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The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR)

Background

On March 23, 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) announced a major force design initiative planned to occur over the next 10 years referred to as "Force Design 2030." As part of this initiative, the Marine Corps aims to redesign its force to place a stronger emphasis on naval expeditionary warfare and to better align itself with the National Defense Strategy, in particular, the strategy's focus on strategic competition with China and Russia. As part of this redesign, the Marines plan to establish at least three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish a number of missions within contested maritime spaces.

MLR Missions

According to the Marines, the MLR is to be capable of the following missions:

- Conduct Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) which is a form of expeditionary warfare involving the employment of naval expeditionary forces with low electronic and physical signatures, which are relatively easy to maintain/sustain. These forces are to be arrayed in a series of austere, temporary locations ashore within a contested or potentially contested maritime area to conduct sea denial, support, sea control, and fleet sustainment operations;
- Conduct strike operations with a variety of systems;
- Coordinate air and missile defense operations;
- Support maritime domain awareness;
- Support naval surface warfare operations; and
- Support information operations.

The MLR's Operational Environment

The Commandant of the Marine Corps' May 2022 Force Design 2030 Annual Update states:

> The security environment is characterized by proliferation of sophisticated sensors and precision weapons coupled with growing strategic competition. Potential adversaries employ systems and tactics to hold the fleet and joint force at arm's length, allowing them to employ a strategy that uses contested areas as a shield behind which they can apply a range of coercive measures against our allies and partners.

Operating in this environment, MLRs are envisioned to serve as what the Marines call a "Stand-In Force (SIF)," primarily to "help the fleet and joint force win the reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance battle within a contested area at the leading edge of a maritime defense-in-depth."

MLR Employment

According to a May 25, 2022 Marine Corps Association article "Missions, MAGTFs, Force Design & Change," by Colonel Michael R. Kennedy, USMC (Retired), MLRs are intended to:

> Deploy to islands, coastlines, and observation posts along chokepoints where their networked sensors and weapons can surveil the air and surface (and, potentially subsurface) waterways. The timing of their insertion is implied to be in the "competition" phase before hostilities start. The duration of their stay is less clear, and potentially challenging as resupply over long distances …will be challenging … Host nation support (if it exists) will be critical as will prepositioned supplies and even "foraging." The MLR's purpose will be to observe and prevent any "grey zone" activities that lead to fait accompli actions. In some cases, it is presumed that they may be the "trigger" that shifts the status from competition to conflict if any premature hostile acts are directed towards their positions.

Proposed MLR Organizational Structure

Marine Corps leadership states it needs further analysis and experimentation to refine MLR organizational structure. As currently envisioned, the MLR is planned to consist of approximately 1,800 to 2,000 sailors and marines and composed of four elements:

- A Command Element;
- A Littoral Combat Team consisting of an infantry battalion and an anti-ship missile battery. The Littoral Combat Team is to provide the basis for multiple platoon reinforced-sized expeditionary advanced base sites capable of conducting a variety of missions;
- A Littoral Anti-Air Battalion designed to conduct air defense, air surveillance and early warning, air control, and forward rearming and refueling operations; and
- A Combat Logistics Battalion designed to resupply expeditionary advanced base sites, manage cache sites, and connect with higher-level logistics providers. The Combat Logistics Battalion is also to provide limited purchasing authority, medical support, ammunition and fuel distribution, and field maintenance.

Selected MLR Systems

In order to accomplish the wide range of missions envisioned for the MLR, Marines Corps leadership contend they require four major systems they consider essential.

Navy-Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS)

NMESIS consists of the Naval Strike Missile mounted on the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV). It is a ground based anti-ship capability intended to facilitate sea denial and control.

Figure 1. Navy-Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS)

Source: First Lieutenant James Winnefeld," NMESIS Now," Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute, November 2021.

MQ-9 Reaper Unmanned Aerial System (UAS)

The MQ-9 Reaper is a medium-to-high altitude, long endurance UAS. The MQ-9's primary mission is to serve as a persistent hunter-killer against enemy targets. The MQ-9's alternate mission is to act as an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platform by employing sensors to provide real-time data to joint force commanders.

AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR)

Initially fielded in 2018, G/ATOR is an expeditionary, multifunctional radar system which is intended to enhance the MLR's ability to perform counterfire and air defense missions, such as defending against cruise missiles and UASs.

Light Amphibious Warship (LAW)

A Navy program, the LAW is intended to fill a capability gap between large, multipurpose amphibious warfare / L-class ships and smaller, short-range landing craft. The LAW is planned to be a low-signature, beaching, shore-to-shore vessel with intra-theater endurance capable of operating independently or with other surface ships in contested environments in support of EABO.

Future MLR Development

According to a March 2022, U.S. Naval Institute (USNI) article, "Marines Stand Up First Marine Littoral Regiment," the current plan is for three MLRs, all based in the Indo-Pacific. The Marines plan to convert the 4th Marine Regiment and the 12th Marine Regiment – both based in Okinawa – into MLRs with the intent of all three MLRs being operational by 2030. With the Hawaii-based 3rd Marine Regiment converted into a MLR in March 2022, Marine officials estimate the next MLR transition in the 2025-2026 timeframe and the 2027-2030 timeframe for the third MLR. As previously noted, the Marines indicated they might decide to create additional MLRs in the future.

Potential Issues for Congress

The Marine Corps Force Design 2030 and the creation of MLRs raise a number of potential issues for Congress, including but not limited to:

MLR Utility Outside the Indo-Pacific

While Marine leadership have noted MLRs are being designed to operate in the Indo-Pacific region, the Marines have global security responsibilities. Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has arguably changed the global security environment and raises potential questions about what role MLRs might play outside of the Indo-Pacific region. Are MLRs structured and equipped to successfully operate in support of U.S. NATO responsibilities if required? If three Indo-Pacific MLRs are needed to support operations in the region, are there plans to develop MLRs for other regions? Congress might decide to examine MLR structure and capabilities in regards to how MLRs might support potential NATO operations and if additional force structure and systems should be dedicated to create MLRs to support operations outside the Indo-Pacific region.

Role of the Light Amphibious Warship (LAW)

The Marines have noted Stand-In Forces require organic operational mobility, such as the LAW, to deploy and sustain MLR elements in support of EABO. The Navy envisions procuring up to 35 LAWs and had planned procuring the first LAW in FY2023, but deferred the procurement of the first LAW to FY2025. While Navy leadership has stated procuring the LAW is a priority, press reports suggest the Marines and Navy have differing views about required LAW numbers and capabilities. Pending delivery of the first LAWs – and perhaps as an alternative means for fulfilling roles planned for LAWs – the Marines are now examining options for other platforms. Given uncertain and shifting Navy shipbuilding plans and the Marine's reliance on the procurement of LAWs, Congress may examine risks associated with MLR deployment and sustainment if fewer LAWs are procured or if fielding timelines are extended. If Congress deems such risks unacceptable, Congress might decide to reprioritize Navy shipbuilding plans or provide additional funding for the LAW program.

Additional Reading

- CRS Insight IN11281, *New U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Force Design 2030*, by Andrew Feickert.
- CRS Report R47096, *U.S. Ground Forces in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert.
- CRS Report R46374, *Navy Light Amphibious Warship (LAW) Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

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