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U.S. Military Forces in FY 2021

Marine Corps

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Part of *U.S. Military Forces in FY 2021*. The Marine Corps begins a major restructuring to develop capabilities for great power conflict after two decades of conducting counterinsurgency ashore. The budget cuts units and personnel to pay for these new capabilities. However, many commentators worry that the restructuring will make the Marine Corps too narrowly focused.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- General Berger's new guidance aims to restore the Marine Corps to its naval roots after two decades of operations ashore, invest in capabilities focused on great power conflict in the Pacific, and divest unneeded forces.
- To pay for this, the Marine Corps' active-duty end strength begins a decline to about 172,000, the level before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Despite a continuing high operational tempo, the Marine Corps is pursuing modernization over expanding force structure.
- Ground forces would gain long-range precision fires but give up three infantry battalions, tanks, and some counterinsurgency capabilities. Most artillery would convert from cannon to missile units
- UAVs would increase in number, but the Marine Corps is far behind the Air Force in this regard and the Marine Corps' UAV development program is in disarray.
- The amphibious fleet will include large numbers of light amphibious warships (LAWs). These will provide more distributed capabilities that can implement the Marine Corps' intention to be a "stand in" force that can operate inside an adversary's defensive bubble. The trade-off is that, because of the LAWs small size, they will not be able to support the customary level of global forward deployments, which may decline as a result.
- The restructuring has been criticized for focusing too much on a maritime campaign in the Western Pacific, ignoring other global conflicts, and relying on unproven operational concepts.

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The FY 2021 budget is an interim step as the Marine Corps seeks to implement a major restructuring. This restructuring would shed capabilities designed for counterinsurgency and sustained operations ashore and cut a slice across the entire Marine Corps to pay for new capabilities. Because the restructuring plan came out after the FY 2021 budget, full implementation is expected in the FY 2022 budget and its associated five-year plan.

End Strength in FY 2021

Table 1: Marine Corps – Active, Reserve, and Civilians

	Marine Corps Active Duty	Marine Corps Reserve	Civilian Full-time Equivalents
	Authorized End Strength	*Authorized End Strength*	
FY 2020 Enacted	186,200	38,500	22,594
FY 2021 Request	184,100	38,500	22,896
Change	-2,100	0	+302

Source: Department of the Navy, *Highlights of The Department of the Navy FY 2021 Budget* (Washington, DC: 2020), Active duty end strength data in Figure 2.6; Reserve end strength data in figure 2.7; Civilian data in Figure 2.10, https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/Highlights_book.pdf.

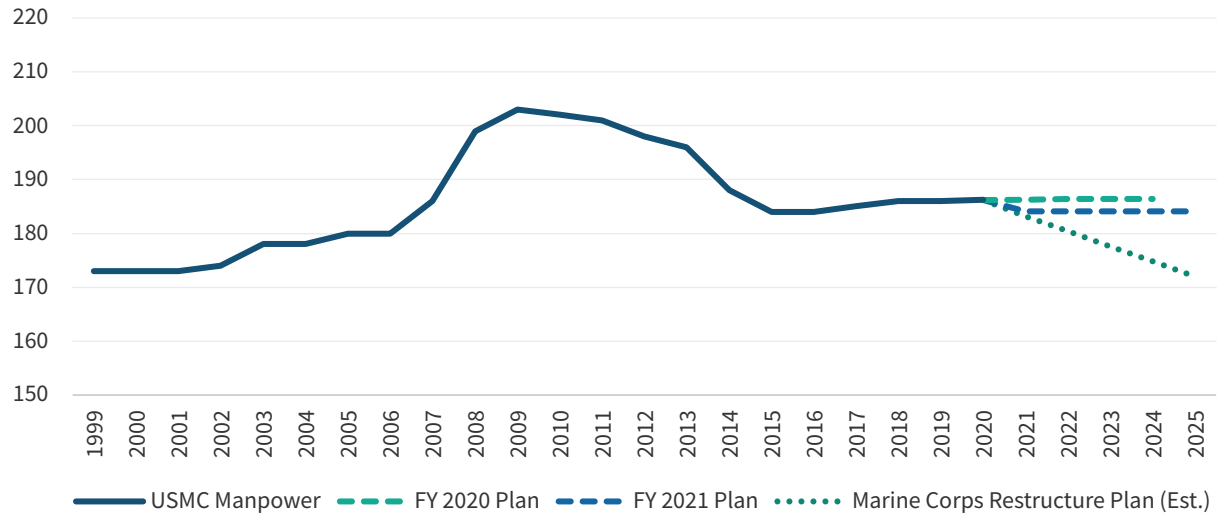
In FY 2021, the Marine Corps decreases active-duty end strength by 2,100. This is the first increment of a larger decrease to pay for the commandant's restructuring.

Marine Corps Reserve end strength stays level at 38,500, where it has been for many years. On the one hand, the retention and recruitment challenges of expanding are too great. (The Marine reserves got into some trouble in the past when they tried to expand to over 40,000.) On the other hand, the demands of maintaining a full division-wing structure prevent it from getting much smaller. General Berger's guidance hints at some changes in the future: "We will explore the efficacy of fully integrating our reserve units within the Active Component, as well as other organizational options." However, that is still pending.[1]

Marine Corps civilians increase slightly, as with Department of Defense (DOD) civilians overall, reflecting the focus on rebuilding readiness and the substitution of civilians for military personnel in support activities. Marine Corps civilian strength levels have been relatively level for several years. One notable point is that the number does not go down, at least yet, as the active-duty force gets smaller.

1. David Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps* (Arlington, VA: 2019), https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/%2038th%20Commandant%27s%20Planning%20Guidance_2019.pdf?ver=2019-07-16-200152-700.

Chart 1: Marine Corps Active-Duty End Strength 1999–2025 (000s)



Source: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2021* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 2020), Table 7-5, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/FY21_Green_Book.pdf; and Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *PB 21 Budget Roll Out Brief* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 2020), 13, https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/SUPPORT_/FY21%20PB%20Rollout%20Brief_1.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-114941-800.

Not so long ago, the Marine Corps had talked about expanding the active-duty force to 194,000. That level would have allowed the Marine Corps to build new capabilities without sacrificing the old. However, flat budgets required some trade-offs.

The projection in the FY 2021 budget shows a small decrease compared to the FY 2020 projection. However, last year, General Berger said: "If provided the opportunity to secure additional modernization dollars in exchange for force structure, I am prepared to do so."[2] His restructuring plan, which came out after the budget was published, described cutting active-duty end strength by "about 12,000" to pay for the new capabilities envisioned. That would take the active-duty Marine Corps down to 172,000, a reduction that will likely be incorporated into the FY 2022 budget.

Even at that level, the Marine Corps would be coming out of the wars at about the same level (172,000) that it went in (172,600).

The McKenzie Group of 2013 (named after its leader, then-Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie, now General McKenzie, commander of CENTCOM) argued that forward presence and crisis response were the Marine Corps' primary force drivers because of the strain that deployments put on the force. This may have also been a reflection of the time, at least in part driven by 10 years of high wartime operational tempo (OPTEMPO).[3]

2. Ibid., 6.
3. Brian Buggeman and Ben Fitzgerald, *Crisis Response: Institutional Innovation in the United States Marine Corps* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, Nov 2015), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/crisis-response-institutional-innovation-in-the-united-states-marine-corps.; Robert Neller, "Posture of the Department of the Navy," Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 116th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 2019, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Neller_04-09-19.pdf.

In any case, that argument has disappeared. General Berger did not mention high OPTEMPO or personnel stress in his annual posture statement to Congress.[4] That is a change from statements pre-2016, when the commandants routinely cited the stress of multiple deployments.

A New Force Structure

When General Berger became commandant, he issued planning guidance with four major themes: to reestablish the Marine Corps' naval roots after years of operations ashore in Iraq and Afghanistan; to build structure and weapons for great power conflict, particularly in the Pacific; to eliminate legacy capabilities that did not fit with a new concept; and to maintain a high level of individual warfighting prowess.[5] These themes were consistent with the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) and previously published Marine concepts such as Expeditionary Advance Base Operations and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment. The Marine concepts envision a shift to distributed operations and the Marine Corps contributing to sea control in a naval campaign through shore-based aircraft and fires, not just by projecting power ashore.

In March 2020, the Marine Corps announced the specifics of the restructuring in *Marine Corps 2030*.[6] The sections below contain details.

Unlike the Navy's proposed restructuring, General Berger stated, "I seek no additional resources for this effort."[7] Thus, the restructure cuts many force elements to create savings to acquire new capabilities. Implementation will be a 10-year effort, though some changes, such as the retirement of tanks, have taken place immediately. The document and General Berger's statements since its issuance emphasize that this is an ongoing process with continued experimentation and wargaming. In particular, the logistics structure, reserves, and elements of aviation are unresolved.

The restructuring maintains the three active-duty Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEFs): I and II MEFs located in the continental United States (California and North Carolina, respectively) and III MEF on Hawaii, Okinawa, and mainland Japan. Today, the MEFs are nearly identical, though they have minor variations, and III MEF is a bit smaller because of its overseas basing. However, *Marine Corps 2030* notes that the MEFs may not be identical in the future.

The restructuring also maintains the reserve division-wing team, headquartered in New Orleans but spread over the entire country. (The reserve division-wing team lacks the headquarters to make it an MEF. Since the reserves are employed at lower unit levels, such a headquarters is not needed.) The Marine Corps reserve, like the Army National Guard but unlike the other reserve components, mirrors the organization of the active-duty force. No capabilities reside disproportionately in the Marine Reserve (except the small civil affairs community, which is almost entirely in the reserves).

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4. David Berger, "Posture of the Navy," Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 5, 2020, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Modly--Gilday--Berger_03-05-20.pdf.
5. U.S. Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, September 2016), https://www.mccdc.marines.mil/Portals/172/Docs/MCCDC/young/MCCDC-YH/document/final/Marine%20Corps%20Operating%20Concept%20Sept%202016.pdf?ver=2016-09-28-083439-483; "Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment," U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy, 2017, https://www.candp.marines.mil/Concepts/Subordinate-Operating-Concepts/Littoral-Operations-in-a-Contested-Environment/; and "Expeditionary Advance Base Operations," U.S. Marine Corps, 2018, http://www.candp.marines.mil/Concepts/Subordinate-Operating-Concepts/Expeditionary-Advanced-Base-Operations/.
6. U.S. Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030* (Washington, DC: March 2020), https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460.
7. Berger, "Posture of the Navy."

General Berger's guidance and restructuring barely mention cyber and special operations, which raises questions about how they fit into his new concept for the Marine Corps. Both had been uncomfortable fits, with cyber Marines being hard to recruit and special forces Marines siphoning top talent from the regular line units.[8]

If fully implemented, the restructuring would also have a major cultural impact on the Marine Corps. Hitherto, the infantry has been the centerpiece of the Marine Corps and the principal instrument by which it wins battles. Its mission has been clear: "locate, close with, and destroy the enemy."[9] Under this restructuring, the Marine Corps would win battles using long-range fires from artillery and aviation. The infantry role would be mostly defensive, to protect these long-range fire assets.[10]

Ground Forces

Table 2 lays out the major changes that the restructuring would make to Marine Corps ground forces. The Marine Corps emphasizes that experimentation is ongoing, so additional changes are likely. In particular, the Marine Corps is still formulating plans for logistics and the reserves. (For a detailed assessment of *Marine Corps 2030*, see Mark Cancian, "The Marine Corps' Radical Shift Towards China."[11])

Table 2: Marine Corps Ground Force Structure

	Current Structure	Proposed Structure
Infantry	24 active-duty infantry battalions	21 active-duty infantry battalions, each about 15 percent or 125 marines smaller
	8 reserve infantry battalions	6 reserve infantry battalions
Fire support	21 cannon batteries; 7 rocket batteries	5 cannon batteries; 21 missile/rocket batteries
Tanks	7 tank companies	0 tanks, no capability retained
Bridge companies	3 bridging companies (active and reserve)	0 bridging companies
Law enforcement (military police) units	3 battalions	0 battalions

Infantry: The cut of three infantry battalions appears to be a bill payer. The press release says that the remaining battalions will be more "mobile" and reportedly "commando-like."[12] That implies deleting some

8. For the case against these units, see, for example, Dakota L. Wood, *Rebuilding America's Military: The United States Marine Corps – Refocusing the Corps on Its Primary Mission: Contributing to the Prosecution of Naval Campaigns* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, March 21, 2019), https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/SR211_0.pdf.
9. The full infantry mission statement: "The mission of the [infantry] is to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver, or repel the enemy's assault by fire and close combat." From U.S. Marine Corps, *The Marine Rifle Squad*, MCWP 3-11.2 (Washington, DC: 2002), 1-1, https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCWP%203-11.2%20Marine%20Rifle%20Squad.pdf.
10. Philip Athey, "Steely Eyed Killers No More: What Will the Corps' Culture Look like under the New Force Design?," *Marine Corps Times*, September 18, 2020, https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/09/18/passive-defenders-or-steely-eyed-killers-what-will-the-corps-culture-look-like-under-new-force-design/. David Barno and Nora Bensahel make a similar argument for the Army in "The Headwinds Looming for the U.S. Army," War on the Rocks, October 27, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-headwinds-looming-for-the-u-s-army/.
11. Mark Cancian, "The Marine Corps' Radical Shift Towards China," CSIS, *Commentary*, March 25, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/marine-corps-radical-shift-toward-china.
12. "Press Release: Marine Corps Announces New Force Design Initiatives," U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, press release, March 23, 2020, https://insidedefense.com/sites/insidedefense.com/files/documents/2020/mar/03232020_fd.pdf.

of the heavy weapons such as mortars and anti-tank missiles. On the other hand, in *Marine Corps 2030*, which came out later, the commandant says, "I am not confident that we have adequately assessed all of the implications of the future operating environment on the proposed structure of our future infantry battalion." He directs further experimentation, so the organization of the infantry battalion is not a closed issue.

Cutting infantry battalions allows proportional cuts in supporting capabilities—in aviation, logistics, and fire support—thus creating enough savings to pay for new capabilities.

The infantry has long been the heart of the Marine Corps, so, if implemented, this would be a major institutional as well as force structure change. The three active-duty divisions would have 27 infantry battalions at full strength. The infantry battalions have been getting smaller over time, totaling about 1,050 Marines up until the mid-1980s. This change will take them down to about 725. Thus, the total number of Marines in infantry battalions goes from 28,350 in the early 1980s to 15,200 in the future, a cut of 47 percent for a Marine Corps of about the same size.

Fire support: The artillery community will be roughly the same size after the restructuring, but it will be dramatically different. Some of the new batteries will be HIMARS, which fire long-range guided and unguided missiles at land targets. Some will be a new system that fires tactical Tomahawk anti-ship missiles. Because of their guided munitions, missile and rocket batteries can hit ground targets and ships at long range. However, they do not support the infantry with massed and area fires as cannon batteries do. This shift is a statement that the Marine Corps does not expect to face adversary armies close-up on the ground but will instead fight maritime campaigns at long distances.

Tanks: This has been the most visible change. Tanks have been part of the Marine Corps since World War II and have fought in every conflict since then. As with changes to the artillery, it is a dramatic statement that the Marine Corps does not plan to participate in ground conflicts in the future as it did in, for example, Desert Storm or the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Bridge companies: These companies are useful for ground combat maneuver but not on islands.

Law enforcement battalions: These units are useful for counterinsurgency but would have little role in a Pacific maritime campaign. The fact that the Marine Corps retains no capability here shows the focus on the Western Pacific scenario and a determination not to get involved in future counterinsurgency campaigns.

Aviation Forces and Challenges

Table 3 shows the current aviation structure and proposed changes under *Force Design 2030*.

Table 3: Marine Corps Aviation Force Structure

	Current Structure	Proposed Structure
Rotary wing—tiltrotor	17 squadrons	14 squadrons
Rotary wing—light attack	7 squadrons	5 squadrons
Rotary wing—heavy	8 squadrons, currently transiting from aging CH-53Es to CH-53K	5 squadrons
Fixed wing—fighter attack (F-18, F-35)	18 total squadrons; planned acquisition: 353 F-35Bs (STOVL version) and 67 F-35Cs (carrier version)	No change to number of squadrons, but number of F-35s per squadron reduced from 16 to 10.
C-130 cargo aircraft	3 squadrons	4 squadrons
Unmanned aviation systems (UAVs)	3 squadrons unarmed ISR	Add 3 armed UAV squadrons,

Source: U.S. Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030* (Washington, DC: March 2020), https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460.

Tiltrotor: The restructuring cuts three squadrons because they mainly support infantry, which is getting smaller. The reduction may create some stress on the remaining squadrons since MV-22s have been used heavily. The Marine Corps has purchased all 360 MV-22 aircraft, so it is unclear where the cut aircraft will go, perhaps retained for the training base (which has used older models) and future attrition.

Rotary wing—light attack: The Marine Corps' light-attack helicopters (AH-1Zs) are most useful against enemy armor and infantry. Although the helicopters have enough range to participate in sea control, they lack a long-range stand-off weapon and need to get close to their target. Because the Marine Corps recently completed the buy of these aircraft, they will likely go into storage for later use. The reduced size and role for attack helicopters raises questions about whether the Marine Corps will participate in the Army's Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft program.

Rotary wing—heavy: The stated reason for the cut is that with less heavy equipment and less infantry, there is less need for heavy-lift helicopters. However, it is likely that General Berger also considered the high cost to maintain these large and expensive helicopters. The cut of three squadrons implies a one-third cut to the replacement CH-53K program, which is just entering production.

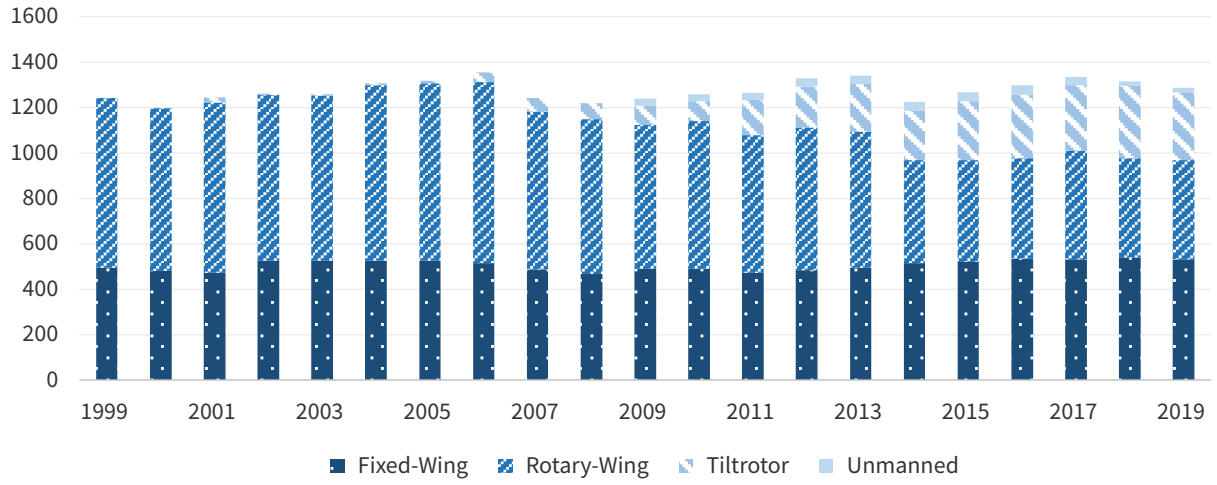
Fixed-wing fighter attack: The reduction in aircraft per squadron implies a cut of about 45 F-35s when training and maintenance overhead are included. As a key reason for the reduction, the restructuring report points to a pilot shortage and the Marine Corps' inability to fix the shortage. However, the commandant's guidance also signaled a willingness to trade off expensive and manned fixed-wing aircraft for UAVs. Nevertheless, General Berger indicates that the changes are not settled: "I am not convinced that we have a clear understanding yet of F-35 capacity requirements for the future force." He reinforced the point in a later media roundtable.[13] Cutting F-35s will be controversial because of the program's strong support in Congress, which has annually added aircraft to the budget.

13. Megan Eckstein, "Marines Won't Cut F 35 Buy Total for Now but External Review May Change That," USNI News, April 1, 2020, https://news.usni.org/2020/04/01/marines-wont-cut-planned-f-35-buy-totals-for-now-but-external-review-could-change-that.

C-130 cargo aircraft: This increase likely recognizes the need to support geographically widespread teams in distributed operations. Because C-130 aircraft can land on rough airfields, they can supply forces in austere, forward locations. The increase would therefore be for the cargo mission and not for the refueling mission since the number of Marine aircraft overall would decline.

UAVs: The Marine Corps has fallen far behind Air Force and Army in fielding armed UAVs as a result of its focus on manned aircraft such as the F-35. This change is long overdue but apparently delayed further by waiting for a developmental system. See the discussion below.

Chart 2: Marine Corps Aircraft Inventory by Type



Source: Data from successive editions of International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance* (London, UK: Routledge, 1999-2019), https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance. Supplemented by U.S. Marine Corps, *2019 Marine Corps Aviation Plan* (Washington, DC: 2019), https://www.aviation.marines.mil/portals/11/2019%20avplan.pdf.

Marine aircraft inventories have increased for the last few years. The rotary-wing fleet has mostly been recapitalized with the MV-22 and UH/AH-1 procurements, so it is modern and relatively young. The CH-53K program will complete that recapitalization. The fixed-wing fleet is in the process of recapitalization with the F-35. So, despite the high cost of contemporary aircraft, Marine aviation is in pretty good shape, unlike the Air Force.

The effect of Marine Corps 2030 on aircraft inventories is unclear. It will cut rotary-wing, tiltrotor, and fixed-wing fighter attack but increase UAVs and C-130s. Since the forces being supported get smaller, the aviation inventory will likely also get smaller.

Lag in Fielding UAVs

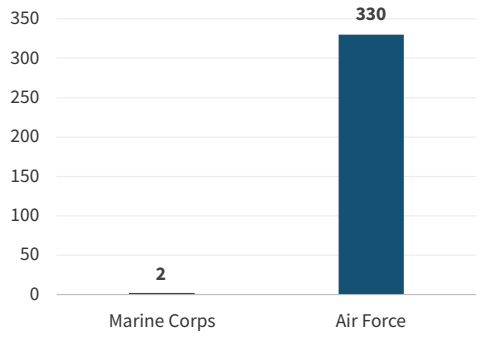
The Marine Corps, having led the way on UAVs in the 1980s, now lags far behind the other services. General Berger vows to change this, saying that "starting with POM-22 [the Marine Corps will] develop a much broader family of unmanned systems."

The Marine Corps considered acquiring MQ-9 Reapers as an interim capability. It bought two MQ-9 Reapers in FY 2020 budget and was going to request another three in FY 2021 but did not. Instead, the Marine Corps is waiting for the USMC-developed large UAV (called MUX) because of its shipboard capabilities. However, the program is being restructured, having collapsed from having too many

requirements piled on it. The Marine Corps hopes to have a family of systems with something fielded in the FY 2023 timeframe but the program is unsettled.[14]

This is a cautionary tale about letting the requirements process opt for the perfect (MUX) over the good (MQ-9).

Chart 3: Marine Corps v. Air Force Armed UAVs in FY 2020



Source: *Highlights of The Department of the Navy FY 2021 Budget* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, February 2020), Figure 4-3, https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/Highlights_book.pdf; and Department of the Air Force, *Budget United States Air Force Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Overview* (Washington, DC: March 2019), 38, Appendix, https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/SUPPORT_/FY21%20Budget%20Overview_1.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-152806-743.

The fate of the Marine Corps' RQ-21 Blackjack is unclear. Fielding has been completed to four operational squadrons, having experienced difficulties in development and a reduction in planned quantities to 21.[15] Located at regiment/MEU level, it will be capable of operating both ashore and from L-class ships. It performs reconnaissance and surveillance functions but has no attack capability.

However, *Force Design 2030* seems to indicate uncertainty about the future of the MQ-21 fleet. "We need to transition from our current UAS platforms to capabilities that can operate from ship, from shore, and be able to employ both collection and *lethal* [emphasis added] payloads."[16]

The Marine Corps also fields a wide variety of smaller UAVs (RQ-11, -12, -20) for tactical reconnaissance and targeting and is experimenting aggressively with integrating such capabilities into small unit operations. None of these systems have attack capabilities, however.

Like the Navy, the Marine Corps has focused on manned aircraft and is far behind the Army and the Air Force in fielding UAV capabilities. General Berger wants to go in a different direction, but the Marine Corps MUX program is in disarray, and he faces decades of aviation culture built around manned aircraft.

Reaction to Marine Corps 2030

The proposed restructuring has been met with both support and doubts. Support comes from strategists who see China as the primary threat and would focus defense efforts tightly on that adversary. They endorse the new technologies and operational concepts.[17]

14. Megan Eckstein, "Marines Ditch MUX Ship-based Drone to Pursue Large Land-Based UAS, Smaller Ship Board Vehicle," Naval Institute News, March 10, 2020, https://news.usni.org/2020/03/10/marines-ditch-mux-ship-based-drone-to-pursue-large-land-based-uas-smaller-shipboard-vehicle.
15. Defense Operational Test and Evaluation, *RQ-21A Blackjack Unmanned Aircraft System* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2016), http://www.dote.osd.mil/pub/reports/FY2015; and Justin Katz, "Marine Corps Manpower Shift Leads to Reduction in RQ-21 FY-19 Request," Inside Defense, February 16, 2018, https://insidedefense.com/insider/marine-corps-manpower-shift-leads-reduction-rq-21-fy-19-request.
16. U.S. Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030*, 9.
17. For example, T.X. Hammes, "Building a Marine Corps for Every Contingency, Clime, and Place," War on the Rocks, April 15, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/building-a-marine-corps-for-every-contingency-clime-and-place/; Jake Yaeger, "Expeditionary Advanced Maritime Operations: How the Marine Corps Can Avoid Becoming a Second Land Army in the Pacific," War on the Rocks, December 26, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/expeditionary-advanced-maritime-operations-how-the-marine-corps-

Doubts arise from five primary concerns.[18]

- The focus on China downplays the possibility of conflicts elsewhere. Since World War II, the United States has fought many regional conflicts but never a great power conflict. Thus, James Webb, former senator, former secretary of the Navy, and Marine combat veteran, criticized a narrow focus on China: "If history teaches us anything in combat, it is that the war you get is rarely the war that you game . . . [The restructuring] could permanently reduce the long-standing mission of global readiness that for more than a century has been the essential reason for [the Marine Corps'] existence as a separate service."[19]
- The new warfighting concepts are unproven. The restructure assumes that in a conflict with China, Marine forces could move into the Chinese defensive bubble, survive, and be supported. That briefs well but may not work in a contested environment where logistics need to move forward continuously and adversary firepower can strike isolated Marine outposts.[20]
- A force design for one kind of operation cannot necessarily conduct a different kind of operation successfully. Thus, a Marine Corps designed for an island campaign against China in the Western Pacific will be poorly designed for conflicts elsewhere, particularly regional conflicts that might occur in Korea or the Middle East. The U.S. Army of the 1960s that was designed to fight the Soviets on the plains of Germany was poorly positioned to fight insurgents in the jungles of Southeast Asia.[21]
- Conflicts against China and Russia are likely to operate in the gray zone and are not high-intensity and kinetic. The new force design is not well suited for these demands because of reductions to counterinsurgency capabilities and the reorientation of training to focus exclusively on a high-end fight.[22]
- All warfighting requires close-in firepower. The new structure focuses on long-range precision fire, but the need for close-in fires, including tanks and cannon artillery, has not gone away.[23]

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can-avoid-becoming-a-second-land-army-in-the-pacific/; Benjamin Jensen, "The Rest of the Story: Evaluating the US Marine Corps Force Design 2030," War on the Rocks, April 27, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/the-rest-of-the-story-evaluating-the-u-s-marine-corps-force-design-2030; and Jeff Cummings, Scott Cuomo, Olivia Garard, and Noah Spataro, "Getting the Context of Marine Corps Reform Right," War on the Rocks, May 1, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/getting-the-context-of-marine-corps-reform-right/.

18. Raising all the concerns, Tanner Greer, "The Tip of the American Military Spear Is Being Blunted," *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/06/us-marines-strategy-military-tip-spear-china-congress/; Paul McHale, "A Critical Assessment of Marine Commandant David Berger's Planning Guidance and Force Design 2030," privately circulated; and Mark Cancian, "Don't Go Too Crazy, Marine Corps," War on the Rocks, January 8, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/dont-go-too-crazy-marine-corps/.

19. James Webb, "The Future of the US Marine Corps," *The National Interest*, May 8, 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/future-us-marine-corps-152606; and Dan Goure, "Will Commandant Burger's Planning Guidance Mean the End of the Marine Corps?," Real Clear Defense, December 13, 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/12/13/will_commandant_bergers_planning_guidance_mean_the_end_of_the_marine_corps_114919.html.

20. Walker Mills, Dylan Phillips-Levine, and Colin Fox, "Cocaine Logistics for the Marine Corps," War on the Rocks, July 22, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/cocaine-logistics-for-the-marine-corps/.

21. Mark Stout, "Archives: World War I and the Lesser Included Threat," War on the Rocks, December 5, 2014, https://warontherocks.com/2014/12/warchives-world-war-i-and-the-lesser-included-threat/; and Ben Wan Beng Ho, "Shortfalls in the Marine Corps EABO Concept," Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, July 2020, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/july/shortfalls-marine-corps-eabo-concept.

22. John Vrolyk, "Insurgency, Not War, Is China's Most Likely Course of Action," War on the Rocks, December 19, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/insurgency-not-war-is-chinas-most-likely-course-of-action/.

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Marine Air-Ground Task Forces

The Marine Corps has long prided itself on being able to task organize—that is, to put existing units together into temporary groups for a particular purpose. The Marine Corps has a standard set of task force templates for what it calls Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs). Each of the standard templates has four elements: a command element, a ground combat element, an aviation element, and a logistics element. The largest, a Marine Expeditionary Force (46,000–90,000 Marines), is built around the Marine division and air wing. The middle-sized force, the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (4,000–16,000 Marines), is built around an infantry regiment and air group. The smallest, the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU, about 2, 200 Marines), is built around an infantry battalion and composite squadron.[24]

Two new task forces have received attention: special-purpose MAGTFs (SP-MAGTFs) and littoral combat regiments.

SP-MAGTFs: Although not new, SP-MAGTF units represent a different capability for the Marine Corps. Traditionally, the smallest unit that the Marine Corps deployed was an MEU. To provide rapid response and persistent presence in AFRICOM and CENTCOM and periodic theater engagement in SOUTHCOM, the Marine Corps established these land-based special-purpose units, which are smaller than the MEU. That made them both more agile and easier to deploy, though at the cost of logistics and firepower.

The Marine Corps appears to be reconsidering the mission and staffing of SP-MAGTFs, using deployed MEUs when these are in the region and regular units to meet specific taskings. This eases the burden of creating new special-purpose units, even relatively small ones.

Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR): This new kind of unit would deliver anti-ground and anti-ship fires and be able to survive inside an adversary's (e.g., China's) defensive bubble. These new units harken back to a World War II capability, Marine defense battalions, which were designed to protect forward bases from naval and air attack. The Marine Corps is experimenting in Hawaii using troops stationed there. MLRs tentatively consist of a combat team, an air-defense battalion, and a logistics unit, though their exact structure and numbers are unclear at this point.[25]

Also unclear is whether MLRs will be permanent or task-organized units. MLRs look a lot like a specialized MEU, though they are not characterized that way.

Guam and Pacific Force Stationing

This is a classic good news (Australia) and bad news (Okinawa/Guam/Japan) story.

Okinawa/Guam/Japan: The Marine Corps is engaged in a long-term effort to ease the burden of its force footprint on Okinawa by moving forces to Guam, though also to mainland Japan, Hawaii, and the mainland United States. The current plan is for the number of Marines on Okinawa to be halved, to 11,500, by 2027.[26]

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24. U.S. Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Operations*, Doctrinal Publication 3 (Washington, DC: 1998), 69–77, https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%203.pdf?ver=2019-07-18-093631-287.
25. Megan Eckstein, "Marines Testing Regiment at Heart of Emerging Island Hopping Future," USNI News, June 4, 2020, https://news.usni.org/2020/06/04/marines-testing-regiment-at-heart-of-emerging-island-hopping-future; and Sean Snow, "New Marine Littoral Regiment, Designed to Fight in Contested Maritime Environment, Coming to Hawaii," *Marine Corps Times*, May 14, 2020, https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/05/14/new-marine-littoral-regiment-designed-to-fight-in-contested-maritime-environment-coming-to-hawaii.
26. Emma Chanlett-Avery, Christopher T. Mann, and Joshua A. Williams, "U.S. Military Presence on Okinawa and Realignment to Guam," Congressional Research Service, April 9, 2019, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10672.pdf.

The government of Japan is paying for much of the massive facility construction on Guam, and construction is going forward, though the timeline has slipped repeatedly.[27] In September, the Marine Corps christened a new base, Camp Blaz, named for a Marine general of Guamanian descent. Apparently only 1,300 Marines will be permanently stationed on Guam, with another 3,700 coming to the island as a rotational force. This is a change from the original expectation that all troops would be permanently stationed on Guam.[28]

The re-stationing effort also involves building a new air facility—called the Futenma replacement facility—in the less inhabited northern area of Okinawa at Camp Schwab. This project continues to have difficulties, with the completion date pushed out again, to 2030, and the price skyrocketing. It appears unlikely that this will ever be completed.[29]

The entire re-stationing effort is a cautionary tale to those seeking to move U.S. forces around the globe. Although there are strong strategic reasons for such posture changes, executing them can be extremely challenging in the real world of local politics, regional tensions, and the inevitable difficulties involved with large-scale construction projects.

Australia: By contrast to the slow and controversial moves on Okinawa and Guam, the Marine Corps' rotational deployments to Darwin, Australia continue into their tenth year without controversy, with six-month rotations on the ground of about 1,200 personnel each year. Rotations restarted after a pause during the pandemic. The rotations have continued through changes of administration in both Australia and the United States, so the politics look settled. The disadvantage is that the forces are a great distance from any likely conflict (2,500 miles from the South China Sea).

Amphibious Ships, Alternative Platforms, and Global Deployments

Amphibious ships: The Navy chapter described how the amphibious fleet will lose some of its high-end ships, potentially up to six helicopter carriers (LHAs/LHDs) repurposed to be "light carriers" that complement the "supercarriers (CVNs)." The Navy might curtail the number of LPD's flight I and II, although it has not released specifics. Instead, the amphibious fleet will add 28 to 30 light amphibious warships (LAWs). Each LAW would carry 75 Marines. Because such a ship is much smaller than anything in the current or recent inventory, it will change the way Marines organize and train for amphibious operations. It is also unprecedented in recent amphibious ship design in that it is intended for relatively short voyages, transit from point A to point B, and not for long-term deployments.

Alternative platforms: The Navy and Marine Corps may use non-amphibious ships, such as Maritime Prepositioning Force ships (TAK-Es), high-speed vessels (Expeditionary Fast Transports, or EPFs), and mobile landing platforms/afloat forward staging bases (now called Expeditionary Sea Base, or ESB, and Expeditionary Transfer Dock, or ESD). General Berger used them extensively when he was the Marine commander in the Pacific, but the concept does not appear in his guidance.[30]

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27. "U.S. to start moving Okinawa-based marines to Guam in 2024," *Japan Times*, April 27, 2017, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/04/27/national/politics-diplomacy/u-s-start-moving-okinawa-based-marines-guam-2024/#.WZw_qsa1vct.
28. Seth Robson, "Marines Activate Camp Blaz on Guam," *Stars & Stripes*, September 30, 2020, https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/marines-activate-camp-blaz-on-guam-the-corps-first-new-base-since-1952-1.647005.
29. Matthew Burke and Aya Ichihashi, "Marine Airfield Relocation on Okinawa to Take 16 Years Longer and Cost $5.4 billion More Than Originally Projected," *Stars & Stripes*, May 29, 2020, https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/marine-airfield-relocation-on-okinawa-to-take-16-years-longer-and-5-4-billion-more-than-originally-projected-1.631642.
30. Robert D. Holzer and Scott C. Truver, "The U.S. Navy In Review," U.S. Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, May 2017, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-05/us-navy-review.

Global deployments: The total numbers will go up, but the number of ships capable of global deployments will go down. This new amphibious fleet will not sustain the current structure of seven MEUs (one in Japan, three on the West Coast, three on the East Coast) and their long-standing forward deployments.

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