

# The Commandant's Guidance for the DOD Non-Lethal Weapons Program

Enabling intermediate force capabilities  
across the competition continuum

by Col Wendell B. Leimbach, Jr.

Many Marines may be surprised to learn that the Commandant of the Marine Corps serves as the Department of Defense Executive Agent for Non-Lethal Weapons (NLW), or that Gen Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, volunteered the Marine Corps to take on a leadership role in their development in 1996. Almost 25 years later, NLW—which have been associated primarily with law enforcement and military security missions—are at a strategic turning point. NLW technology, to include directed energy systems, has advanced significantly. Compelling

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## EXECUTIVE AGENT'S PLANNING GUIDANCE 2020

by Gen David H. Berger

### INTRODUCTION

As the Department of Defense (DOD) Executive Agent (EA) for Non-Lethal Weapons (NLW), I serve as the focal point for NLW matters. Continued research, development, and investment in NLW—better characterized as “intermediate force capabilities”—will enhance our ability to respond to challenges across the continuum of conflict. The 2020 EA's Planning Guidance incorporates over a year of study, collaboration, and strategic engagement with program stakeholders and leadership. The guidance incorporates the U.S. National Defense Strategy, aligns with DOD priorities, and describes how intermediate force capabilities support military objectives, including activities below the level of traditional armed conflict. Our potential adversaries will use any collateral damage—however lawful—to provoke escalation, generate negative views of America, or to erode political and public support for our operations. The unintended consequences of lethal force can undermine our legitimacy, and may complicate our operations. Decisions to use—or forego—lethal force can incur a heavy cost. Intermediate force capabilities enable U.S. and allied forces in delivering accurate, tailorable, and compelling effects in complex and ambiguous scenarios, while simultaneously preventing unnecessary loss of life or destruction of property. Our forces understand the strategic and political consequences of their actions; intermediate force capabilities can help mitigate those consequences. In support of the National Defense Strategy, the DOD NLW Program will build upon past accomplishments, and further develop intermediate force capabilities. Senior leader awareness of those capabilities, and support for their operational employment, will be required. To emphasize the contributions of intermediate force capabilities to the Joint Force across the competition continuum, the Joint NLW Directorate will be renamed the Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office. This document articulates the DOD NLW Program's way forward, both technologically and programmatically. The document provides vision, guidance, and tasks. Its contents are directive for the Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office and relevant Marine Corps organizations, and informative for Service-unique NLW programs.

effects without destruction can be delivered at extended ranges and integrated with a variety of manned, unmanned, and autonomous platforms. These advancements are timely as the *National Defense Strategy* aligns the Joint force to compete, deter, and win across the competition continuum, including the ever-present competition below armed conflict. Similarly, the Commandant's guidance to the Marine Corps takes us into a new strategic direction that includes "successfully competing and winning in the gray zone,"<sup>1</sup> calls for investment in "less-lethal" capabilities,<sup>2</sup> and notes the need for stand-in forces to be equipped with non-lethal payloads to counter malign activity.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to aligning the DOD NLW Program in a new strategic direction and updating the Program's mission and vision, the following planning guidance also introduces updated terminology: "Intermediate Force Capabilities" or "IFCs," which include NLW as well as other non-lethal tools. The new language is intended to encourage interest across the Joint force beyond

legacy law enforcement applications. IFCs apply to a broader array of capabilities that bridge the gap between presence and lethal effects, allowing active measures when presence alone is insufficient to deter malign activities or the use of lethal/destructive force is otherwise not desired.

### Conclusion

The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* for the DOD NLW Program reflects his intent to transform traditional views of non-lethal weapons from primarily law enforcement tools to much-needed capabilities that can contribute to deterrence and the warfighting needs of the Joint force. His guidance also supports the DOD's intent to enable U.S. and allied forces to deliver accurate, tailorable, and compelling effects in complex and ambiguous scenarios while preventing unnecessary loss of life or destruction of property. With a wide spectrum of strategic competitors challenging the Nation, the opportunity exists for the Marine Corps—as the Nation's most prepared force-in-

readiness—to lead in the development, experimentation, and operational use of IFCs. The Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office, located at Marine Corps Base Quantico, stands ready to assist the Marine Corps and the Joint force in advancing the development and fielding of IFCs and their application across the competition continuum.

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### Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).
2. Ibid.
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

>Editor's Note: Read the entire Executive Agent Guidance document, available at <https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/DoD-NLW-EA-Planning-Guidance-March-2020.pdf>.

