

Radical Realignment: The Marine Plan to Reshape Battalions and Squadrons Over the Coming Decade



U.S. Marines with Bridge Company, 8th Engineer Support Battalion, 2nd Marine Logistics Group, and 2nd Tank Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, transport two M1A1 Abram tanks across the New River during an exercise at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The Corps plans to totally divest itself of law enforcement and tank battalions during a 10-year reorganization. U.S. Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Damion Hatch Jr.

Editor's note: This is the second straight month that Seapower has taken an in-depth look at the profound structural changes ahead for the U.S. Marine Corps. Within the [May issue](#), in "Rejoined at the Hip," we examined how the Corps is reintegrating with the Navy. Here, we examine structural changes that will be required to make that shift and how those changes affect the Corps' conduct of expeditionary warfare.

A profound structural shift is coming to the U.S. Marine Corps over the next decade.

The Corps in late March announced new force design initiatives intended to make the service the sea-based force it once was. To describe these collectively as a tectonic shift might be an understatement.

Check out the digital edition of the June Seapower magazine [here](#).

Under the new plan, the Marine Corps will totally divest itself of law enforcement and tank battalions, decrease infantry battalions from 24 to 21, slash artillery cannon batteries from 21 to just five, reduce amphibious vehicle

companies from six to four, and cut the number of helicopter and tilt-rotor squadrons.

Specifically, the Corps will deactivate Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 264; Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462; Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 469; Marine Wing Support Groups 27 and 37; the 8th Marine Regiment Headquarters Company; and 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines. The service also will deactivate Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 and relocate it to Camp Pendleton, California. And there will be 10 F-35B and C Lightning II joint strike fighters per squadron instead of 16.



Lt. Patrick Leahey (right), air boss of the amphibious transport dock ship USS Somerset, and Lt. Ken Fisher watch a CH-53E Super Stallion of Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 take off during Pacific Ocean operations. Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 is set to be among those units deactivated during the 10-year realignment. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kyle Carlstrom

Why are the Marines making this shift? It's all about making the future "Fleet Marine Force" a modernized force with "new organic capabilities" by 2030, the Corps said in a statement.

"Throughout this 10-year initiative, the Marine Corps will be making investments in capabilities to include increasing long-range precision fires, advanced reconnaissance capabilities, unmanned systems and resilient networks," the statement reads. "Future budget requests will include an expanded list of viable unmanned capabilities that will create significant opportunity for industries across the country."

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Jonathan Wong, associate policy researcher, Rand Corp.

It is a dramatic departure from what the Corps has been doing since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps essentially acted as a second land army, despite its origins as an amphibious force. But the Marines always believed this was a temporary diversion and that they would at some point get back to the sea. Now, it appears that is really happening.

Arming and Manning to Match 'Great Power Competition'

But the Marines have spent the better part of two decades investing in equipment and structuring itself in an entirely different way, so these 10 years of changes will not be easy. To make them happen, the Marines believe they need to get smaller and start eliminating "legacy" capabilities that don't match up with future strategy.

This will result in a major personnel reduction – a total force cut of 12,000 over the next decade.

As a result of this shift, III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) will become a major focal point for the service. The Marines expect to have three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) that can handle sea denial and sea control in maritime spaces as part of III MEF – a far cry from the work the Marines were doing in Iraq and Afghanistan but more in line with the service's amphibious roots.

The realignment places a bigger emphasis on the Pacific Ocean, and the Marines will operate three Marine expeditionary units (MEUs) there to support the realignment.



Marines with Fox Battery, Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, fire an M777A2 lightweight 155 mm howitzer during exercise Cobra Gold 2020 in Thailand. Artillery cannon batteries will be slashed from 21 to just five under the Marines' 10-year restructuring. U.S. Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Kenny Nunez Bigay

Jonathan Wong, associate policy researcher at Rand Corp., said the most impactful changes have nothing to do with divesting or investing in certain forces or equipment but in how the Marine Corps will approach warfare. And the focus is countering a “Great Power Competitor” – the People’s Republic of China.

“The Marines realize that the Navy will face great difficulty projecting power in the Pacific in the future; there are too many accurate, long-range Chinese missiles for that to be feasible,” Wong said.

“So, the Marines’ response is to scatter themselves across islands in the Pacific before a conflict with sensors and long-range rockets and missiles of their own. This puts them in a position to degrade China’s missile advantage and protect the fleet. Being a supporting asset to the Navy is a wholly new way of thinking for today’s Marines. This is the biggest change of all.”

Indeed, the Marines say they expect to expand long-range fires, including a 300% increase in rocket artillery capacity along with anti-ship missiles, which they hope will “profoundly enhance our ability to support the fleet commander in sea control and denial.”

There are other major adjustments to the characteristics of the future force beyond more long-range attack capabilities. Infantry battalions also will be smaller and lighter. The Marines will double the number of unmanned aircraft squadrons. There will be an increase in littoral maritime mobility, including a new light amphibious warship. And the service expects to make big investments in directed-energy systems, electronic warfare, loitering munitions and other cutting-edge technologies.

Lower Budgets Bring About ‘All-In’ on Optimized Force for Peer Conflict

“If defense budgets were on the upswing, the Marine Corps could try to make this concept a reality while preserving their ability to project power, conduct crisis response, wage counter-insurgencies, or any of the other missions that the [Corps] has taken on in the past 20 years,” Wong said. “However, [Commandant Gen. David] Berger believes – rightfully so, I think – that budgets will be flat or decline in the near future. This forces the Marine Corps to make a choice: be a jack of all trades and master of none or go all-in on a force optimized for peer conflict. The Marine Corps has chosen to go all-in, so the reorganization is necessary to enable that.”



Seaman Cesar Ramirez-Fajardo, a field medical service technician with 3rd Law Enforcement Battalion, III Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, maneuvers through razor wire at Camp Gonsalves in Okinawa, Japan. The Marines will eliminate all law enforcement battalions under their 10-year restructuring. U.S. Marine Corps/Pfc. Andrew R. Bray
Wong said a forceful execution of this plan could improve the “initiative and decision-making abilities of its leadership up and down the chain of command” over the next decade.

“Instead of deploying as battalions in defined battlespaces, companies or even platoons will be operating beyond the range of support, sometimes without reliable communications,” he added. “This will force commanders to trust their subordinates to a much greater extent. Those subordinates will be forced to make decisions with truly nothing more than commander’s intent.”

He added: “I hesitate to make any predictions about force designs or capabilities 10 years hence, but I am very certain that the decision-making qualities of Marine leaders will be forced to mature dramatically if the Marine Corps follows through with their new operating concept.”