

Smash Bullies

Interpreting the “why” behind our Commandant’s Force Design Report

by Maj Gordon Emmanuel

The level of hyperbole surrounding the *Marine Corps Force Design 2030* (FD2030) publication, including some describing our Commandant’s new Force Design (FD) guidance as “radical” and even potentially the equivalent of “suicide,” is constructive.¹ It is likely a positive sign that the mandated FD changes are bold enough to help meet the situation at hand—that of a Chinese Communist Party now clearly demonstrating that it is an *existential* threat to the American people. At the same time, the hyperbole likely represents a reality that the reason behind the FD guidance, or the “why,” has not been as effectively communicated as perhaps it could have been, at least not yet.²

There are concerns that the Marine Corps is moving forward with changes that are going to severely diminish its worth to the Joint force. Contrary views to the FD2030 include its over emphasis on its alignment with the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), its focus on a “conventional” war with China, and a firepower/attributional understanding of warfare.³ Many also believe that the changes mentioned in the document do nothing more than provide redundant and, in some cases, irrelevant capabilities to the Joint force. Each of these concerns have merit, specifically when looked upon as isolated issues; however they misrepresent the true problem when viewed holistically.

The Marine Corps must continue to provide the Joint force and the Nation a Service with unique capabilities worth taxpayer dollars. The capabilities provided should be largely unique and a force multiplier toward the NDS being fulfilled. The Marine Corps is taking great leaps in ensuring that it continues to do so, and I seek to provide answers as to why in this article.

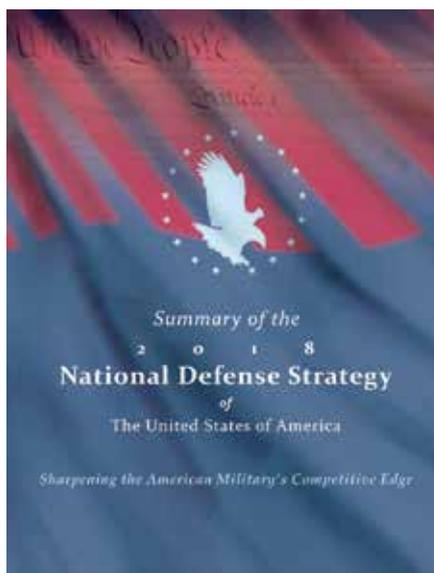
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Why Align with the National Defense Strategy?

Aligning with the NDS is what the Marine Corps is required to do. For all of the consternation that usually arises regarding the lack of a coherent strategy, the last thing the Nation needs—or will accept in a democracy where civilians are in charge of the military—is a rogue branch of the Armed Forces disregarding the vision of the strategy’s creators. The main concern of many

of those who oppose the NDS is that it overemphasizes “war with China,” despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) making clear that it is at war—albeit much different than the one that our Corps prepares for in Twentynine Palms—with the United States nonetheless. Those critical of the FD report guidance appear to be arguing that a war with China is highly unlikely because nuclear powers do not go to war with each other “conventionally.” Going back to the title, it appears that “what we have here, is a failure to communicate.”⁵

Fortunately, the NDS is not all about fighting a conventional war with China or the Marine Corps conducting another island-hopping campaign similar to World War II. Thankfully, our forefathers already did this for us so that we do not have to do so again—if we leverage the countless advantages that their sacrifices and heroism have provided us. The NDS is predicated on doing just this. The Marine Corps’ major role within the NDS is one of deterrence, not 70,000-man amphibious landings. The contact layer, where the Armed Forces seek to expose the actions of malign actors, is where the Marine Corps will provide the Joint force and the Nation the most value.



2018 National Defense Strategy.

“China has been relentless in exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic as it continues to pursue its illegal and expansive claims in the South China Sea.”⁴

The strategy is not simply looking to avoid a conventional war; it is looking to ensure that the interests of America and its allies are protected while doing everything possible to help prevent one from happening in the first place.

Simply relying on the fact that nuclear powers do not go to war with each other would be disingenuous. For 40-plus years, the United States and the Soviet Union fought a Cold War as the world's largest nuclear powers. The Cold War did not see these two actors go to war conventionally, but it was war nonetheless. It involved conventional wars between their proxies, individual quagmires that each country found themselves in conventionally, and an economic battle that undoubtedly had a human cost. All these issues arose because the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union were not in alignment with each other. This is always a recipe for deadly confrontation even if it does not involve hordes of tanks storming through the Fulda gap.

Further, some believe that the NDS is designed to justify unacceptable levels of defense budget increases and perpetuate the military-industrial complex.⁶ If the NDS is supposed to facilitate budget increases, then the Marine Corps is doing a poor job following suit. In fact, out of all the Services' recent posture hearings to Congress in February and March, the Marine Corps is the *only* Service to explicitly state no additional resources are required to meet its NDS tasks while also acknowledging the Defense budget is unlikely to grow in the near future. Meanwhile, other Services quibbled over a desire for a greater percentage of the Defense budget and telegraphed a future request for more money.⁷ In a demonstration that it was not just lip service, the Marine Corps has outlined a plan to significantly divest by cutting all seven of its tank companies, sixteen of its cannon artillery batteries, two of its assault amphibious companies, and three of its infantry battalions. Even more, the Marine Corps has decided to cut back on the size of its F-35 and CH-53K squadrons, which would likely be the biggest move against a military industrial complex mafia if there is one.⁸ All of this should lead one to believe that

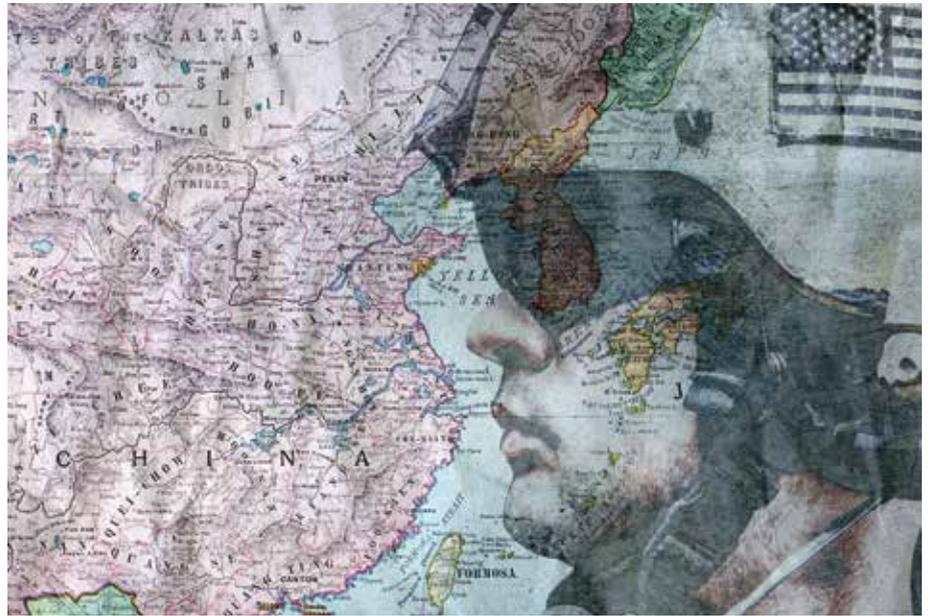


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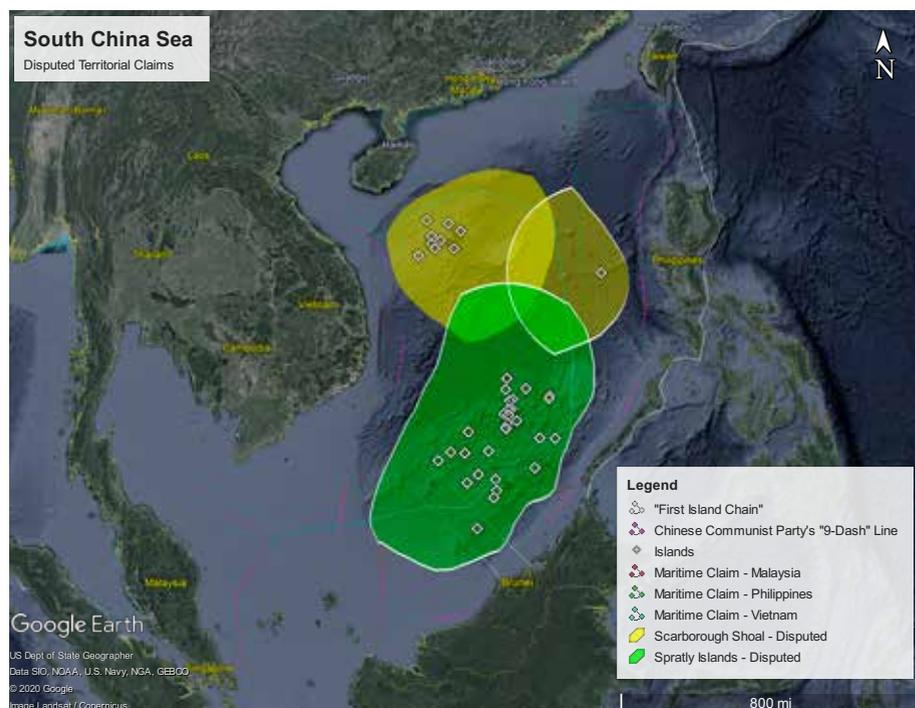
our Commandant's Force Design guidance has nothing to do with increased Defense spending and instead has everything to do with a bold approach in ensuring that the Service can deal with current and forecasted challenges.

Is the Marine Corps Focusing on Redundant Joint Force Capabilities?

The Chinese military possesses the world's largest Navy supplemented by a coast guard and a maritime militia that continues unimpeded bullying of allies and partners within the region. It also has the world's largest and most comprehensive long-range conventional missile force. Combat credible Marines—meaning distributed operations-capable infantry formations armed with hundreds of organic loitering munition and supported by long-range fires while operating from relatively low-signature, affordable platforms within the range of these Chinese sensors and weapons—presents the CCP with a dilemma. Conducting malign activity that goes against the interests of the United States and the international community is low risk when there is not a force in zone to stop you. These activities become far costlier when there are combat credible Marines, partnered with allies, upholding international norms persistently rather than in a transitory manner.

For example, despite the overwhelming effect that the COVID-19 pandemic is having across the globe, and the CCP having to deal with its involvement, Beijing continues to pursue military gains in the South China Sea and surrounding regions.⁹ The reason the CCP is conducting these actions amidst the pandemic is because of the low risk associated with doing so. In fact, the CCP consistently employs these “gray zone” strategies, pandemic or not, because it seeks to avoid direct military confrontation while still achieving its regional goals which, as the 2017 *U.S. National Security Strategy* describes, involves first and foremost “displac(ing) the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.”¹⁰ If the CCP's malign activity continues to go unabated, the United States will sacrifice the protection of its national security interests in the region. This would include the United States losing face with its partners and treaty allies, which would then greatly increase the probability of the CCP achieving regional hegemony while marginalizing the interests of the other regional actors.

Forcing the CCP to choose “black” or “white” as opposed to “gray” in its strategic pursuits is critical in ensuring that U.S. and allied interests within the region remain protected. If their forces choose to continue malign activity



Disputed claims of the CCP which were not upheld by the 2016 international tribunal. (Map courtesy of Google Earth.)

that goes against international norms (black), then they risk not only severe attrition imposed by Marine and Naval forces but also international backlash. This scenario would further force them to double down on these actions and risk an even greater response backed by the range of U.S. and allied resources. If the CCP chooses that continuing malign activity is not worth the risk of multiple ships being destroyed and the international community further wedging the CCP out (white), then the Marine Corps would be successful in its role as a deterrent force. In either case, a gray zone strategy is not one that the CCP is allowed to choose, thus preventing a *fait accompli*.¹¹

The Marine Corps is the ideal Service to deter potential adversaries in the gray zone as a naval infantry force capable of fighting from the sea and on land. No other branch is highlighting itself as the gray zone force that is ever present and prepared to deter and take on malign activity at the source. Further, the Marine Corps is specifically suited to do these things while also conducting training and real-world operations with local allies and partners at the ground level. These are some of the tangible and

intangible capabilities that the Commandant's FD report goes a long way in facilitating toward deterrence.

But What Does Deterrence Really Mean and What Does it Look Like?

The FD2030 document is intended to structure the Marine Corps into a force capable of “detering” adversaries, but what does this deterrence look like and why is it important? The idea of the Marine Corps being a deterrent force draws skepticism from those that are either against the idea or are unsure of what the role of such a force looks like. There are many visions that may pop into a Marine's head, but I will attempt to clarify what the vision should be by describing a few types of deterrence and highlighting the Marine Corps' role.

The idea that nuclear powers do not go to war with each other conventionally is generally correct because of a concept called “nuclear deterrence.” Since the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union avoided overly aggressive actions against one another because the risk of nuclear retaliation was too great. For example, in 1962 the two countries engaged in what would come to be known as the Cuban Missile

Crisis. An American surveillance asset discovered Soviet nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba with Soviet intentions being unclear. This was a dramatic shift in the strategic status quo because more American cities would be in range of some of the Soviet Union's most deadly weapons.

President John F. Kennedy was presented with a multitude of response options to include a full-scale military invasion of the island but chose against it, fearing that this aggressive action would cause a nuclear response in what would be perceived as self-defense. The risk was too great. Tensions flared up quickly and the world came the closest it had ever been to nuclear Armageddon. Ultimately, after thirteen days, the Soviets removed their missiles from the island, and the United States removed some of their weapons systems from the European theater. The risk of Mutually Assured Destruction via nuclear weapons “deterred” both countries from escalating the situation.¹²

A modern-day example of a scenario that is being deterred could be a CCP invasion of the island of Taiwan. The CCP has made it abundantly clear that it intends to unify Taiwan with the mainland by any means necessary. This begs the question: why has Beijing still not attempted to do so?¹³ One could make the argument that the possibility of America coming to Taiwan's defense conventionally and, if necessary, potentially using nuclear weapons in the process deters the CCP from carrying out one of its most strategic priorities. One could also argue that while this combination deterrent capability has proven effective for decades, the relative decrease in the U.S. military's conventional capabilities compared to the CCP's is one of the primary reasons why the NDS tasked the Marine Corps to prioritize the Indo-Pacific—to help correct the growing conventional imbalance with the right modern, not legacy, capabilities. Importantly, its likely nuclear deterrence, which is currently helping prevent the CCP from pursuing an unacceptably aggressive policy toward Taiwan, that is providing the Corps the time it needs to implement the FD2030 goals.

The second idea of deterrence can be simply thought of as “traditional” or “conventional” deterrence alone.¹⁴ Before the advent of nuclear weapons, nation states built up their armed forces in order to deter other nation states from violating their sovereignty. For example, in the 1930s, the French built the Maginot Line. The Maginot Line was a heavily fortified defensive network designed to deter Germany from invading France. It did in fact deter the majority of German forces from invading through the Maginot Line; however, they eventually went around it instead, perhaps, one could argue, because the German military failed to have the required contact force in front of the line to identify and blunt malign German behavior prior to the invasion. In any case, this was an example of deterrence not achieving the desired effect.¹⁵

The concepts of deterrence thus far explained would be considered “deterrence by punishment.”¹⁶ If you do “X,” then I will punish you by doing “Y.” Deterrence by punishment has always played a role in a nation’s national defense strategy, but generally this type of deterrence is “reactive,” and the initiative is left up for grabs.

The Marine Corps will play a role in what is called “deterrence by denial.”¹⁷ Deterrence by denial seeks to deny the enemy the ability of pursuing their objective in the first place. For example, imagine a playground where a bunch of kids are interacting. Every day, a bully named Billy prevents a smaller kid named Johnny from playing on the swing set even though Billy knows that this is inappropriate. Nonetheless, Johnny never plays on the swing set that he has the right to play on except in the few instances when his great friend Chesty, who is bigger than Billy, is around to protect him. Chesty does a great job of protecting his friend and all the other kids from Billy—when he is around. When he is not, the bullying continues.

In a real-world scenario, the playground is currently the South China Sea and if not stopped may soon be other disputed waters and features that many of our allies and partners have a claim to. The bully named Billy is the CCP’s navy, coast guard, and maritime militia,

backed by the PLA’s long-range rocket forces, that repeatedly ram Vietnamese boats, harass Filipino fishermen, and impose on Malaysian waters. Johnny is all of our allies and partners in the region to include the Philippines, Malaysia, and Japan. The Marine Corps would be Chesty, except the Marine Corps would be on the playground every time, preserving the peace and preventing the bullying.



Force Design 2030.

Deterrence by denial requires an agile force that is not stuck in the simplistic paradigm of offense versus defense. Deterrence by denial requires a force that can operate in a fluid environment, train with partners in the morning, then neutralize adversaries by long-range fires and close combat in the evening. All of this happens within the contact and blunt layers of the NDS. These two layers are where the Marine Corps will dedicate all its time, thinking, and resources. These two layers are the most critical in ensuring that American interests and those of our allies remain protected.

Deterrence by denial is “not” sitting on a piece of rock in the middle of the ocean waiting to be attacked. Nor is deterrence by denial simply attempting to put Marines on every piece of terrain to repel an assault. This would be a static “defense.” This is not what we are tasked to do. Deterrence by denial will

require our Corps to have many dozen distributed operations-capable infantry formations persistently forward deployed, maneuvering, sometimes alone, sometimes with allies, and partners, and often with the U.S. Navy. These forces will be supported by the Corps’ increasing long-range sensing and fires capabilities, as well as those from the rest of the Joint force and our allies. Of course, the fine details of how our Corps will execute these missions will continue to require deep thinking and refinement, just as has been the case with every concept that our Corps has executed throughout its history. Fortunately, FD2030 has provided our Corps a strong foundation to now move on.

Firepower/Attritional Understanding of Warfare

The last concern is that the Marine Corps is focusing on a firepower/attritional understanding of war. Many reading this article would recognize that firepower, attrition, and body counts were a specific measure of success during the Vietnam War. Military and civilian leaders believed that killing enough North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong fighters and winning tactical battles would ultimately lead to a strategic victory. Hindsight has proven that this approach was wrong. Focusing on firepower and attrition as the panacea to today’s military problems would also be wrong.

Fortunately, the FD2030 initiatives take these lessons into account. *MCDP I* establishes maneuver warfare as a warfighting foundation.¹⁸ Maneuver warfare was developed in part to counter the anachronistic and linear way of thinking about war. Maneuver warfare seeks to utilize asymmetric methods to counter and neutralize enemy strengths. The elimination of tanks, most of the service’s cannon artillery, and some of its most advanced and expensive aircraft highlights that the Marine Corps is not focused on maintaining a force capable of firepower and attrition, but one focused on the mission, using the most relevant maneuver to help counter our nation’s adversaries.

The Marine Corps has a deep history of adapting to the situation. Despite the

heavy focus on body counts in Vietnam, the Marine Corps focused on a counterinsurgency strategy centered around the Combined Action Program.¹⁹ The Marine Corps understood that combatting the enemy effectively was not as simple as bombing them as persistently as possible. Our forefathers developed and then successfully implemented an asymmetric approach, living in villages, gaining the trust and confidence of the local population, and often locating and killing the enemy at very close range. Ultimately, the Marines were successful in neutralizing the effects of the enemy wherever the Combined Action Program was employed, but it was not employed widely enough across Vietnam to possibly lead toward a favorable strategic end.

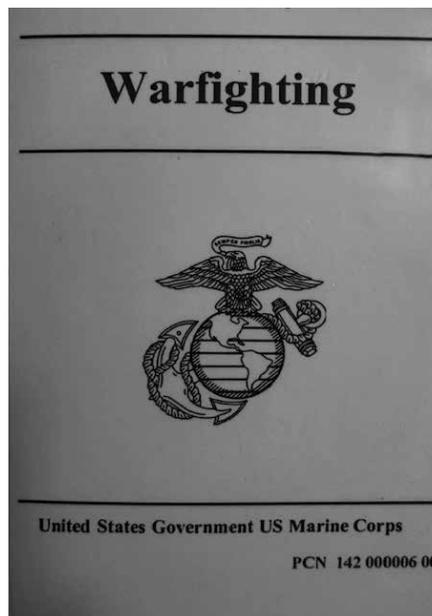
It is still critical that the Marine Corps doubles down on its implementation of a maneuver warfare philosophy not only when designing its future structure but also when training and educating its personnel. A force structure, regardless of the funding behind it, would be a hollow structure without the educated Marines capable of employing it. The Marine Corps should continue to ensure that it avoids trending toward a firepower/attritional mindset and always seeks to achieve assigned objectives at the least cost to itself and the Nation. Moreover, similar to the FD2030's bold changes, the Marine Corps should continuously ask if *MCDP 1* and maneuver warfare is the appropriate philosophy for the situation.

To be clear, *MCDP 1* does not present maneuver warfare as a romanticized or bloodless manner of fighting a war. To the contrary, the CMC's guidance and FD2030 talks at length of the necessity for Marine forces being highly effective in close combat and inflicting violence upon the enemy. Being combat credible, capable of unleashing violence on the enemy, and being backed by the Joint force, allies, and partners will go a long way in being able to deter malign actors and prevent the clash that we are preparing for.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps is doing exactly what the NDS directed and what the

CMC stated in his planning guidance. Our Service is making bold changes to keep up with and get ahead of an incredibly complex situation. Our CMC understands that it would be folly to maintain a force structure or method of fighting simply because it worked in the last war. The Marine Corps, and more



MCDP 1.

importantly the Nation, does not get to fight the conflict or choose the type of competition that it prefers. The Marine Corps is obligated to prepare for the type of conflict and competition that is expected and presented.

This is not to say that criticism of the changes that the Marine Corps is instituting is not warranted, but suicide in this instance is the Marine Corps believing that it can win in a different form of conflict while keeping the same legacy equipment and way of thinking. Fortunately, our CMC has made very clear, that our service does not think this way.

Notes

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