

USMC Force Changes 'Wicked Hard,' but Essential, Lt. Gen. Smith Says



Lt. Gen. Eric Smith discusses U.S. Marine Corps force design changes at Sea-Air-Space 2021. *NAVY LEAGUE / Lisa Nipp*

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The Marine Corps' drastic changes in force size, composition and weapons to meet the emerging threats, primarily from China, is going to be "wicked hard," but the Corps' top officer driving those changes said it is both essential and achievable.

"We have to find out how to go after a pacing threat that is moving. How a small force can hold something at risk. ... We have divested what we can divest. We will produce the force we need by 2030," Lt. Gen. Eric Smith, commanding general Marine Corps Combat Development Command and Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration, said Aug. 3.

Smith added that the Marines' effort to rebuild a smaller, more mobile but lethal force by the date set by Gen. David Berger, the Marine Corps Commandant, will depend on "stable funding." A continuing resolution on defense funding, which is expected, "is a gift to an adversary," he told Sea-Air-Space 2021.

Smith and the Marine Corps headquarters are rapidly shedding legacy systems, including the M-1 Abrams main battle tanks, much of its tube artillery and other heavy weapons to produce a much lighter force capable of sending small units into dispersed locations, most likely in western Pacific littoral regions, to counter China's area-denial, anti-access capabilities that could nullify the Navy's power projection efforts.

“The Corps’ purpose is to support the naval forces efforts,” Smith said. “It’s all about supporting the naval force in a conflict with a major adversary.”

Under intense questioning by moderator Dakota Wood, a retired Marine officer now a senior military analyst with the Heritage Foundation, Smith rejected the idea the Corps is sacrificing heavy systems, such as tanks, that would be useful in other parts of the world to focus solely on the Indo-Pacific theater and China. Smith noted recent experiments that used a mobile rocket artillery system mounted on a Humvee to hit distant targets.

“I can recreate the ability to kill armor,” he said. But “we have to get it there ... we have to move things,” he said.

Challenged on how the Marines would support their dispersed light forces in a contested area, Smith said, “the first thing about having the logistical enterprise able to support you is need less. Why do I need water in the Indo-Pac theater?”

Smith was supported in his confidence in the Corps’ dramatic redesign efforts by William Williford, executive director of the Marine Corps Systems Command, which is fielding the new weapons and systems needed for the new force, and by Scott Lacy, executive director of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, which is running extensive wargames and experiments to develop and test the new formations and gear.

“Starting with the individual Marine, we are putting resources out there to make the Marine more lethal.” Wilford said.

“Don’t bet against us. If there is a concern it’s that the adversary will move faster than us,” Lacy said.

Smith also rejected Wood’s challenge the Corps is putting pressure on the other services to make up for the Marines’ cut in heavy forces, stating the Navy is all in on this and the Corps is working closely with the Army and Air Force to

develop and field the right equipment. He also denied the Marines are sacrificing their ability to deal with current threats.

“You have to be able to fight today. I think we’re capable of doing that today,” he said, and noted that he and at least 14 other Marine generals, including Berger, “have skin in the game” by having sons currently serving in the Marines.