



# An Amphibious Force for Emerging Demands

By General James F. Amos, U.S. Marine Corps

**National security and economic vitality are intertwined, and both depend on naval expeditionary capabilities that are as flexible and evolving as the challenges ahead.**

Irrespective of how the future security environment evolves, naval expeditionary forces will remain pivotal to the nation's ability to deter and defeat adversaries, strengthen alliances, deny enemies sanctuary, and project global influence. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, articulates key missions for the U.S. military, to include rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region,

U.S. MARINE CORPS (MARCO MANCHA)

**U.S. Marines provide security during a beach-landing assault on 25 September as part of the Africa Partnership Station 13 international training exercise. “Amphibious forces have never been more relevant than they are today,” the author writes. “We currently have no peer in this capability, and this constitutes an asymmetric advantage for the nation that is uniquely relevant in the future security environment.”**



ensuring power projection, providing a stabilizing presence in key regions, and undertaking humanitarian assistance. Emerging international-security and domestic fiscal environments require the nation’s forward-deployed crisis-response forces to aggressively innovate. Additionally, the growing challenge posed by conventional, irregular, and asymmetric threats requires naval expeditionary forces agile enough to adapt as the demands of future naval warfighting, littoral maneuver, and amphibious operations change. This force will consist of a “middleweight” expeditionary Marine Corps employing reinvigorated amphibious capabilities together with a Navy capable of maintaining forward presence and responding to crises.

Since President Thomas Jefferson sent Marines and sailors to fight the Barbary pirates off the coast of North Africa in 1805, U.S. naval forces have been vital to ensuring our national security and economic prosperity. They are sure to remain equally vital in the future given the challenges arising from an emerging peer competitor, widespread social instability, economic uncertainty, and cascading regional crises. These realities highlight the necessity for a ready, forward-deployed, sea-based expeditionary force that serves the United States’ national interests. This article will outline how I see the future Marine Corps force design as part of the broader naval expeditionary forces based on three underlying points: 1) How the emerging security environment, fiscal constraints, and the most likely future challenges require new thinking and an evolved force; 2) how these new realities impact our force, its capabilities, capacities, concepts, investments, training, and personnel development; and 3) how we must maintain the “right” force balance to fight as an integrated naval force that deals with the most likely future threats and/or challenges.

## Emerging Challenges

The DSG states the need to

maintain a broad portfolio of military capabilities that offer versatility across the range of missions . . . and that U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S.

military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region . . . the maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce, and of U.S. influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence.

Geographic combatant commanders consistently place high demand on expeditionary forces, and our partners seek to exercise with us to improve their capacity. Marines are engaged in Afghanistan, providing crisis support in the Middle East, acting as a stabilizing presence in Africa and the Pacific, and standing ready to respond to humanitarian-assistance/disaster-relief (HA/DR) situations around the globe. Marines are also providing forces to some of the most challenging arenas of modern warfare: special operations and cyber. We are asking more out of our Marines today than we have at any point in our history—a trend that will likely define our future. In fact, conflict attributes such as violent extremism, battles for influence, and disruptive societal transitions will likely be the norm for tomorrow’s Marines. We must maintain a force that can balance an increasing focus on the Asia-Pacific with sustained engagement in the Middle East, combined with a continuous effort to counter violent extremists operating across multiple domains. Additionally, and at the institutional level, we face substantial fiscal challenges. All threaten to have significant impact on the way we organize, train, and equip, and the way we fight as a naval force.

We have been here before. In fact, we have been here repeatedly throughout our history. The interwar years of the early 20th century famously leveraged the currents of diplomatic restraint on battleships and reduced forward basing to build the components of a carrier navy that could project power over great distance. Rising regional competitors sparked new ways of thinking about maneuver at sea, and the development of expeditionary amphibious capabilities. The landmark shift in focus after the Cold War was captured in documents like . . . *From the Sea* and its encore, *Forward . . . From the Sea*. Throughout our history, we have learned to understand the influence of external currents and used them to propel us toward our objectives. This time is no different. In an age when we will likely see more crises that resemble hot spots like Syria and Yemen (or natural disasters like Hurricane Sandy) rather than those similar to Iraq or Afghanistan, our ability to respond rapidly and deter aggression with minimal escalation will be critical.

## Force Design in a Constrained Environment

Recognizing a changed economic landscape and compounding factors such as Department of Defense budget reductions and sequestration, it became apparent that all branches of the armed forces would be faced with significant capability and capacity reductions. Recognizing this impending challenge, we had to find a way to be-

come more efficient while ensuring our ways and means remained effective and met the broader strategic ends. We had to do this without sacrificing our fundamental character, a force that is ready, responsive, and present. The truth is, the force structure we would likely be forced to accept would not be the force structure our strategy required, it would simply be the best we could put forth with the resources we were given.

Anticipating a reduced capacity requirement post-Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the Marine Corps convened a Force Structure Review Group (FSRG) in the fall of 2010. The FSRG

aggressively prepare for change—a change that was coming whether we liked it or not.

In February 2013 we stood up a working group that focused on designing a resource-constrained future force. This effort was informed by the realization that if we continue to be confronted with sequestration-level budgets, the Marine Corps will need a force structure that not only supports the requirements of our national security strategy, but also works within a reduced fiscal framework. This was not easy, but would prove fruitful as it gave us the best force available given our reduced resource levels. The idea was to not “do more with less,”

but to do as much as we could, as efficiently as possible, and do it well.

We proceeded with the notion to create a credible, effective force able to maintain itself as “our nation’s insurance policy for the next ten years.” We prioritized our capability and capacity to be forward-deployed and ready for crisis, while accepting risk in major contingency operations and stability operations as necessary. Great care was taken to ensure that both the strategic landscape and emerging demands were properly balanced against force-design risks. To do this properly, as we began to look below our current projected end strength of 182K, we did not consider simple linear reductions in force structure. Instead, we sought a design that optimized our force based on desired capability and capacity with respect to risk. In the end we still required a Marine Corps that was bound by a basic set of guiding principles: We needed to be modernized, ready and biased

for action, integrated into the Joint Force structure, expeditionary and right-sized, all the while retaining our core combined-arms and amphibious structure and competencies.

## Optimal Structuring

With guidance in place, our working group set out to design a range of possible force structures, all of which would be subject to both internal and external risk analysis. They began analyzing those things we do today and then widened the scope to include those emerging trends that will ultimately frame the future operating environment. Based on guiding principles and driven by fiscal constraints, our working group built a set of force structures focused on meeting emerging demands.



**Sailors and Marines on board the amphibious assault ship USS *Boxer* (LHD-4) man the rails while embarking from San Diego for deployment with the *Boxer* Amphibious Ready Group on 23 August. Critical to the Marine Corps’ success in the security challenges ahead “will be a shared commitment with the U.S. Navy.”**

recommended a force of 186,800 (186K) Marines based on the President’s Defense Strategic Guidance, steady-state commitments, contributions to the Joint Force, and presence in the Pacific, while remaining globally responsive to major contingency operations. I remain convinced that this is the right force structure to optimally meet the needs of the nation. As a result of new factors driven by the Budget Control Act, which followed in August 2011, 186K was no longer affordable. This forced a further reduction of end strength and a subsequent increase in risk as the force level dropped to 182,100 (182K), our current projected end strength. Further, with sequestration as law, it became clear that we could not afford the 182K force structure and would require additional cuts. These facts drove us to more



U.S. MARINE CORPS (DAVID GONZALEZ)

**U.S. Marines conduct small-boat training with Philippine Marines during Amphibious Landing Exercise 14 on 20 September. “Our need for amphibious capacity will not wane with our decreasing force structure.”**

The “prime force,” as it was called within the group, encompassed an array of scalable force structures designed as a set of building blocks, called capability shells. The first shell was composed of fenced forces—institutional activities not directly related to core competencies but that had to remain (Marine Forces Cyber Command, Marine Special Operations Command, Chemical Biological Incident Response Force, Marine Barracks 8th & I, Marine Aviation Weapon and Tactics Squadron 1, and others). From this first shell, capability shells were added such that the force could address the highest-priority risks and enhance desired capabilities. This methodology afforded us an element of reversibility, allowing us to map the outlines of force growth as resources are available in order to add back capacity if necessary in a period of increased demand. More important, this approach to force design will allow us to regain wholeness of our force while reducing risk and maintaining balance vice the typical piecemeal fashion we’ve seen in the past.

While designed from the perspective of adding to the base force, the prime force is best viewed from the top down. As we begin to draw our end strength below our original strategically sound force structure of 186K, to a Budget Control Act–driven force of 182K, and subsequently to a further fiscally constrained lower level, it remains ever more important, as an institution, to possess the ability to identify and prioritize how we make those cuts, should they become necessary. Also, this process identifies the risks associated with each successive reduction, and the discontinuities in force design experienced as successive capability or capacity shells are removed.

Looking at each force structure, the group considered risk tolerances in three categories: operational, institutional, and force management. With this in mind, and

based on outside analysis, the group concluded that all force levels considered incurred a moderate level of institutional risk. This, however, is where the commonality ended. In fact, only one force-structure design possessed the capacity to sustain forward presence requirements at a unit deployed-to-dwell ratio of 1:2 while also maintaining the capability to respond to a single, moderate crisis for an extended period of time. This same force can also readily adapt to emerging missions or “other duties” and maintain acceptable risk levels across the board while optimizing capability and capacity within a fiscally constrained budget: That force was composed of 174,000 (174K) active component Marines.

Based on the detailed research of our working group in conjunction with, and analytically underpinned by outside analysis, the 174K force design was determined to best balance risk and resources with our most likely future operational environment. This force preserves our readiness and presence while allowing us the ability to reassure our partners and allies, build partner capacity, respond to crisis and deter potential adversaries. At the end of the day, a 174K Marine Corps gives America the best balance of the requirements of steady-state operations and crisis-response activities while accepting increased risk in major contingency operations.

Balance is the operative term here as research also revealed prohibitive risks associated with significant reductions below the 174K number. Specifically, going below 174K would upset a critical balance of being able to provide a ready force, meet steady-state demand, and respond to crisis—exposing substantially greater risk across the board. To this end, we would see reductions in forward presence and significant risk to, and a compromise to, our institutional health; it’s not a place we can afford to be,

particularly given the security challenges our nation will face down the road.

## To Meet the Challenges of Tomorrow

As a naval service chief, I experience daily those currents that press on our course as the United States enters a new security environment. Critical to our success in this environment will be a shared commitment with the U.S. Navy. Together we will weather the coming storms with perseverance, resilience . . . and optimism. While I appreciate the

row's naval expeditionary force will offer the nation a capability that combines modern technology, operational effectiveness, thoroughly trained naval staffs, and tactical excellence that comes from symbiotic relationships. These relationships would be built among a professional force that routinely operates together in peacetime so that naval forces do not form and train for the first time under the eyes and guns of the enemy.

Increasing focus on the Asia-Pacific and a sustained emphasis on the Middle East, combined with a contin-



Marines on the USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3) in the Red Sea board a CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter for fast-rope training on 30 June. They are deployed in support of maritime-security operations in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility. “We are asking more out of our Marines today than we have at any point in our history—a trend that will likely define our future.”

strategic dangers inherent in a rapid defense drawdown, I am committed to using this opportunity to ensure we remain an effective partner to our naval brethren.

While many uncertainties cloud the future, looking forward, it is clear the United States must possess a responsive force that can operate across the demanding domains and conditions that challenge our ability to execute our global responsibilities. This force must be skilled in engaging, responding, and projecting, thereby assuring access across the vital sea-land-air interface. It must also be highly adaptable for the circumstances found when responding to rapidly emerging and changing events that define critical crises wherever they might occur. Tomor-

uous effort to counter violent extremists operating in other regions, further highlight the importance of a force design that optimizes naval amphibious forces' unique contribution to national defense. Looking at maritime dominance through a single, naval lens will help frame our path forward. Naval forces must retain the ability to project power and control the sea while remaining flexible enough to employ multi-domain capabilities across the range of military operations. Our future force must continue to consider multiple anti-access/area-denial threat constructs, requiring the full range of naval power, in order to be ready to react, especially as forward basing is diminishing and U.S. conventional dominance is no

longer a guarantee. To more effectively function within the modern operating environment, naval expeditionary elements must remain integrated as littoral-maneuver forces, and those, in turn, must become more integrated with the U.S. joint forces.

To this end, our need for amphibious capacity will not wane with our decreasing force structure. In fact, amphibious forces have never been more relevant than they are today. We currently have no peer in this capability, and this constitutes an asymmetric advantage for the nation that is uniquely relevant in the future security environment. With budget uncertainty, and viewing the past as prologue, now is a time for action to ensure adequate capitalization of lessons learned and to ensure previous mistakes are not repeated. We must not forget the lessons of the interwar years when fiscal austerity stunted Navy–Marine Corps amphibious capacity. It was reconstituted at great cost during World War II.

On 15 August 1945, the United States was capable of lifting nearly 15 percent of its non-airborne ground-maneuver units. At the end of the Cold War, that percentage had nose-dived to just more than 3 percent. Today, in an era again defined by a strategy of expeditionary dependency, the percentage is even lower than it was in 1989—slightly more than 2 percent. We will remain engaged in reversing this decline. The sea will continue to provide the primary global common through which the United States projects power. Amphibious forces can rapidly move to a position to influence potential crises from the sea without forcing escalation or aggravating sovereignty concerns. These facts will remain constant as the future security environment emerges.

## ‘Critical That We Be Prepared’

Current fiscal constraints threaten the future of naval expeditionary forces in much the same way the interwar years characterized the decline of Great Britain as a great sea power. By 1919 the governing body in Britain lacked both the inclination and the finances to endure the cost of another Great War. It was this aversion that would transcend social attitudes and eventually move into political and military policies, to the extent that the British War Office definitively forecasted a ten-year period in which

“the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war . . . and that no Expeditionary Force is required for this purpose.” This thinking prevailed throughout the 1920s and ‘30s such that by 1936 British military leaders began scrambling to meet an impending threat against a predominantly German military strength. Great Britain realized rather late that disarmament and minimal defense policies were not sufficient for what was finally perceived as a credible threat to their homeland. Although we faced similar issues pre–World War II, as a country we had the resource potential and adequate lead time to mitigate the effects prior to our entry into the war. We will not be afforded this opportunity in the future, particularly given the nature of the security environment.

Today’s Marine Corps remains committed to the idea that we must be ready to project power from the sea. Structuring our forces so that they are ready and optimally shaped remains our focus. As described in our Defense Strategic Guidance, we have a national-security priority to maintain a strong economy. As a maritime nation, the littorals and maritime crossroads are arguably the most critical link to our economic security. Therefore, it remains critical that we be prepared to address events in these regions, given the importance of these crossroads to our own—and global—prosperity. Additionally, while the most frequent area of action may soon shift away from Southwest Asia, the Marine Corps must remain ready to respond to difficult and dangerous missions throughout that region and across the world.

Whatever our end-strength target, we must remain prepared to fight and prevail in the most likely range of conflicts that bound our emerging security environment. Current fiscal constraints demand a Marine Corps optimized for forward presence and crisis response while maintaining relevance in a major-contingency-operations environment. The 174K force, though below our strategically optimized 186K force, answers these demands by accepting increased risk in major contingency operations, and does so with the scalability, capability, and capacity required of our naval expeditionary forces. America demands no less. ✪

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General Amos is Commandant of the Marine Corps.

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