

State of the Marine Corps 2023

Efforts to fulfill the vision of Force Design 2030 are hitting a groove. But who will replace its architect?

[CAITLIN M. KENNEY](#)

<https://defenseone.com>

600 New Hampshire Ave, NW | Washington, DC 20037

The year-old land war in Europe has not distracted the Marine Corps from readying its forces for operations in the world's other hemisphere.

“On any given day, 20,000 Marines are west of the dateline. Our job is to organize, train, equip, prepare them to handle the crises that may come. But we are focused on the Pacific. But those forces are not simply designed for the Pacific. They're most useful in the Pacific, but highly useful across the globe,” Gen. Eric Smith, the assistant commandant, said Feb. 14 at the WEST 2023 conference in San Diego.

In January, the Marine Corps [reactivated](#) Camp Blaz in Guam after a delay due to the coronavirus pandemic. The base, part of a long-planned agreement with Japan to move thousands of Marines from Okinawa, provides the Marine Corps and the U.S. military “a strategic hub” for training and operations in the western Pacific.

The Marines also announced in [January](#) that they would turn the 12th Marine Regiment in Japan into the second of three planned [Marine Littoral Regiments](#).

The Force Design groove

With six years to go, the Marine Corps’ efforts to fulfill the vision of [Force Design 2030](#) are getting into a regular groove.

“We are done divesting. We went quickly as the Secretary of Defense guided all of us to do in the planning guidance and National Defense Strategy,” Gen. David Berger, Marine Corps commandant, told *Defense One*. “So now we’re stable. And now as fast as we can go, modernize the force and get the capabilities into the field, now. Not in five years or seven years—now. Which we’re doing.”

Berger said he’s not dissuaded by the [criticism](#) of Force Design by some retired Marine officers. But he is listening.

“Some of them absolutely have influenced Force Design,” he said. “The discussion over how many aircraft in a squadron. The discussion about how many Marines are in an infantry battalion. All these were also discussions that were happening in the process, but they raised them also. So, it absolutely affects how we refine concepts and go back and test assumptions.”

Berger said he has also listened to suggestions that he needed to “more clearly communicate things that are not going to change,” such as training or “the basic ethos culture.”

For “evidence” that Force Design is going in the right direction, Berger pointed to January’s U.S.-Japan [announcement](#) that the Marines would establish their next MLR in Japan.

“This is between two big nations and their No. 1 item is what the Marine Corps needs to do,” he said. “Two national leaders are validating this is absolutely the direction we got to go, and we got to go faster.”

The 3rd MLR, expected to reach initial operating capability this year, is [experimenting](#) “under a stress test in a pretty realistic environment” in California and Arizona that will allow it to learn and make adjustments, Berger said. Its work will shape how the 12th MLR is initially organized in Japan, he said.

The Marines have just released a new report under the Force Design effort, “[Installations and Logistics 2030](#),” which includes the need to work on “the essentials” such as barracks, dining facilities, and workplaces after decades of prioritizing “readiness and lethality,” Berger said. An update to [Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 4, Logistics](#), is also coming out soon, Col. Rob Weiler, the military secretary to the commandant, told *Defense One*.

People

The most important part of the Marine Corps and its Force Design effort remains its people, Berger said.

“Not any of the gear, not any of the other elements, because it won't work if we can't bring in the right people, train them the right way,” he said. “If you can't get the people part right, nothing else matters. And that is the foundation of the Marine Corps.”

The recruiting crisis is putting pressure on all the services, but the Marine Corps is [faring better](#) than others—in part because it has [since 2021](#) worked harder to retain the troops it already has.

“This year alone, we're basically closed out, or will close out, our retention goals about three months earlier than we traditionally do. That's a positive,” Sgt. Maj. of the Marine Corps Troy Black told *Defense One*.

“In fact, we have a process now where instead of having a ceiling on how many we are going to retain...we are making it a floor,” Black said. “So, we're going to keep more first-term Marines. More importantly, we're going to keep and are keeping, more of our subsequent-term [Marines]—that means people who have reenlisted two or more times.”

The Talent Management Annual Report is expected in early March.

The month-old Training and Education 2030 [document](#) has a to-do list to get the service prepared for the “future operating environment.” This includes a new program called Project Tripoli which will provide a “live, virtual, and constructive training environment” for all Marines unit levels, said Lt. Gen. Kevin Iiams, the commanding general of the Marines’ Training and Education Command.

Budget

Much of the arms and equipment [sent to Ukraine](#), such as [howitzers](#), came from the Marine Corps and Army, and Berger said the two services—as part of a “group” DOD effort—are expected to ask for funding in the 2024 defense budget request to replenish [their stocks](#). That effort will take time as companies work to increase their production, he said.

Berger pledged again that the Marine Corps will be fiscally disciplined, following the course it has laid with Force Design efforts, and living within its means as decided by the Navy and Defense Department.

“I think, rightfully so, the secretary of the Navy should expect from me: if there was more money, what would you do with it? And my answer is: go faster. And some of that, of course, would be the installation logistics part.”

Amphibs

The 2023 National Defense Authorization Act [required](#) the Marine Corps to have at least 31 amphibious warships and that the commandant must be consulted on decisions related to the amphibious fleet. The size and composition of the future amphibious fleet was analyzed in the Amphibious Force Requirements Study, whose [findings remain classified](#).

Berger declined to say how many amphibs the study calls for, but said he is “very comfortable with the rigor, the analysis in it. Comfortable with the assumptions that were built into it, and the outcome of it.”

He said that the readiness of the ships matters more than their number.

“The higher your readiness is, probably you can do with less inventory. 31 is the bare minimum at our high readiness rate. Anything lower than that, you're going to need more,” Berger said. “Second is the composition of it. 31, it has to be broken down into both the large—the big decks and the medium and smaller size, so there's a breakdown of each.”

Berger and Smith have both [said](#) there are [potential risks](#) to combatant commanders if the fleet drops below 31 ships.

The Marine Corps is also pursuing a shore-to-shore connector ship to fill a gap in capability between the big-deck amphibians and the dock landing ships. These Landing Ship Mediums, or LSMs, will be used by Marine Littoral Regiments. The Marines will need at least 35: nine per MLR and eight that will be in some maintenance period, Berger said. The Navy is expected to start buying these newer amphibious ships in 2025, so in the meantime the Marine Corps is leasing three commercial [stern landing vessels](#) and modifying them to test out how they could be used by the regiments. The first SLV is expected to arrive in San Diego in April-May, and begin experimentation this summer, Col. Weiler said.

Berger is excited not just about the potential and functionality of the vessels, but what feedback they will receive from the Marines.

“Once you give them something like that, like two weeks later they come back and go, ‘Oh yeah, we figured something else out.’ Because they have it in their hands, they can experiment with it. And they're going to tell us it does these things, and it also does this. We're going to learn,” he said.

Future

Who will lead the Marine Corps when Gen. Berger steps out of the role this summer remains unclear. Berger said he was not aware that anyone has been chosen yet. The decision could [determine](#) how closely the Corps stays on the Force Design 2030 path paved by Berger—or where it may diverge.

And Berger's next chapter? [Reporting](#) suggests he's among a few generals being considered for the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Berger deflected, saying Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and President Joe Biden “make those decisions and run that process.”

“Whatever they're willing to provide you or not, I'm not going to get in front of them. It's their—they own it...it's the right way to do it,” he said.

Spokesmen for both the President and Sec. Austin declined to comment on the chairman nomination process.