



New U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiatives

March 26, 2020

Background

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) [announced](#) a major force design initiative planned to occur over the next 10 years. The Marine Corps aims to redesign the force for naval expeditionary warfare and to better align itself with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, its focus on strategically competing with China and Russia. The Marines intend to eliminate or reduce certain types of units and eliminate some military occupational specialties (MOS). The Marines also plan to reorganize higher echelon Marine formations and get smaller—reducing forces by 12,000 personnel by 2030. Congress in its regulatory, oversight, and authorization and appropriations roles could take interest in this major proposed force design initiative.

Major Ground Force Eliminations/Reductions/Realignments

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

- eliminate all Marine Corps Tank Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminate all Law Enforcement Battalions and associated MOSs;
- eliminate all Bridging Companies and associated MOSs;
- reduce the number of Infantry Battalions from 24 to 21—as part of this,
 - deactivate the 8th Marine Regimental Headquarters and 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines from Camp Lejeune, NC;
 - realign the 1st Battalion 8th Marines to the 2nd Marines; and
 - realign the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines to the 6th Marines—
- reduce the number of Cannon Artillery Batteries from 21 to 5; and
- reduce the number of Amphibious Vehicle Companies from 6 to 4.

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IN11281

Major Aviation Force Deactivations

Marine aviation force deactivations include the following:

- 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.

Of particular note, the Marines plan to reduce the number of F-35 B and C aircraft (see CRS Report RL30563, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, by Jeremiah Gertler) in each squadron from 16 to 10.

Reorganization at Higher Echelons

Per the Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) headquartered at Camp Courtney, Okinawa, Japan, is to be the focal point of higher echelon modernization [described](#) as follows:

- The Marine Corps is to establish three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish sea denial and control within contested maritime spaces as part of the modernized III MEF.
- The III MEF's Pacific posture is to be augmented by three globally deployable Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) possessing both traditional and Expeditionary Advanced Base capabilities that can deploy with nonstandard Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs).
- I MEF (Camp Pendleton, CA) and II MEF (Camp Lejeune, NC) are to generate forces to support the MLRs and the MEUs, and are to be able to apply their forces against other global challenges consistent with Title 10 roles and missions.

Proposed Future Capabilities of the Redesigned Force

As part of the redesigned Marine Corps for 2030, the Marines intend to pursue the following [capabilities](#):

- **Expansion of Long-Range Fires:** Achieve a 300% increase in rocket artillery capacity, which, in conjunction with anti-ship missiles, is intended to significantly expand the Marine Corps' ability to support the fleet commander in sea control and denial operations.
 - **Lighter, More Mobile and Versatile Infantry:** Reduce the size of infantry battalions in order to support naval expeditionary warfare and to facilitate distributed and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.
 - **Investments in Unmanned Systems:** Double the number of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) squadrons and austere lethal unmanned air and ground systems to enhance the ability to sense and strike targets.
 - **Maritime Mobility and Resilience:** Seek new capabilities to increase littoral maritime mobility and resilience, including a new light amphibious warship, as well as more affordable stern-landing and operational support vessels.
 - **Mobile Air Defense and Counter-Precision Guided Missile Systems:** Pursue a variety of efforts to include directed energy systems, loitering munitions, signature management, electronic warfare, and expeditionary airfield capabilities and structure to support
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manned and unmanned aircraft and other systems from austere, minimally developed locations.

Potential Issues for Congress

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

- The elimination of Marine Tank Battalions represents a significant reduction in the ability to confront enemy armor threats. How will the Marines compensate for the loss of this capability?
- The estimated elimination of 76% of the Marine Cannon Artillery Batteries represents a significant reduction in organic on-shore artillery fire support. How will the Marines compensate for this loss? Does this suggest the Marines intend to rely on Army cannon artillery to make up for this capability shortfall?
- What is the operational impact of the planned deactivation of four helicopter squadrons and the elimination of three Marine Infantry Battalions and a Regimental Headquarters?
- The reduction of F-35s per squadron and the possible reduction in Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs) (see CRS Report RS22942, *Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV): Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert) resulting from unit eliminations/deactivations have implications beyond the Marines, as both are major Joint-Service programs. How might this planned reduction in Marine requirements for F-35s and JLTVs affect the other military service's procurement plans for these systems?
- Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces–Crisis Response units (SPMAGTF-CR) have been used by Combatant Commanders to respond to limited crises in their regions. Will the Marines continue to support SPMAGTF-CRs in its redesigned force structure?
- What are the basing implications associated with the planned Marine Corps force redesign?
- How will these proposed force redesign initiatives affect contingency operations that do not fall under the category of “great power competition”?
- How do proposed Marine force design changes and intended future capabilities efforts (e.g., long-range fires, smaller infantry battalions) fit into the larger context of changes in Navy and Marine Corps operational concepts and Navy fleet architecture, including the amphibious fleet? (See CRS Report R43543, *Navy LPD-17 Flight II and LHA Amphibious Ship Programs: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, and CRS Report RL32665, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.)

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