like the “San Antonio” class (LPD-17), sometimes called “small-deck” amphibious ships.

The Navy's current force-level goal (released in December 2016) calls for a 355-ship fleet that would include 38 amphibious ships, all either "big-deck" or "small-deck" vessels.<sup>19</sup>

Since, however, this 38-ship amphibious-force level goal predates development of the EABO concept, it does not include any LAW-type vessels. Marine Corps officials have stated their future requirement is for a minimum of 66 amphibious ships, including a minimum of 31 of the larger amphibious ships (10 "big-deck" and 21 "small-deck") plus 35 LAWs, which the Navy currently plans to begin procuring in FY 2025.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned above, there has been considerable discussion between the Navy and Marine Corps about the number of Light Amphibious Warships that are needed. A classified report to Congress on the Navy's amphibious force requirements in January 2023 reaffirms the Navy's "future objective" for 31 amphibious ships.<sup>21</sup>

The "Battle Force" fleet – those ships that contribute directly to Navy warfighting or support missions – currently stands at 285 vessels but will drop to 280 by FY 2027. The Navy projects the fleet will grow to 355 ships by FY 2043. But concerns about the current size of the fleet, particularly vis-à-vis the continued growth in the size of the Chinese fleet, is evident both inside the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. For example, during a hearing on the Navy's FY 2023 budget request before the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) stated, "All I can say is I'm just astounded that China is going to be at 480 [ships] and we're going to be at 280. We're going backwards in terms of the size of the Navy."<sup>22</sup>

But these pressures, combined with the fact that several new and future programs within

the shipbuilding budget – the "Columbia" ballistic missile submarine, the next generation destroyer [DDG(X)], and the next generation attack submarine [SSN(X)], all of which will place additional demands on the shipbuilding budget as they reach maturity – will cause even greater competition for funding even as the Navy tries to grow its fleet. This is going to put even more pressure on all areas of the shipbuilding budget, including funding for the Navy's amphibious fleet.



Freedom-variant Littoral Combat Ships  
March 25, 2019 / Official U.S. Navy Page / Flickr

## Congressional Parochialism

In its FY 2023 budget request, the Navy proposed decommissioning 24 ships.<sup>23</sup> This included nine "Freedom" class Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), none of which had reached their estimated 25-year service life, and several of which had been in service for five years or less. According to Rear Adm. John Gumbleton, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Budget, decommissioning the 24 ships would generate \$3.6 billion in savings over five years.<sup>24</sup> Lawmakers, however, refused to go along with the full proposal, allowing the Navy to retire only four of the LCS ships, despite repeated Navy complaints about ongoing mechanical issues and the inability of the ships to adequately perform Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) operations, which is one of their primary missions.<sup>25</sup>

And while the LCS program has no direct impact on Marine Corps amphibious ship requirements, any budgetary changes that occur within the Navy’s shipbuilding accounts have a ripple effect across all shipbuilding programs.

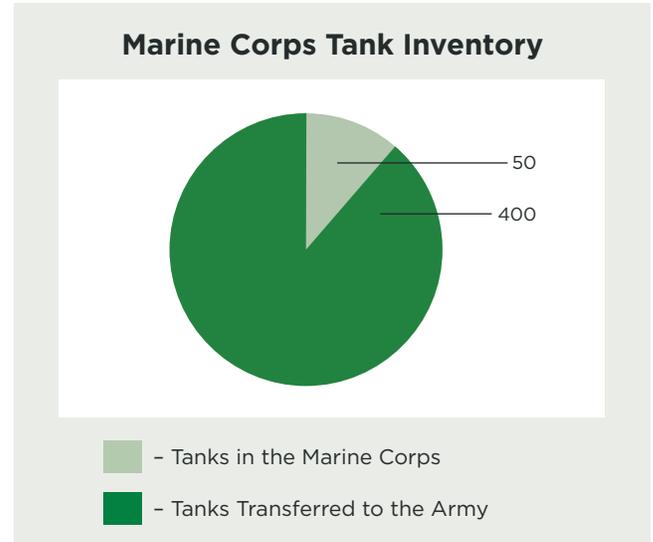
### Who Pays? “Divest-to-Invest”

One area where there seems to be little disagreement is that the current FD 2030 proposals will find the savings needed to implement the proposed changes. The Marine Corps refers to this as a “divest-to-deliver” or “divest-to-invest” approach. The original FD 2030 proposal estimated a potential savings of \$12 billion over a ten-year period, “to be reallocated towards equipment modernization, training modernization, and force development priorities.”<sup>26</sup>

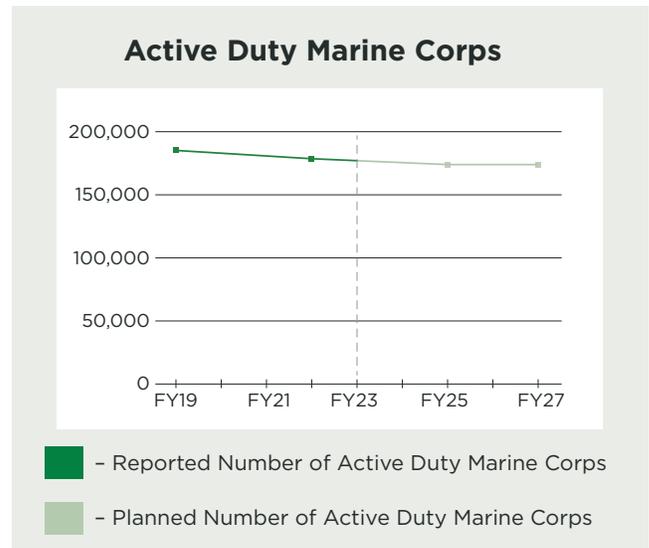
*Divestments over the past two and half years have resulted in savings of \$16 billion available for reinvestment*

Yet the changes proposed under FD 2030 that have been implemented to date have already exceeded these savings projections. The Marine Corps’ May 2022 update on FD 2030 reported that divestments over the past two and half years have resulted in savings of \$16 billion available for reinvestment.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Lt. Gen. Christopher Mahoney, the Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Programs and Resources, reported that the Corps had achieved \$18.2 billion in savings over the previous five budgets. Of this, \$15.8 billion was reinvested in modernization and the remaining \$2.4 billion went toward current expenses.<sup>28</sup>

Progress has also been made in implementing proposed force structure and equipment changes:



- **Armor** – Of the roughly 450 tanks in the Marine Corps inventory prior to the deactivation of its tank battalions, 400 have already been transferred to the Army, and the remaining tanks will be transferred over the next few years.<sup>29</sup>



- **End Strengths** – FD 2030 calls for a reduction in Marine Corps active duty “end strength” of 12,000 by 2030. According to various Navy budget documents, the Corps active-duty personnel levels were 186,000 in FY 2019.<sup>30</sup> The Marine Corps May 2022 update on FD 2030 indicates that “end strength” had been reduced by 7,000

towards its goal.<sup>31</sup> The Navy’s FY 2023 budget indicates that the Marines will achieve their goal ahead of schedule, reaching 174,500 in FY 2025, and remain at that level through FY 2027.<sup>32</sup>

- Force Structure – The Corps “stood up” the first of its new units, the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment, in Hawaii in March 2022. The first of the three new units was formed out of the old 3rd Marine Regiment.<sup>33</sup>



Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Eric M. Smith  
July 10, 2023 / U.S. Secretary of Defense / WikiMedia

## Takeaways

Even as former Marine Corps leaders and retired Pentagon policy makers continue to express concerns about the changes occurring under FD 2030, it seems for now at least that Congressional resistance is dwindling. In fact, the House Appropriations Committee, in the report accompanying the FY 2023 defense funding bill, stated that “the Committee supports the ongoing modernization effort and recognizes that such a shift requires substantial adjustments in how the Marine Corps organizes, trains, and equips, moving away from traditional platforms in pursuit of a more resilient forward deployed posture.” But this tentative acceptance is not unconditional. The Committee also directed the Navy and Marine Corps to provide Congress with “details [on] the timeline for achieving such force design changes, including how the Marine Corps’ modernization strategy may impact possible future force structure gaps in the next five to ten years.”<sup>34</sup>

*In a break with Berger’s track record, Smith is pursuing a faster pace of modernization, seeking more taxpayer cash for accelerated implementation,*

General Berger’s successor as Marine Corps Commandant, Gen. Eric Smith, whose confirmation is currently being held up by Sen. Tommy Tuberville’s (R-AL) blanket hold on senior military confirmations, has expressed support for continuing the FD 2030 reforms. However, in a break with Berger’s track record, Smith is pursuing a faster pace of modernization, seeking more taxpayer cash for accelerated implementation, and resuming the tried-and-true Pentagon pattern, abetted by congressional parochialism, of budgetary bloat regardless of a service branch’s well-intentioned efforts to reform and resize its requirements.<sup>35</sup>

The changes in unit organization, force structure, and weapons acquisition proposed under FD 2030 are underway and represent significant investments. To date these have been funded within the Marine Corps budget through such changes as end strength cuts, the elimination and/or reorganization of existing units and missions, and the retirement or cuts in acquisition of several major weapons systems (i.e., armored units and naval vessels). Reversing these decisions, which would require additional expenditures without the accompanying savings, would create a burden on other areas in the Marine Corps and Navy’s budgets and strain efforts to maintain a “divest-to-invest” funding model for FD 2030.



Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff U.S. Army Gen. Mark A. Milley testify before the House Appropriations March 23, 2023 / U.S. Secretary of Defense / Flickr

## The FY 2024 Budget Request: Procurement, Not Policy, Driving Congressional Debate

Three years after FD 2030's inception, congressional concerns about the plan appear to have slowed. For example, during a March 2023 Defense Appropriations hearing in the House on the Navy's FY 2024 budget request, Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-MD), referred to the resistance of the retired generals to the FD 2030 proposal. Noting that when professional experts disagree on critical issues and citing Congress' oversight responsibilities, the congressman commented that it's important to "air things out" and let all sides be heard. He then threw his support behind the Marine Corps and the FD 2030 initiative. "From what I see [Gen. Berger], you've done a good job..." He further indicated it was time to put any past differences aside and move forward. Directing his comments to the Service's leadership seated before him – Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday, and Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger – Rep. Ruppersberger stated that "both sides need to calm it down, because you're in authority now."<sup>36</sup>

But while the caution preached by the retired Marine generals continues to lose its

congressional audience, the simmering tensions between the Pentagon, Navy and Marine Corps over the future of amphibious ship production were unusually public as the services headed to Capitol Hill to brief on their FY 2024 budget requests. This has created its own fallout on Capitol Hill.

Last year Congress included provisions setting a minimum of 31 amphibious ships in the FY 2023 Defense Authorization Act.<sup>37</sup> Previously Congress had also given the Defense Department the authority to do "block purchases" of the San Antonio class ships, permitting the Navy to contract for multiple ships at the same time in an effort to drive down costs. Yet, although equipped with both of these incentives, the Navy opted not to include a request for a new San Antonio ship in the FY 2024 budget, instead announcing a "strategic pause" in the program in an effort to better understand the costs and capabilities of the latest ship design.<sup>38</sup>



AAVP7A1 Amphibious Assault Vehicles Return to Ship July 17 1988 / National Archives and Records Administration / Wikimedia

According to the Marines, this "pause," coupled with the Navy's plans to continue to decommission older versions of the ship, will cause the inventory of assault vessels to fall below the 31-ship target. Gen. Berger reported that the Navy's current divestment/investment plan calls for the amphibious assault ship inventory to drop to 27 ships, and then to 24 ships over

the next decade. “We can’t do our job with 24 ships,” Gen. Berger told the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. “Or 27. 31 [ships] is the bare minimum.”<sup>39</sup>

Even at current levels, the Marines claim they are stretched too thin to meet essential mission requirements. On several occasions in testimony before Congress in early 2023, Gen. Berger and members of his staff have noted the Marine Corps’ inability to provide crisis response. Citing calls for emergency assistance in Turkey after the February earthquake and the April evacuation of U.S. diplomats and citizens from Sudan, Marine Corps leadership has indicated that a lack of ready amphibious vessels has reduced their ability to have units on station when needed. “When the earthquake happened in Turkey, a NATO ally, [a Marine Expeditionary Unit] was not on station and it should have been,” Lt. Gen. Karsten Heckl, one of Gen. Berger’s deputies, told lawmakers in March. Referencing the evacuation from Sudan, Gen. Berger told a congressional hearing in April that “I feel like I let down the combatant commander,” referring to Gen. Michael Langley, the Marine Corps general leading U.S. Africa Command. “He didn’t have a sea-based option [from the Marine Corps]. That’s how we reinforce embassies. That’s how we evacuate them. That’s how we deter.”<sup>40</sup>

Although controversy over the amphibious ship program appears to pit the Marine Corps against the Navy, there seems to be a sense in Congress that the problem may lie at a higher level. Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA), Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s sea-power subcommittee, said he felt the “Navy [and the] Marines are completely on board on this. I think [it’s] coming out of [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] or the [White House Office of Management and Budget]. I’m not hearing that when I talk to the Navy.”<sup>41</sup>

Even Gen. Berger’s comments, as he made his case to Congress for the 31-ship level, seemed to indicate he felt there was fundamental agreement between himself and CNO Adm. Michael Gilday. He listed the three “key principles” where he and the Adm. Gilday were in complete agreement when it comes to amphibious ships: First, the minimum number of L-class amphibious ships is 31; second, that “block buying” is the proper way to acquire these ships; and third, that not replacing ships that are being retired “creates unacceptable risk.”<sup>42</sup>

Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK) went further in pointing a finger at the Navy’s civilian leadership. During the April 2023 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the Navy FY 2024 budget, Sen. Sullivan referred to Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro when he spoke



Marines from Company A, 4th Assault Amphibian Battalion  
2018 / U.S. National Guard / WikiMedia

to Gen. Berger. “I want to compliment the Commandant. It’s not easy to be sitting next to your boss, saying ‘we need this, we need this, we need this.’ Your boss obviously doesn’t agree, General.” And later, speaking directly to Sec. Del Toro, Sen. Sullivan referred to provisions of the FY 2023 defense authorization act setting a minimum number of 31 amphibious ships for the Navy. “Mr. Secretary, I’d like to just ask you, right off the bat, why are you violating the law? And why does your shipbuilding plan have no interest, for the next 30 years as far as I can tell, of hitting the statutory mandate that we told you to hit?” Sen. Sullivan then told Mr. Del Toro it was his desire that the Navy Secretary come back to the Committee, “...soon, and tell us how you’re going to follow the law.”<sup>43</sup>

Regardless of where the roadblock on amphibious ship acquisition lies, powerful members of Congress are already indicating their willingness to bypass it. Sen. Kaine, describing his committee’s commitment to the amphibious fleet, stated “I don’t want to speak for people other than me, but I can read the room...I think we’re on for 31.” His House counterpart, Rep. Trent Kelly (R-MS), the new chairman of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, was even more direct. Speaking to the Amphibious Warship Industrial Base Coalition, a lobbying group which represents companies that build the Navy’s amphibious ships, Rep. Kelly said, “My commitment to the future of these platforms is unwavering, regardless of the Navy’s intent to strategically pause purchasing.”<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

“Force Design 2030” is a serious piece of scholarship regarding the future of the Marine Corps. The ball is now in the court of Congress and

Navy leadership to support these reforms and allow the Marine Corps to transform to meet the roles and missions laid out in the plan.

## Recommendations

- Lawmakers should support the Marine Corps’ efforts at transformation without regard for parochial political interests. Where something is built or based is not sufficient reason to block these efforts to develop the future Marine Corps force.
- Lawmakers who support fiscally conservative principles should recognize the Marine Corps’ progress in paying for its own transformation by divesting from systems and missions not central to the future Marine Corps force.
- Lawmakers should allow the necessary divestment of legacy systems and missions.
- Lawmakers should support changes to force structure as recommended for ground, aviation, and amphibious forces in FD 2030.
- Navy officials should support Marine Corps preferences for future troop-carrying ships. Lighter, less expensive ships that can meet the Marine Corps’ mission, such as the planned Light Amphibious Warship, are the fiscally responsible route.
- Gen. Eric Smith should proceed with the original plan to transform the Marine Corps by 2030 rather than pursuing some more costly, accelerated plan.

## Appendix

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