Transforming the Maritime Prepositioning Force

How to change while staying the same

by the Officers of HQMC PP&O (Expeditionary Policies Branch) & I&L (Logistics Operations Branch)

"For several decades, the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) represented a competitive advantage for the Marine Corps. That is less the case today. During major contingency, our MPF ships would be highly vulnerable and difficult to protect. We must be prepared to fundamentally alter this capability, as well as all the inventory currently programmed for inclusion with the MPF, as we rethink the future of this capability."

—Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG)

In the *CPG*, published in June 2019, Gen Berger firmly stated his belief that the "Marine Corps is not organized, trained, equipped, or postured to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment,"[1] and directed that force design will be his number one priority to transform the Marine Corps into the force needed for the future. This transformation will have implications across all aspects of Marine Corps capabilities, but arguably none more so than the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF) afloat-based program. The government-owned, civilian-operated Military Sealift Command ships loaded with Navy and Marine Corps equipment, which comprise the two MPF Squadrons have been a cornerstone to the Marine Corps' ability to rapidly deploy and provide sizable and sustainable combat formations in response to crisis. Thus, changes to this well proven capability will have implications for all elements of the MAGTF (and the supporting Naval forces) and must be done with both a look to the future and a recognition that MPF remains a key element of the Marine Corps response capability today.

>The Officers of the Expeditionary Policies Branch and Logistics Operations Branch work on a daily basis to continue the transformation of the current Maritime Prepositioning Force into the future Prepositioning Network.

Today's MPF program is the result of decades of development from a temporary measure to cover a gap in military forward presence in the Persian Gulf to a globally postured capability able to support multiple contingency operations simultaneously. In the early 1980s, the Marine Corps assembled equipment and 30 days of supplies for a permanent prepositioning force aboard Military Sealift Command ships organized into three squadrons located around the globe to support Marine Corps operations. Maritime Prepositioning Ships Squadron-1 (MPSRON-1) became operational in 1984 on the U.S. East Coast and relocated following Operation DESERT STORM to the Mediterranean Sea to establish a forward presence in the European theater. MPSRON-2 was located at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to support operations in the Middle East, and MPSRON-3 was located in Guam and Tinian in 1986 to support operations across the Pacific. As the program expanded and matured, it became the foundation for the rapid deployment and buildup of combat capability for the Marine Amphibious Brigades (later the MEB).

MPF supported numerous operations in the 1980s and 1990s and repeatedly proved integral to Marine Corps success. During Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, MPF helped to establish the first self-sustaining, opera-

tionally capable force in northern Saudi Arabia by providing equipment and 30 days sustainment for Marine Corps forces ashore, as well as supporting Army forces. In 1991, MPF supported Operation FIERY VIGIL to assist the Republic of the Philippines when Mount Pinatubo erupted. In 1993, MPF capabilities supported Marines conducting peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance operations in Somalia during Operation RESTORE HOPE. Then, in 2003, eleven of the then fifteen MPF ships supported Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, enabling the rapid deployment and subsequent combat operations for I MEF (reinforced) during the march to Baghdad. Today, fourteen MPF ships (now organized into two squadrons) provide a global response capability to support the full range of Marine Corps crisis response and combat operations.

A number of ships within the MPSRONs already include EABO packages. *(Photo: Courtesy U.S. Navy.)*

While both the utility and return on investment of the MPF is well established, the program requires reexamination based on the current operational environment. Weapons technology, most notably anti-ship missile and unmanned aerial system capabilities, have rapidly advanced in the past ten years. MPF ships are now at risk of enemy attack at much greater ranges at sea, and these more capable weapons systems are available to many military forces and para-military groups around the world. Even if the MPF ships are able to conduct a pier-side or in-stream offload, the time and personnel required to conduct the arrival and assembly operations present significant risk to Marine Corps forces. Without change, the current MPF is much too vulnerable to enemy actions to deliver the equipment and supplies needed to support Marine Corps operations in a contested environment when needed.

Another fundamental change driver for the MPF is the organization and capabilities of the Marine Corps forces that it supports. The Marine Corps' force design planning effort has been underway for well over a year, and it has provided a significantly different view of how Marine forces will fight in the future. From the outset, the Commandant's guidance was to focus on how Marines can support naval operations within the maritime component commander's campaign design, as well as directing the transition from a 2.0 MEB planning requirement for MPF operations to that of smaller, tailored forces. This new vision of how Marines fight in support of a maritime campaign has already led to changes to existing force structure and concepts, to include the divestiture of some heavy combat capabilities, including tanks and tube artillery. The vision of Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) conducting expeditionary advance base operations (EABO) in support of fleet requirements requires many changes across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and policy—and some of those changes are already visible within the MPF. Multiple ships within the MPSRONs already include EABO packages to support training and continued experimentation with force design concepts, and removal of some heavy combat capabilities have created opportunities to reconfigure load plans for more access to equipment and supplies during MPF operations. This is only the beginning of the numerous modifications required to realize the vision of the 2030 Prepositioning Network.

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The 2030 Prepositioning Network requirement is for an integrated global network of afloat and ashore prepositioned equipment and supplies capable of supporting crisis response and deterrence actions in the contact layer that can rapidly transition to support FMF blunt layer operations as well as the introduction of surge layer Marine Corps forces during major combat operations. This future prepositioning network will primarily support MLR and MEU operations in the contact and blunt layer, supported by a forward-postured maintenance and supply support capability that maximizes equipment readiness and availability. While today's prepositioning programs include both

an afloat and ashore component,[2] the future prepositioning network is envisioned to be a much more integrated network of afloat and ashore nodes that is optimized to support distributed Marine Corps operations in support of the maritime component commander.

As we look to the future and the 2030 Prepositioning Network, we must also maintain the capability to respond to current Marine Corps requirements for crisis response and support to operations and contingency plans. Marines continue to deploy around the world to support exercises and operations with allies and partners, and MPF remains a key component of many of those events. The ability to balance today's requirements with the actions needed to transition to the 2030 Prepositioning Network comes at a cost. Force design includes a sizable divestment effort across the Marine Corps, which includes MPF to create assets within the future budgets to support modernization investment. While today's MPF includes inventory already procured over the past two decades, this equipment and supplies require significant resourcing for maintenance and modernization. At what point does this investment to keep legacy equipment afloat affect the needed investment in future capabilities and transformation of the network? Is there a point where investment in the legacy capabilities should end because either it no longer fits the Marine Corps' concept of operations or it is no longer affordable? How will new, smaller ships such as the Light Amphibious Warship and other commercial offshore support vessels change the MPF? Conversely, are we convinced that the changes within the operational environment are clear enough to make dramatic changes to the current MPF capabilities?

The Marine Corps is currently in year one of a ten-year transition to the 2030 force, and there are many unknowns about the future enemy, future joint force, and future environment. Planners across the Navy and Marine Corps will have a central role in the development and implementation of the plan that takes the MPF program from its current capabilities to a future ashore and afloat network that supports Distributed Maritime Operations, EABO, and other future joint warfighting concepts. How much of the existing capability should be retained and modernized to provide scalable force projection capabilities and how much should transform to support deterrence during competition? Is the future MPF designed to support all Marine Corps forces globally or just a portion in specific regions? What does the supported Marine Corps force look like beyond MLRs and MEUs? As the Marine Corps moves forward, it must consider, weigh, and resolve the balance between legacy and future capabilities, determine what the Service requires, what it can afford, and how it will implement that plan by 2030.

In-stream offload of an MPS can present significant risks to the mission and the force. *(Photo: Courtesy U.S. Navy.)*

> ***Is the future MPF designed to support all Marine Corps forces globally ...***

None of us has all the answers of how to transform MPF from a seabased force generating capability to an integrated land and seabased network that enables Marine Corps forces during all phases of operations, but every Marine Corps logistician (uniformed and civilian) has expertise help inform capability development as we move forward. Logisticians across the Marine Corps should study, experiment, evaluate, discuss, and debate the many details of how to create the 2030 Prepositioning Network to support the future Marine Corps. The decision to create the MPF program was instrumental to the Marine Corps success over the past twenty years, and the transformation of the current MPF program into the 2030 Prepositioning Network will be just as critical for the Marine Corps for decades to come. This is no small task by any measure, but a task worthy of the collective intellect, energy, and vision of the professionals that fill our ranks.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

2. The current Marine Corps Prepositioning Program includes both MPF and Marine Corps Prepositioning Program–Norway.