

Force Design 2030: Acquisition for the Future Battlefield



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By Johannes Schmidt, Marine Corps Systems Command

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QUANTICO, Va. – The 2018 National Defense Strategy warns that U.S. adversaries are actively challenging the long-standing rules-based international order, thus “creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory.”

Building on the Pentagon’s observations, Gen. David H. Berger, then-commandant of the Marine Corps, released his seminal 2019 Commandant’s Planning Guidance, in which he proposed sweeping changes aimed at transforming the Corps from its established land-focused role in the Middle East into a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness primed for active engagement in contested maritime spaces within the Indo-Pacific region.

This ultimately led to the initiation of Force Design 2030—a strategic overhaul aimed at transforming the Marine Corps into a more agile, technologically advanced force, prioritizing stand-in forces, littoral operations, modernization, force sizing and composition, training, and international cooperation.

For the acquisition community, the shift to Force Design 2030 opens doors for creativity and innovation, as seen in the

development and fielding of cutting-edge gear by Marine Corps Systems Command and Program Executive Officer Land Systems.

As Marine Corps Systems Command's Executive Director, Dr. Todd Calhoun, recently told Quantico's acquisition workforce, "As we prepare to face potential future adversaries, it is becoming increasingly evident that acquisition is the pacing element of Force Design 2030."

In reimagining the Corps for future battlefields, Force Design 2030 centers on a leaner, agile force equipped for naval expeditionary warfare and prepared for an unpredictable future.

"Force Design 2030 is more than a strategy – it's a vision for the future of the Marine Corps, one that takes into account the evolving challenges of the modern battlefield," said Brig. Gen. David C. Walsh, commander of MARCORSYSCOM. "As we shift focus towards the Indo-Pacific, it's imperative we equip our Marines with the cutting-edge tools and technologies that give us an edge in this new operational landscape."

A significant aspect of this transformation is the realignment and reduction in ground and aviation forces, signaling a transition from traditional ground combat and emphasizing naval expeditionary warfare and its distinct demands.

In parallel, the strategy underlines the deployment of cutting-edge technologies like unmanned aerial and ground systems, advanced air defenses, and anti-ship missiles to enhance the Corps' ability to sense, strike, and counter targets.

These capabilities are acquired through a process of continuous experimentation and an emphasis on user feedback, particularly from the fleet.

“Our requirements are well-defined, but there’s been an intriguing rediscovery process within the acquisition community,” shared Program Executive Officer Land Systems Stephen Bowdren. “We’ve come to understand that, as important as our requirements are, the unique needs and experiences of each Marine are just as critical. We’re not merely fulfilling a requirement; we’re also taking into account the user experience and focusing on ensuring the success of our warfighters.”

Walsh is confident that MARCORSYSCOM will continue to prepare the warfighter to fight and win in any clime or place.

“While China stands as our primary adversary, our commitment remains unwavering to protect American interests across the globe,” he said. “The strategic rationale behind our approach is clear: equipping our forces with the capabilities to effectively engage in this highly challenging theater ensures that we have the necessary tools to respond to crises, conflicts, and responsibilities wherever they may arise worldwide.”

As Ukraine’s successful use of the American High Mobility Artillery Rocket System has shown in Eastern Europe, American capabilities remain versatile—especially against our stated adversaries.

“Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the magnitude and breadth of the challenges confronting us, in both military and economic terms, that pose the most substantial threat we’ve faced in generations,” Bowdren explained. “That said, I wouldn’t say we were ever unprepared for this challenge. We just never want a fair fight. We want a completely unfair fight if it comes to that. Our part in that effort is to develop, build, deliver, and sustain dominant warfighting capabilities for our Marines.”

Evolving Acquisition for Future Battlefields

While Force Design 2030 reimagines the operational role of the warfighter, it also opens the door for innovative acquisition, putting bleeding-edge gear in the hands of Marines.

“Change and evolution are hardwired into the DNA of the Marine Corps,” said Calhoun. “The shift towards the Indo-Pacific under Force Design 2030 brings new challenges and opportunities in acquisition. Our commitment is to drive innovation and smart procurement strategies that ensure our Marines have the best tools and technologies to adapt, succeed and ultimately dominate in this evolving landscape.”

Three years into Force Design 2030’s ten-year timeline, the modeling and experimentation stage, which permitted the divestment of legacy gear, is complete. That means the focus lies solidly on equipping the warfighter—both at home and in the field.

“One of the big shifts that we did this year from a planning and possibly a programming perspective is that we said divestments are complete. We are no longer looking to figure out what do we need to get rid of in order to modernize,” Brig. Gen. Stephen Lightfoot, director of Marine Corps’ Capabilities Development Directorate told reporters in June.

So far, this has meant a shift towards acquiring state-of-the-art gear allowing Marines to beat their adversaries on the battlefield while operating independently in small, distributed forces—often for extended periods with limited outside support.

This has led to the development of capabilities like the expeditionary fueling systems, multi-wave radio systems, an updated vehicular fleet, and the Corps’ first medium-range air

defense capability since HAWK.

On the MARCORSYSCOM side, one program that stands out is the Long Range Unmanned Surface Vessel—or LRUSV.

Lauded as one of the Corps' first semi-autonomous vessel programs, the LRUSV aligns with the Commandant's latest Force Design 2030 update, where Berger envisioned a future in which "amphibious warfare ships will offer even more capability, serving as 'motherships' for a variety of manned, unmanned, and human-machine teamed systems."

"Through Middle Tier of Acquisition rapid prototyping authorities, the team was able to assess the market, place vendors on agreement, and quickly deliver LRUSVs, autonomy software, sensors, and C2 equipment," said Col. Paul Gillikin who, until recently, served as program manager for Fire Support Systems.

"Due to our strong vendor-program office team, we had a boat in the water one year from agreement award despite COVID supply chain impacts. The benefits of the LRUSV prototyping effort allows the Marine Corps to understand the concept, costs, and [Doctrinal, Organizational, Training, Materiel, Leadership and education, Personnel, Facilities and Policy] implications before the Service becomes fully invested," he continued.

This rapid prototyping process ultimately allowed Gillikin's team to get LRUSV on the water and in the hands of Marines for testing quickly, allowing for increased Marine feedback throughout the acquisition process.

Col. Craig Clarkson, commanding officer at Marine Corps Tactical Systems Support Activity, adds perspective to this emphasis on feedback, stating, "Force Design 2030 is not simply a blueprint for the future; it's a call for dynamic engagement with the Fleet. Their firsthand experiences, tactical insights, and invaluable feedback are integral to our

acquisition process and help shape our understanding of what is needed to fight and win on the modern battlefield.”

Similarly, PEO Land Systems has been successful in bringing back the Corps’ air defense capabilities through its Ground-Based Air Defense systems. The Medium-Range Intercept Capability, or MRIC, is one example of this programmatic success.

“A striking example of successful acquisition support to Force Design 2030 execution can be seen in our Ground-Based Air Defense system,” said Bowdren. “Just five years ago, our primary air defense weapon was the Stinger Man-Portable Air-Defense System. Today, we’ve implemented systems like the Marine Air Defense Integrated System, the Light Marine Air Defense Integrated System, MRIC, and we’re seeing the emergence of Installation Counter-small Unmanned Aircraft Systems. In a very short period of time, we’ve established a comprehensive suite of capabilities designed to counter the full range of aerial threats to Marines.”

The transformation undergone by the Marine Corps is manifest in the groundbreaking gear that equips Marines. The past three years have been marked by a radical overhaul, with MARCORSYSCOM and PEO Land Systems leading the acquisition charge towards force modernization.

The journey, though charted with unerring foresight and audacity, continues to evolve. Experimentation, an integral part of this process, has allowed for the rapid adaptation and refinement of systems to best serve Marines’ operational needs. The input and feedback from Marines, those on the ground, have been invaluable in this phase, fine-tuning advancements to the unique demands of the modern battlefield.

Through the vision of Force Design 2030, MARCORSYSCOM and its supported Program Executive Offices have updated the Corps’

equipment and embraced a new generation of warfare—utilizing bleeding-edge gear and cutting-edge tactics that redefine the landscape of conflict. The transformation promised by FD 2030 is underway, and with it, the Marine Corps is poised to ensure America's continued military superiority, no matter the time or place.