Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS)

China first for the US Marine Corps

Fast-paced adaptation and reform

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The United States' current priority theatre is the Indo-Pacific, but for various reasons, a 'say-do gap' has plagued Washington's efforts to allocate resources to the region. This paper discusses the American prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific by analysing the US Marine Corps' new conceptual and doctrinal focus on warfare in the region, outlines the consequences for force composition, and concludes by exploring the implications for Northern European security.

Since 2018, the US's national security and defence strategies have conveyed that Washington's top national security priority is the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, it has been difficult for the US to follow through on that priority due to several reasons, including defence budget sequestration, contingencies in the Middle East and Europe, and basing difficulties in Asia.[1] Prominently, the US has only marginally adjusted the amount of military forces stationed in and allocated to the Indo-Pacific region.[2]

The US military services have nevertheless taken the strategy documents' guidance and begun adapting for future warfare, particularly against China. The Air Force has developed the concept *Agile Combat Employment*, and the Navy's concept is called *Distributed Maritime Operations*, while the Army's is *Multi-domain Operations*.[3] Of the US's armed services, the Marine Corps (USMC) has begun the most dramatic adaptation, by some even called "radical," and has reached the farthest in implementation.[4] After a contentious debate, which has now largely settled due to strong support from Congress, the Corps is doubling down on its reforms.[5]

This memo aims to provide an overview of the Corps' efforts, analyse its conceptual and doctrinal thinking about how it envisions fighting in the Indo-Pacific through 2030 and beyond, summarise the most relevant consequences for organisation, capabilities, and training, and explore consequences for Northern Europe.

How the US prioritizes China can be analysed in several ways. Many analysts have approached it top-down and focused on the presidential administrations' various efforts to strengthen the US's role in the Indo-Pacific.[6] Other analysts have analysed a single armed service and focused on the operational and tactical implications of the changes. Possible strategic consequences for other regions have received less attention.[7] This paper focuses on the US Marine Corps and attempts to generalise the findings to assess their implications for Northern European security, and, more widely, the US's security policy priorities.

Focusing on the Marine Corps serves several objectives. Amphibious forces will play a central role in any conflict in the Indo-Pacific, but the Corps also has other responsibilities.[8] It plays an important role for NATO, and many Europeans have become accustomed to thinking about the Marines as an agile joint force that could more quickly reinforce Europe than, for example, the US Army. Moreover, as the service that has gone farthest in adaptation, the Corps might inspire the other US armed services in coming years, as they accelerate their adaptation and follow the strategic guidance on the need for "ruthless prioritisation."[9] Additionally, the other services might encounter similar adaptation challenges as the USMC.

Recent military concepts hold new ideas on how a force envisions its role in a future fight. Once concepts have been evaluated and found valid, they are translated into doctrine, which forms the long-term basis of understanding for a task within a force.[10] The Corps documents examined in this paper are slowly becoming doctrine, and many of the changes proposed just a

FOI Memo 8802
Project no: A12502
Approved by: Mike Winnerstig

February 2025

few years ago are not only being implemented but at a pace that is fast for a service in the US armed forces.

This memo focuses on conventional and amphibious conflict, but in some instances, it briefly addresses the Corps' role in a joint operation and within the competition continuum.[11] The paper is forward-looking, but since the Corps has published its important documents over several years, some retrospective analysis is necessary. The memo uses primary and secondary sources, such as USMC publications and analyses by US research institutions.

The next section briefly describes the military operational environment of the Indo-Pacific, including military geography, some relevant military technology trends, and US military access to the region. This provides crucial context for understanding the challenges that a military force faces when operating in the region. The following section outlines and analyses the central components of the Corps' conceptual and doctrinal thinking. The consequences for organisation, capabilities, and training are summarised in the subsequent section. The final section explores tentative consequences for Northern European security and US security policy.

The Indo-Pacific's military operational environment

The Indo-Pacific region is characterised by vast expanses of open water, with relatively few and small islands spread out over a large area, many of which are thus difficult to reach. The climate varies considerably from north to south, but within the first and second island chains (see Map 1), it is mostly warm and humid throughout the year.[12] The terrain is littoral, primarily situated close to water, which affects the land's vegetation, ranging from jungle to brush. The elevation is generally low, with some exceptions found inland on the large islands of the Philippines, the Indonesian archipelago, Papua New Guinea, and the mountainous portions of Taiwan. In a conflict, a military force operating in the area is likely to need to be able to sustain itself for long periods. Air, naval, and amphibious forces dominate, and by necessity, little room exists for large land forces and manoeuvre.[13]

For several decades, two significant trends in military affairs have been the increasing range and precision of weapons and improvements in sensors, or Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) capabilities. Consequently, troops, equipment, supplies, and infrastructure have become much more difficult to hide and protect.[14] The terrain of the Indo-Pacific region compounds these trends, as it generally lacks natural concealment and protection, especially when at sea.[15]

The PRC's armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), have heavily exploited these trends. It is widely acknowledged that the PLA has a significant arsenal of precision missiles with short, medium, and long range, coupled with good sensor ability spread across the region.[16] The PRC is relatively transparent about the fact that it has developed these capabilities to contest US forces, especially within the first island chain.[17] Many of the capabilities associated with these trends, and the Chinese pursuit of them, have been categorised as so-called anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) assets.

The US armed forces long relied on its superior naval forces and relatively strong footholds to contain China in the region. One example is when US forces sailed undeterred through the Taiwan Straits with two carrier groups in 1996. However, with recent developments, especially the PLA's military build-up, it has become increasingly difficult for US and allied forces to operate freely, as doing so now involves taking much greater risks, especially in the South China Sea.

The US has a long history in the Indo-Pacific. The country's base and access infrastructure dates back to the Second World War, and it developed through the Cold War. Post-Cold War, governments in the region revoked several agreements, and the US's access declined. In recent years, the US has again expanded access slowly, but the country still has relatively few places from which to operate. In addition, the US mainland is far away, making logistics and reinforcements demanding, in contrast to the primary threat in the region — China. Map 1 provides an overview of the US's basing and access agreements.

It is primarily with these challenges in mind — the geography, China's military growth and behaviour, declining US capabilities relative to the PLA, and access difficulties — that the Corps has developed its recent concepts and doctrines.

Concepts for a new role

The USMC was established to work closely with the US Navy and, over time, developed a particular skillset in large-scale amphibious assaults. However, during the so-called War on Terror, starting in 2001, the service was primarily used as a second land force in the Middle East. The Corps' operations required many types of mechanised and armoured vehicles, and it increasingly designed itself for that mission. Amphibious operations were not prioritised. In the early 2010s, the service's leadership sought a new direction to try to correct this.

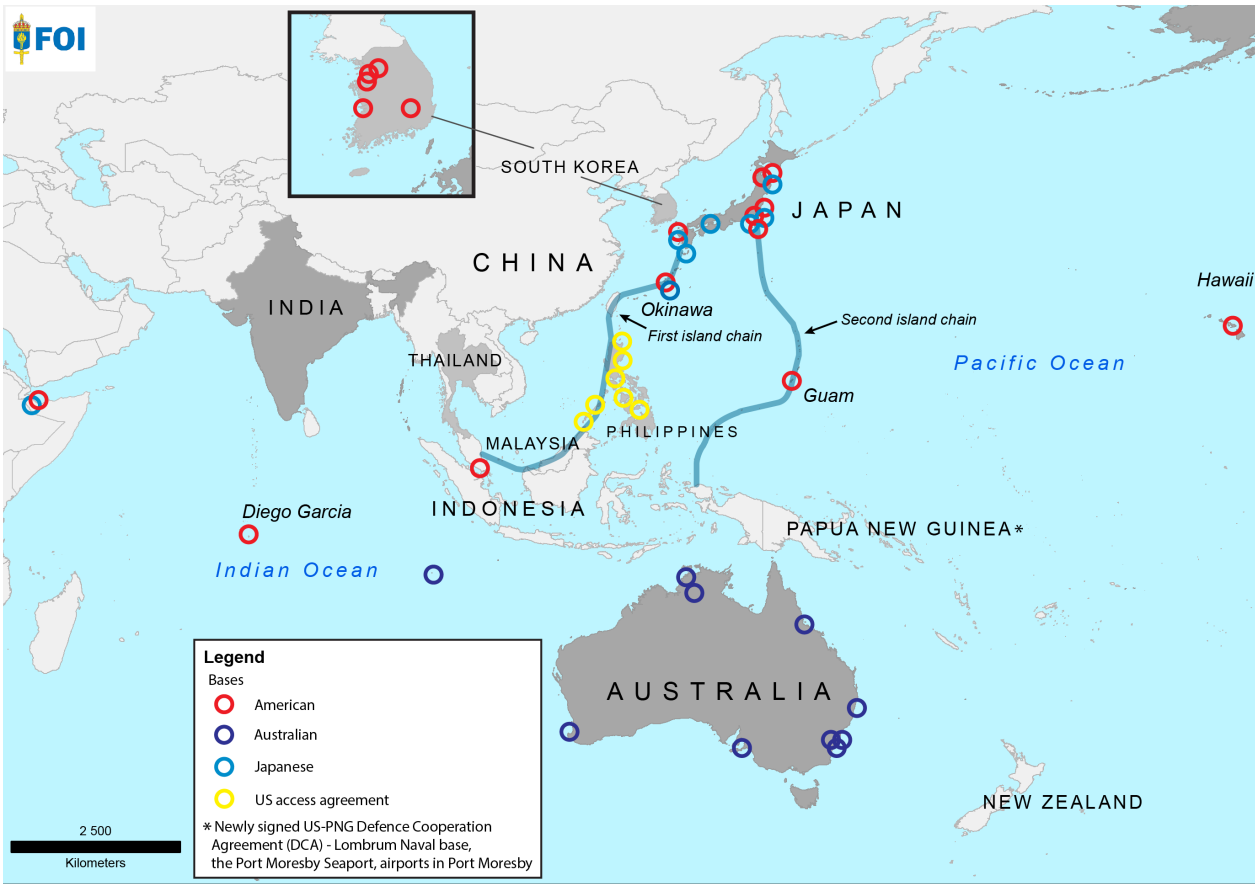

Figure 1. US basing and access agreements in the Indo-Pacific.

Source: Tom Corben, Ashley Townsend, Blake Herzinger, Darshana M. Baruah, Timohiko Satake, Bolstering the Quad: the case for a collective approach to maritime security (University of Sidney: United States Studies Centre, 2023), 16-17. Map designed and modified by Per Wikström.

At the same time, the PRC was emerging as a serious threat to US security interests, which top-level guidance increasingly reflected. The 2017 and 2018 National Security and Defence Strategies characterised the competition with China and Russia as the US government's priority.[18] The subsequent Defence Planning Guidance, a central document for the joint force, instructed the Corps to prioritise China above all else. The Corps' then Commandant, the service's leader, instructed his staff to set up an internal "China research group," and from these developments flowed the tranche of publications on which this paper focuses.[19]

Littoral Operations against the PLA

The Corps, together with the Navy, published the document *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* (LOCE) in 2017. LOCE is essentially a description of the threat and operational environments that an amphibious force would encounter in the near future, including the tasks and capabilities that the force would need to master to fulfil its missions.

The adversary is a state actor with access to long-range precision strike and pervasive surveillance capability over a large maritime and littoral area. The defending force would have to operate inside the enemy's weapons engagement zone, or "bubble."[20] The LOCE's unclassified edition does not name China, but it is evident that the theatre is the Indo-Pacific, and the imagined primary adversary is the People's Liberation Army.

The LOCE's overarching requirements and goals for a force operating in this environment include the ability to establish a forward-deployed and persistent presence in the area to deter and defeat aggression, wage sea *denial* in the littorals, establish sea *control* in a hostile environment, employ defensive measures to enable service and joint operations, and conduct maritime power-projection operations.[21] The publication summarises what an effective force should look like to achieve this: "a modular, scalable, integrated naval network of sea-based and land-based sensors, shooters, and sustainers that provide the capabilities, capacities, and persistent, yet mobile forward presence necessary to respond…"[22]

EABO: Small, dispersed forces moving between islands

In an attempt to concretise how the Corps might operate and evolve to overcome the challenges and fulfil the tasks that the LOCE identified, the Corps released an unclassified version of its new concept of operations, called *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* (EABO), in 2018.[23]

At its core, EABO calls for *integrated* and *dispersed* naval and amphibious formations that are able to influence the adversary's decision calculus and capability, disproportionately in relation to the defending force's (US) size and capability.

The Joint Force is to employ the Corps' EABO formations in an *expeditionary* way, as indicated by its name. For that to be possible, the formations would need to be small and mobile, have high firepower, and emit low electromagnetic and heat signatures to be hard to track, find, and neutralise.

A force conducting EABO would have 12 key tasks, particularly denying or controlling key maritime and littoral terrain and carrying out surface warfare, other strike operations (primarily from land), air and missile defence, and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).[24] As an essential part of the operations, the forces would need to include mobile precision-engagement assets, coupled with their own sensor networks to track and find the enemy. These are considerable capabilities for a small marine infantry force, provided they can be achieved.

The size of formations conducting EABO can vary from one or two platoons of around 40–100 marines, up to a regiment or even a larger Marine Air-ground Task Force (MAGTF).[25] The force would land on an island or multiple locations and quickly deploy for various operations, including establishing observation posts, conducting mobile reconnaissance, setting up artillery or rocket artillery posts, and being able to move rapidly to a different island.

Locations and logistics are important parts of EABO. The word "base" in the context of EABO actually means an area of operations from which the Marines are based, not necessarily a fixed location. An EABO force would have to be comfortable operating in austere or temporary locations for some time and still be able to fulfil its envisioned tasks. The force would need to set up quickly, and move its operations from one location on an island to another to avoid enemy detection or neutralisation. Due to the difficulty of resupplying a force in a contested area, the EABO force would have to make do with a thin logistics tail; it would need to be able to sustain itself and operate alone for a long time.

Movement and infiltration are perhaps what EABO is most known for. The Corps envisions a force moving to different locations on and between islands in a way often described as "island-hopping."[26] Depending on the distance between different islands, an EABO force would mostly be able to operate independently, using smaller boats, amphibious vehicles, helicopters, or vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft.

If the distance between islands were longer, the Corps would have to rely on the Navy. The Navy, however, would likely be stretched early in a conflict and vulnerable to strikes, especially considering the PLA's capabilities.[27] This helps explain why the Corps has developed a complementary concept.

Stand-in Forces to limit the PLA's freedom of action

The concept of EABO is meant to describe how the Marines would operate in a contested environment at the tactical level and in crisis. In contrast, the *Stand-in Forces* (SIF) concept, published in 2021, outlines the types of forces and equipment required to be forward deployed to an area of operations *pre-crisis,* capable of surviving within the enemy's weapons engagement zone for a campaign. SIF are better understood as forces used at the operational level of war and as *in-place* forces.[28] Hence, EABO and SIF complement each other but differ in important respects.

SIF have a broader role and are expected to contribute to deterrence both pre-crisis and intra-conflict, comprising a sort of *deterrence by denial* force. Tailored to the Indo-Pacific's maritime environment, with its vast tracts of water and few land features, SIF aim to convince an adversary that aggression will fail. In short, the mere presence and capabilities of these forces aim to deter. The key tasks for SIF differ slightly across the competition continuum, but pre-crisis, SIF are especially tasked to collect intelligence and conduct reconnaissance and surveillance in its area. SIF are distinguished by the expectation that they will operate within the adversary's weapons engagement zone.

In war, SIF are to function as a *defence-by-denial* force. By already being in place, SIF aim to provide a Joint Force Commander (JFC) with a significant in-theatre resource that can be levelled against the adversary, either for direct action or by delivering front-line intelligence to support various strike options. This is likely to be in a scenario where the JFC faces difficulties

deploying larger assets to the area of operations due to a significant enemy threat.

Moreover, in war, SIF's role is similar to that of forces conducting EABO, but with a greater focus on staying in place to consistently limit or deny an adversary's freedom of action or manoeuvre in its area of operations. This particularly applies to "maritime chokepoints," such as narrow straits.[29] One example is the waterways between islands in the Philippine archipelago, though it could also apply to the Strait of Hormuz in the Middle East. Ultimately, SIF's task in war, in military jargon, is to "complete naval and joint kill webs."[30]

In line with this broader role, SIF can be described more as *hubs of forces*, deployed over a large area, with relatively long distances between them. This has consequences for force composition. SIF are to be composed of several armed services and, when appropriate, of allied and partner forces. A typical SIF could thus consist of a main Marine Corps contingent, complemented by Navy, Coast Guard, Special Operations Forces (SOF and SF), interagency personnel (perhaps Foreign Service and Intelligence Officers), and a few allied and partner squads or platoons from naval/amphibious branches.[31] The exact composition would depend on its specific mission. It is reasonable to think that it would be a combination of lighter mobile infantry, with some heavier equipment, complemented by a few aviation platforms, but this is something about which the Corps' open publications are sparse on details.

As mentioned, SIF are meant to be able to operate for some time in vulnerable and hard-to-reach locations without resupply. Accordingly, SIF need pre-crisis access to many locations in the operations theatre. Even then, they will likely have had to survey many more suitable locations across the Indo-Pacific, for instance across the Philippine archipelago, and closer to mainland China, due to the risk that an enemy finds out pre-war where planned deployment areas are located. The base locations will require significant pre-positioned supplies — an important difference in amounts — compared to EABs. These supplies will need to include food and fuel (e.g., fossil fuel, batteries, generators, and other forms of electric supply), considerable amounts and variants of ammunition, and, at a minimum, medical equipment for effective field use.

The need for access locations and the placement of pre-positioned equipment at these locations substantially contribute to understanding why the US government has recently invested considerable diplomatic resources in persuading regional allies and partners to grant the US the right to peacetime access and wartime consent to use various locations in the region. The US has also seen some success in this effort, with allies increasingly supportive of hosting US forces nearby.[32] At the same time, the US's efforts to survey locations for SIF would have to be discreet, as an adversary could otherwise relatively easily preempt their placement by sabotaging or otherwise rendering these locations ineffective.

Movement in the theatre is not a primary concern in the SIF concept, as it assumes the force is within enemy weapons' range. However, for smaller force movements, say across a narrow strait or to a nearby island, the SIF could likely use EABO tactics. For longer-distance movement, the Joint Force Commander would most likely have had to decide that the Corps has fulfilled its task in an area and that US forces had control over it. In such a scenario, the Navy would likely relocate the Corps using its amphibious assault ships to another area of operations, but this reveals the extent to which the Corps' new tactics may be overly dependent on the Navy or the Air Force.[33]

The core of the Marines' new concepts, the naval expeditionary role, has been pursued before, primarily in the Pacific campaign of World War II. What is different this time is the dramatically increased capabilities that units conducting these operations would have, the scale and pace of changes the service is undergoing, and the degree of *specialisation* (versus generalisation) that the Corps seems to be pursuing.

A new optimised force

A primary means by which an amphibious force can adapt is to adjust its way of fighting. However, after analysing the future operating environment and the requirements for effective operations within it, the Marine Corps' leadership concluded that it needed to remake the service — primarily by making it lighter and more agile. The Corps leadership therefore proposed the most drastic redesign of the Marine Corps in at least four decades, summarised in *Force Design 2030* (FD) and further detailed in subordinate publications.

This section outlines FD's consequences for the Corps' composition and addresses the status of implementation. It aims to cover briefly four areas: reorganisation, divestiture of platforms, the acquisition of new materiel, and personnel and training. The aim is to cover the most relevant and affected capabilities, rather than be exhaustive.

New force structure and reduction of numbers

The Corps' manoeuvre forces are principally divided into three Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEFs), each with a geographic area of responsibility. I MEF is based in California and is responsible for the Middle East and global operations, but falls under Marine Forces Pacific (MARFORPAC). II MEF, in North Carolina, has primary responsibility for Europe. Okinawa-based III MEF, whose sole responsibility lies within the Indo-Pacific (including Korea), has been the focus of much of the Corps' redesign.[34]

Until 2022, III MEF had two regular marine infantry regiments and an artillery regiment. As of 2025, two of these have been relabelled as Marine Littoral Regiments (MLR), while the third is planned to switch its name in 2027.[35] As explained below, this has so far only applied to III MEF and not been carried out in either I or II MEF.

The MLRs differ from their predecessors in their training, equipment, and composition, with an emphasis on becoming lighter, more mobile, and better able to disperse and support themselves.[36] One MLR consists of a littoral combat team (essentially an infantry battalion with anti-ship missiles), a littoral anti-air battalion, and a combat logistics battalion.[37]

The Corps has not stated whether it will also redesignate regiments in the other two MEFs, but this appears possible because the Corps has claimed that the SIF and EABO concepts may also be applied elsewhere, even though the Corps' changes are focused on a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. An interesting detail is that I and II MEF have been tasked to contribute to the generation of forces for III MEF's MLRs.[38] This may be indicative of the Corps' priority — preparing and filling up the MLRs in III MEF with the most experienced and senior personnel — possibly at the expense of the other MEFs.[39]

Other relevant parts of the reorganisation are the reduction in the Corps' total number of infantry battalions from 24 to 21 (including a reduction in total personnel), a reduction in the number of amphibious vehicle companies from 6 to 4, and the reduction of other ground forces (to be discussed in the next section).[40] Additionally, traditional battalions are being downsized from 965 to 811 marines each, and fighter/attack squadrons are being reduced from 16 to 10 planes each as the Marine Corps retires all of its AV-8B and transitions from the F/A-18 to exclusively F-35 squadrons. These decisions, again, are intended to further the goals of becoming lighter, more modern, and more mobile and agile. This is expected to result in at least some of the Marines' air-ground task forces looking different in the future, as elaborated upon in the next section.

Disinvestment and Investments

The Corps' approach to warfare affects all of the service's platform categories. The common consideration is to lighten the logistics load and further the goals of mobility, dispersal, and anti-ship capability. This section outlines developments in three capability categories.

Armour is the first category. The Corps has transferred all its main battle tanks to the US Army, divested its bridging equipment, and re-tasked specialists.[41] This decision was particularly contentious, but the Corps' leadership and supporters successfully argued that the service is not instructed to have tanks nor to function as a second land army.[42] Additionally, they argued that if the Corps were to keep the heavy armour, the associated opportunity and maintenance costs, in logistics and funds, would significantly reduce the service's ability to adapt to future needs. Notwithstanding the validity of these arguments, it is clear that the Corps is trying to differentiate itself from the U.S. Army and will no longer retain some of the capabilities Marines have had in recent wars. Consequently, the USMC is thereby remaking itself into a different service from what many have been accustomed to thinking about the service.

Fires is the second category. In line with attempting to reduce logistical burdens, the Corps is reducing its arsenal of tubed artillery by 75 percent and is moving to retire some of their High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) systems in a few years. In their place, the service is attempting to increase its total fires capability by acquiring various platforms but being less public about them, and in the meantime, it is relying more on the M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), which has two pods of rockets as opposed to HIMARS with only one.[43]

The most important fires capability is the substantial investment in anti-ship missiles. The new Navy/Marine Corps Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) anti-ship missile will be mounted on a small armoured truck, the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV); it has entered low initial production and will be fielded on a greater scale between 2025 to 2027.[44] Additionally, the Marines are developing the possible placement and use of a Tomahawk missile battery placed on a JLTV to increase range compared to the NMESIS.[45] As with the tank decision, the Marines are prioritising their littoral

role, increasing its ability to sink enemy ships and their ability to quickly move and hide from possible enemy retaliation.

A third category is sensors. The Corps is investing heavily in and has begun to field new and more UAVs, many of which are being placed at lower echelons, from squad-level to platoon, and some for battalion command. The central idea is to drastically increase small marine forces' battlefield ISR and, via that their lethality, thus having an outsized effect on the enemy's decision calculus.[46] Although the service has come part of the way here, as of winter 2024, it is unclear to what extent the new UAVs have been fielded.

A more senior and well-trained Corps

The Corps is more manpower-intensive than the air and naval services, and the types of operations the Corps is envisioning will require more marines. Operating in small, dispersed groups, cut off from communication lines, means that personnel will have to make more and more complex decisions, become better problem solvers, and act in a more cognitively mature way. In response, the service is seriously adjusting its personnel management, affecting recruitment, retention, education, training, and exercises.

The Marines have the highest turnover of young/junior enlisted personnel among the services, due to the traditional Corps infantry battalion and deployment model, but it is now trying to replace the old "recruit and replace" with an "invest and retain" model. The service is adding flexibility to career trajectories, adding more incentives and possibilities for education, offering people more influence over their future assignments, and placing people in units for longer periods to build better troop cohesion and especially retain more non-commissioned officers (NCOs), who are the backbone of the Corps. The aim is to recruit and retain people with ambitions to stay in the Corps longer and slowly make the force more senior.[47]

The education, training, and exercise system is also affected, and the Corps is implementing several projects targeting these areas. Professional military education is being revamped with new pedagogy, more realism is being added to training and exercises, Marine Corps Infantry School (MCIS) has been lengthened from eight to fourteen weeks, and new initiatives are enhancing individual marines' marksmanship skills.[48]

The revamped exercise program places more emphasis on the EABO and SIF concepts as they are refined into doctrine, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Marines are now regularly conducting exercises in the region to improve their proficiency in using these concepts and are becoming more comfortable using the new weapons systems as intended.[49]

The Corps' focus on the Indo-Pacific operational environment and efforts to optimise its warfighting capability in the theatre are thus clearly leading the service to adapt its organisation, capabilities, personnel, and training. Some of this might have happened without them being specifically focused on the Indo-Pacific, but the service is nevertheless becoming increasingly specialised.

The Corps' new path, and implications for Northern Europe

This paper describes and provides an analysis of how the Marine Corps plans to fight in the Indo-Pacific through 2030 and how it is optimising its composition for such operations. These changes should come as no surprise. One of America's armed services is clearly following the US's strategic guidance on the "pacing challenge" (China) and the need for "ruthless prioritisation."

However, the US's armed services have global tasks and responsibilities. The Marine Corps is called the "911 force" and is intended to be able to operate anywhere in the world. As mentioned above, many in Europe have also become accustomed to thinking about the Marines as an agile joint armed force that can reinforce Europe more quickly than the US Army can.

If the Corps is tailoring itself to perform best in the Indo-Pacific, does this have consequences for its ability to operate elsewhere?

Northern Europe's military operational environment differs in many ways from that of the Indo-Pacific. The climate varies from sub-arctic to temperate, and the region has a mix of mountains, dense forests, and fields in the south. On the other hand, the military requirements for operating in the High North and the Baltic Sea have some similarities to those required in the Indo-Pacific. A light logistical footprint is preferred; signature management is important in the barren terrain of the north as well as in the crowded space in the Baltic Sea, and special clothing, equipment, and training for austere environments are needed.[50] The Norwegian coastline, with its many uninhabited islands and barren environments, has some similarities with how the Corps describes the many Pacific islands.

The Corps has also conducted testing, training, and validation in Northern Europe to ensure its operations

function smoothly. In short, the Corps' new concepts and doctrines are not useless in Northern Europe.[51] Nevertheless, the Corps' specialisation in the Indo-Pacific provokes several important considerations and consequences for Northern Europe.

Culture, readiness, adaptability, and resource constraints

First, the less formal aspects, for example, culture and incentives, may be more important than the formal efforts, i.e., the focus of the concepts and doctrines on the Indo-Pacific and public attempts at applying them in Northern Europe. In the Corps' current evolution, the service's leadership has emphasised the importance of buy-in from relatively junior personnel. Captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels, who are or have recently commanded platoons, companies, and battalions, appear to have participated significantly in the development of the new concepts and the service's future. It is worth noting that the Corps' rank-and-file vigorously defends the changes underway.[52]

When young officers and marines/soldiers participate early in the development and implementation of large projects, they are more likely to exert themselves over the course of their careers to continue to develop and enhance the changes to the service. The Marines' current changes are going to have operational and tactical consequences for at least a decade, but they will affect the personnel's views for an even longer time and perhaps then have strong strategic effects. A culture change concerning how the Marines see themselves and their role in American defence may be under way.

A second consideration concerns the risks to operational readiness that arise from the degree of change that the Corps is undergoing. When an organisation is in a process of significant change, primarily focusing on the future, the almost inevitable result is that less focus and resources are devoted to the present.[53] The Corps is tasked with being the most ready service, but the fact that it is rapidly adapting itself and thinking about the future cannot be easily offset by official statements that this will not come at some expense to current readiness. Allies around the world need to be aware of this risk and factor it into their expectations of what the Corps could deliver in a crisis.

Northern European states may face an increasingly complex dilemma. This dilemma concerns whether Northern Europe should fundamentally adapt its expectations of what the Marines will be able, and perhaps willing, to do in the region and accordingly adapt its own forces, or whether Northern Europe should try to influence the Marine Corps to try to ensure that its concepts are equally applicable to Northern Europe as to the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the Marine Corps retains its prepositioned equipment in Norway, a good sign that not all connection to the Marine Corps is lost.[54]

On the one hand, one might consider that the Marine Corps' prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific is a "done deal." If that were the case, then it is likely better to attempt to optimise Northern European *interoperability* with the Marines' concepts and II MEF and increase cooperation with, and reliance on, heavy support from the US Army.

In line with adaptation, one adjustment could be to attempt to apply the SIF concept in Europe. Northern European states' militaries could attempt to design their amphibious forces, and to some extent its various Ranger formations, in a similar way to the USMC, including acquiring similar capabilities but tailoring them more to the region's particular characteristics. The US Navy could then perform a similar role to Northern European forces in planning how to support the US Marines in the Pacific.

On the other hand, Northern Europe could continue to believe that the Marines' adjustment is very receptive to feedback from allies and that it is possible to influence the degree to which the Corps' remake is tailored to the Indo-Pacific. Although based on incomplete evidence, a common and current thread seems to be that Northern European representatives gently attempt to remind the US armed services of their global responsibilities and the varying requirements of effective force application around the world.

However, the available evidence suggests that the Trump administration is likely to take a harder line towards China than the Biden administration. This suggests further top-level directives to the armed services to accelerate their adaptation to the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, President Trump's former national security advisor, Robert O'Brien, has even suggested that the US allocate the entire Marine Corps to the Indo-Pacific.[55]

Even if the US's Indo-Pacific movement maintains its current pace or accelerates, the US Army is likely to be the service least affected, as air, naval, and amphibious forces are more suitable in, and perhaps sought after in, the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, for ground-force capabilities, especially ground-manoeuvre forces and heavy armour, Northern Europe could focus its efforts on deepening relationships and interoperability with the US Army.

Conclusion

Strategic guidance has consequences for America's armed services, despite frequent US domestic political dysfunction, distracting events, and lofty diplomatic rhetoric. When that guidance states that countering China is the Department of Defence's "pacing challenge," the services are expected to adapt to pursuing that priority. The Marine Corps is the service that has been most transparent about its changes, but it is reasonable to assume that other services are undergoing similar adaptations. Additionally, believing that one can do everything without significant trade-offs may be a classic US problem.[56] Perhaps Europe should recognise and plan for this scenario before the Marines or other services prove the point — at worst, in a crisis. For example, it is not unreasonable to think that at least portions of the II MEF could be redirected to the Indo-Pacific in a crisis, making them unavailable for Europe.

Doctrines are a reflection of priorities and the inner life of a military organisation.[57] The Marine Corps may be an early mover, in line with its history and role, but perhaps the other services, particularly the Air Force and Navy, will heed the strategic guidance in a similar way and adapt more dramatically than currently seems to be the case in the coming years. Under the second Trump administration, the push to counter China will likely accelerate, possibly at some expense to America's role in Europe. It would be prudent for Northern Europe to adapt. ■

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Endnotes

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34 The Marine Corps' III MEF, by its presence in Okinawa, Japan, is already a SIF. I MEF has around 53,000 marines, II MEF 47,000, III MEF 27,000.

35 Sources often indicate that three infantry regiments were allocated to III MEF. However, due to the initiative to reduce forces permanently allocated to Okinawa, parts of the Marine battalions previously in III MEF were moved to I MEF. Thus, in practice, there were only two infantry regiments in III MEF.

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37 Andrew Feickert, U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024), 2–3.

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