



OCTOBER 2026

Preparing U.S. Land Forces to Fight in an Era of Strategic and Technological Disruption

Project on the Future of Land Power
CSIS Working Paper No. 2

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A Report of the CSIS Center for the Industrial Base

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Cover: Capt. Christopher Gabayan via DVIDS

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the individuals whose assistance was critical in the research, writing, editing, and publication of this paper. This paper benefited tremendously from the insights and the draft review of the advisory committee consisting of distinguished leaders who served as Army officers and enlisted personnel, as well as former government officials, respected analysts, and others with deep knowledge of U.S. land forces and national security. They include the Honorable Ryan McCarthy, General (Ret.) Jack Keane, Sergeant Major (Ret.) Rob Abernethy, General (Ret.) Chris Cavoli, the Honorable J.D. Crouch, the Honorable Rudy deLeon, General (Ret.) Mike Scaparrotti, Robert Stevens, and former Congressman the Honorable Mac Thornberry.

We also extend our thanks to Lieutenant General (Ret.) Michael Cederholm, General (Ret.) Richard Cody, Major General (Ret.) John Ferrari, General (Ret.) Charles Flynn, Under Secretary of the Army Michael Obadal, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Laura Potter, Dr. Alexis Lasselle Ross, and Colonel Jaron Wharton for their review and critiques of the draft, in addition to General (Ret.) Joe Dunford, Dr. John Hamre, and Dr. Seth Jones for their guidance and feedback. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Oliver Buntin, Celia Barrie, Audrey Aldisert, and Awais Hanif, who provided valuable research and data collection. We owe a debt of gratitude to those in government, military, academia, Congress, and industry who took time from their busy schedules to conduct research interviews with us, laying the intellectual groundwork for this working paper. Finally, the authors would like to thank Hunter Macdonald, Kelsey Hartman, Kharle Wu, and other members of the CSIS publications team for their invaluable contributions to the compilation, editing, and design of this report.

This report is made possible by the generous support of the Association of the United States Army.

CSIS welcomes dialogue and feedback on this analysis. Please submit comments and questions via the Future of Land Power study website: <https://www.csis.org/programs/centerindustrial-base/future-land-power>.

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Executive Summary

The utility of U.S. land power is being redefined by rapid strategic and technological evolution across the European, Middle Eastern, and Indo-Pacific theaters. The rapid pace of developments and information overload in contemporary conflicts, combined with competing theories of victory, have produced an increasingly challenging decision environment for security policymakers. To establish a strategic foundation for stakeholders, the first report in this series, *The Value of U.S. Land Power*, identified the core attributes that shape how U.S. land power is employed.¹ This second report applies these attributes to major modernization questions confronting U.S. land forces. The assessment begins with an analysis of major land force redesign efforts, focusing on the Marine Corps Force Design 2030 and Army transformation efforts, including the just-announced “How the Army Fights” guidance. It considers each service’s approach to navigating both technological developments, such as unmanned systems, and broader strategic priorities, such as the shift to the Indo-Pacific.

Next, the analysis evaluates the role of U.S. land forces as a joint force enabler. The U.S. Army exercises a disproportionate share of Department of Defense (DOD)-wide joint executive agency responsibilities, holds primary responsibility for all logistics and sustainment, and plays a vital role in air defense. The central role of land forces in sustaining security cooperation with allies and partners through formal institutions and joint exercises is also discussed.

The report dissects the structural budgetary and recruiting conditions faced by U.S. land forces. It discusses the fiscal impact of post-Cold War and post-Global War on Terror (GWOT) drawdowns, the challenge of balancing robust investments in personnel and procurement, and the demographic

and economic factors that have impacted land force recruiting. The paper also considers the challenges of integrating traditional military training with the ability to harness rapidly evolving technology to improve situational awareness and deploy the right capability at the right moment.

Finally, the paper evaluates the current land power procurement landscape, including ongoing efforts to replace the Army’s “Big Five” programs, the legacy of failed flagship post-Cold War procurement efforts, and current acquisition priorities. It also considers whether current efforts are adequate to address pressing strategic needs to enhance munitions stockpiles, expedite the adoption of unmanned systems, and quicken the feedback loop with industry.

Leveraging the present paper and its predecessor, the upcoming final report will synthesize the study team’s year-long research engagement to put forward concrete recommendations for maximizing the potential of U.S. land forces.

Introduction

This working paper broadly analyzes U.S. land forces' modernization efforts, covering force structure and organization, service funding and recruitment, and acquisition priorities and challenges.

Organization, training, and kit should all rest on a clear operating vision; the Marine Corps has “Force Design,” while the Army has the just-announced “How the Army Fights,” which builds off a series of transformation concepts and projects, dubbed “Army Modernization.” Both services recognize the problem presented by adversaries’ anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. They attempt to mitigate this problem through “multi-domain operations,” which aim to accelerate the integration of fires and effects across physical domains to permit freedom of action for the joint force and establish local superiority. Some colloquially admit that this amounts to an “everything, everywhere, all at once” approach.

Going forward, the United States must make important decisions over where to prioritize global posture, how to train and retain talent, and which capabilities present the best investment as an effective and responsible tool of U.S. statecraft.

Unfortunately, this is a rather broad and ambitious mission set. And it is not entirely the Army’s or Marine Corps’ fault. It results from a broader revolution in military affairs since the demise of the

Soviet Union—massed stand-off precision strikes; information warfare; and dramatically improved command, control, and intelligence—that has democratized lethality and challenged conventional assumptions about how to prevail on the battlefield.² Going forward, the United States must make important decisions over where to prioritize global posture, how to train and retain talent, and which capabilities present the best investment as an effective and responsible tool of U.S. statecraft. This paper offers selected observations on current modernization policies.

Battlefield Trends and Land Power Characteristics

The last working paper assessed the contemporary value of U.S. land power amid an increasingly complex battlefield.³ Russia's invasion of Ukraine returned large-scale industrial land warfare to Europe at rates of consumption and casualties few Western militaries were prepared for, while China is pressing extraterritorial claims and employing coercion below the threshold of armed conflict to expand its reach in ways that could preclude traditional responses. The previous paper surveyed the trends reshaping this environment: the accelerating proliferation of unmanned systems; a growing tension between stand-off effects and maneuver warfare; a related asymmetry in air and missile defense, epitomized by cheap one-way attack drones; the enduring centrality of manpower, as Russia leans on quantity and Ukraine on technology to offset its demographic disadvantage, both at enormous human cost; and mounting strain on sustainment, as contested supply chains and rearward-displaced depots degrade readiness in ways an Indo-Pacific contingency would only magnify—with artificial intelligence cutting across all of these, accelerating the decision cycle but unable to supplant human intuition and situational awareness.

These trends point to a set of characteristics that capture both the advantages and limits of U.S. land power:

- Land power, through its presence and persistence, offers durable control, security, and deterrence.
- The land domain remains the decisive domain in which to generate enduring results.
- Land power's wide variety of capabilities lends it versatility, survivability, and adaptability across missions.
- Because land power is largely expeditionary, it depends on the joint force (and often allies and partners) to meet its objectives. This dependence is reciprocal: The joint force relies heavily on land forces for executive, logistics, and air-defense functions.
- Land power is constrained by potential human costs.

With this context, this paper offers selected observations on organization, training and personnel, and acquisition to support the modernization of U.S. land power within those constraints.

Strategic Trends and Land Power Evolution

In the late 1980s, at a speech at CSIS, General Donn Starry reflected on how the U.S. military met the Soviet threat in Europe.⁴ Starry gave these remarks at a time when the United States understood the

major threat, knew where it would be principally fought, and had successfully devised a doctrine to contest it at a time and place of its choosing. Yet Starry's AirLand Battle doctrine arose from years of debate and strategic upheaval. From 1973 to 1982, the Army went through fundamental changes in its structure, the way it recruited and trained the force, and the systems it decided to acquire. In 1973 alone, the United States decided to end the war in Vietnam and the draft. Chastened by the experience, the U.S. Army turned its focus to Europe and pivoted away from irregular conflict. This created an opening for a new nonlinear doctrine that could counterbalance Soviet mass with superior tactical leadership. A new organization—Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)—helped disseminate AirLand Battle throughout the Army rank and file.⁵

While it may appear that national defense strategy drives military force development and organization, in reality, each only occasionally takes its cues from the other. Administrations set policy; military forces define their capabilities.

Today, U.S. land power faces an even more complex operational environment than the Cold War. The notion of “boots on the ground” drives deep domestic skepticism in land power after the “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the land force casualty rates seen in Ukraine. New technology tempts decisionmakers to rely solely on stand-off lethality. Finally, automation and artificial intelligence are accelerating the pace of warfare beyond traditional human decisionmaking. These trends affect the entire military, not just the Army and Marines, but the effectiveness of ground forces is the most in question. Clear thinking is needed to form the right mix of capabilities and force structure, led with effective and trained service members and leaders and equipped with modern, yet nimble, tech to dominate the battlefield.

While it may appear that national defense strategy drives military force development and organization, in reality, each only occasionally takes its cues from the other. Administrations set policy; military forces define their capabilities. Both should inform each other. The 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS), for example, focuses on defending the homeland, contesting China when and where necessary to preserve U.S. interests, ensuring allies and partners invest in their own security, and putting the U.S. defense industrial base on a firmer footing.⁶ U.S. interests throughout the Western Hemisphere are equated with homeland defense, and Europe is expected to assume primary responsibility for dealing with the Russian threat. The document preserves the assumption—and choice—that U.S. security is predicated on forward global posture, maintained increasingly through temporary rotational deployments. But national defense strategies are strategic frameworks, not force blueprints; contingencies and political intangibles are constantly influencing the configuration of U.S. land power.

Fundamentally, U.S. land power institutions are part of a greater whole. They organize, train, and equip forces for the joint force. Service chiefs respond to policy goals, contingencies, and evolving warfighting requirements while striving to keep their forces relevant, effective, and resilient. To

achieve these goals, now is an opportune time for both the services and combatant commanders to reassess their global posture and regional theater architecture. The Marines have produced Force Design and Ground Combat Element 2040; the Army has announced the “How the Army Fights” warfighting guidance.

Engagement with Allies and Partners

U.S. military strategy rests on the unspoken assumption that force posture abroad protects the United States at home. And force posture abroad relies on access, basing, and overflight (ABO) on or above foreign lands. Working with allies and partners has thus been a bedrock principle of U.S. military strategy; this work is reflected in U.S. land power organization, executed by service members, and enabled by shared warfighting technology. Critics have argued that air- and sea-based sustainment can fulfill strategic needs, but such methods lack the deterrent effect and capabilities of a land-based presence. Recent statements, however, are testing this assumption, and it is uncertain whether the United States will continue to prioritize force posture abroad as it has in the past.⁷

If the United States desires to remain globally postured to respond to crises and project power, it must be physically present and close to the action, which hinges on relationships with allies and partners that permit U.S. forces to operate in key terrain. Even written agreements and treaties must be maintained by constant practice and engagements, which themselves sustain the relationships, trust, and procedures that make alliances functional. The entire premise of “setting the theater” sits on a foundation ABO; while it can be done without allies and partners, this is only possible at a higher cost and with more limited scope. The degree of ABO depends on three conditions: (1) the ability of a political-military enterprise to convey a consistent message; (2) steady, predictable engagement; and (3) the understanding that all sovereign states pursue their own interests. Even with these, the United States may still fall short of achieving its desired global footprint.

U.S. land power not only depends on the access enabled by its partners and allies but also on their ability to jointly share responsibility for common threats.

As cited in the first working paper, since U.S. land power is predominantly expeditionary, it is tied to foreign territory to meet its objectives. To remain prepared abroad and to retain its freedom of action, U.S. land power not only depends on the access enabled by its partners and allies but also on their ability to jointly share responsibility for common threats, offsetting the need for U.S. land power formations to address these threats directly. This underscores the importance of security cooperation.

The Army is the most significant facilitator of international security cooperation among the services, providing the bulk of personnel for the defense institutions that facilitate working with allies and partners. This includes thousands of newly codified billets with the Defense Security Cooperation Workforce, executive agency duties for the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance



A U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter lands to pick up U.S. and allied soldiers during a joint air assault exercise during Operation Maneuver on Calayan Island in the Philippines on June 15, 2026.

Photo: Sgt. Olivia Cowart via DVIDS

and the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, and the largest share of personnel in the Defense Attaché Service. Additionally, the National Guard's State Partnership Program pairs state National Guard organizations with foreign militaries for sustained training, professional exchanges, and other military-to-military engagement.

Furthermore, the Army has force structures devoted to building partner capacity. One of these is the Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), a bespoke Army unit of trainers whose role is to deploy forward and train partner forces. Despite advances in understanding how partner capacity is achieved over time, current reporting suggests the department will make cuts that result in four of the six Security Force Assistance Brigades deactivated by the end of 2026. Partners and allies must take primary responsibility for their readiness in the first place, but the modest investment in SFABs is outweighed by tangible military capacity that exponentially contributes to regional campaigns.⁸ Partner and allied forces can offset the need for growing Army end strength to meet global demand and are a necessity for coalition operations.

Land forces also play a key role in enabling joint multinational exercises and the attendant security partnerships. In the Indo-Pacific, Pathways has supported more than 50 joint, bilateral, and multilateral exercises, using forward-deployed formations, C2, sustainment, and partner

engagement to integrate forces across the theater.⁹ In Europe, Atlantic Resolve has employed rotational formations to sustain multinational training and strengthen interoperability along NATO's eastern flank.¹⁰ Across both theaters, land forces provide the headquarters, logistics networks, persistent presence, and organizational framework through which joint forces and allied militaries assemble, integrate, and rehearse for operations. These exercises consequently illustrate land power's broader role of creating much of the connective infrastructure for international security cooperation.

Creating global posture—which generates theater readiness—with allies and partners is not a simple resource that can be acquired overnight; it must be cultivated and earned over time. “Setting the theater” is more dependent on pursuing common ground with allies and partners than on technical solutions.

Force Structure and Organization

This section begins by taking a broad look at force structure and organization to examine the ways U.S. land power could adapt to modern exigencies and demand. Force structure has changed over the years, responding to national prerogatives and service interests. The history of land power force structure reveals constant permutations (see Table 1).

Both the Marines and the Army have adopted operating concepts centered on fighting for freedom of action amid key terrain denied by adversaries. The Army has discussed “inside and outside” forces to be positioned so that mobility and freedom of action are restored. The Marines center their modern operating methodology on the contested littoral space, particularly in the Pacific. For their part, Special Operations Forces play a vital role amid U.S. land forces. Their unique role and organization, as well as their Title 10 acquisition authorities, suggest they deserve their own discussion. This report also sets aside the role of combatant commanders in order to maintain its focus on the broader future of the services principally responsible for delivering land power.

Table 1: Timeline of Major Land Power–Related Organizational Initiatives

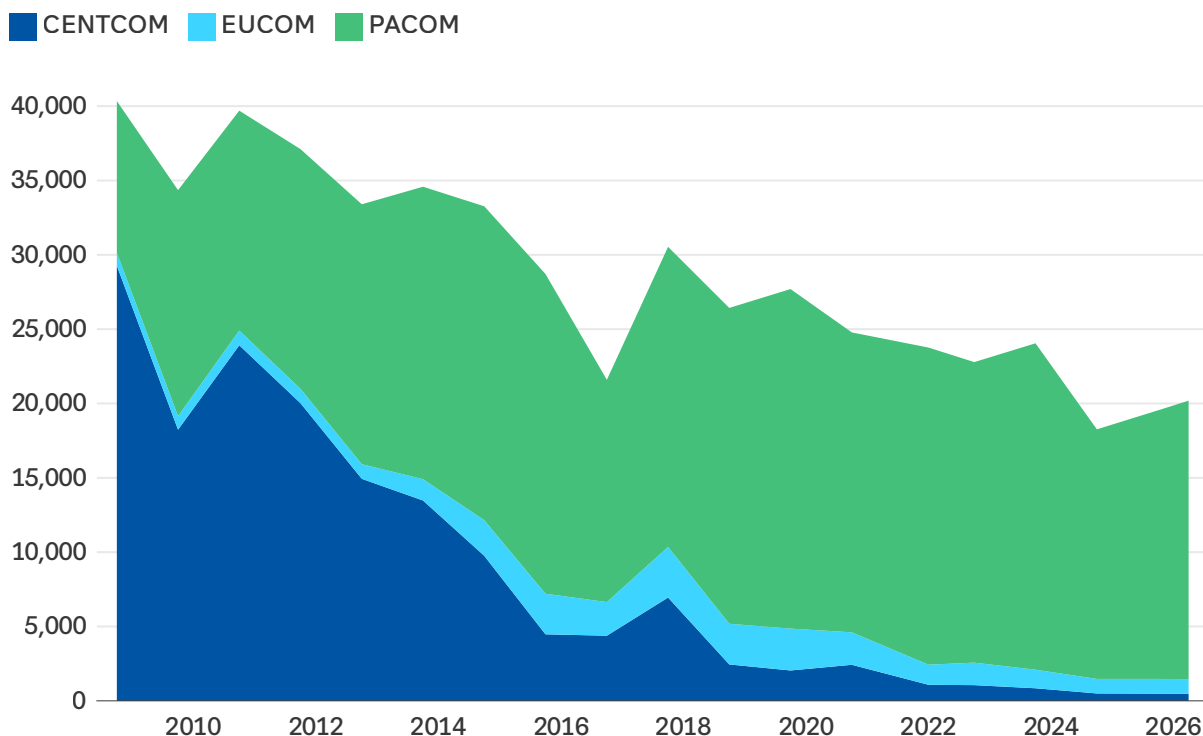
Year	Event
1945	Postwar demobilization begins
1950	Korean War remobilization; NSC-68
1952	Congress guarantees the Marines three divisions and three air wings
1957	Pentomic reorganization
1961	ROAD reorganization; three brigade divisions restored
1963	Marine Corps adopts the MAGTF Air-Ground Task Force concept
1973	All-Volunteer Force begins
1973	Total Force policy; TRADOC and FORSCOM activated
1980	Division 86 heavy division design approved
1983	Army of Excellence; light infantry divisions announced
1989	Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 (FMFM 1) - Warfighting
1990	Post-Cold War drawdown
1994	Force XXI campaign launched; digitization and division redesign
1999	Army Transformation announced; interim brigade combat teams
2004	Modular force conversion; brigade combat team becomes the basic unit of action
2013	Army drawdown
2018	Army Futures Command activated; Security Force Assistance Command activated
2020	USMC Force Design 2030; tank and artillery drawdowns
2022	The first Marine littoral regiment officially stands up
2024	Army Force Structure Transformation white paper; Multi-Domain Task Force formalized
2025	Army Transformation Initiative; T2COM activated; U.S. Army Western Hemisphere Command activated
2026	Security Force Assistance Command deactivated
2026	Ground Combat Element 2040
2026	The Army Azimuth and “How the Army Fights”

Army	Marine Corps	Overarching event
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U.S. Marine Corps Force Design 2030

Force Design 2030, currently referred to simply as Force Design, emerged from the broader shift away from counterinsurgency and toward peer competition in the Indo-Pacific, formalized in the 2018 NDS. This shift strengthened calls for the Marine Corps to reclaim its traditional role as a light, littoral force. The changing geographic distribution of permanently stationed marines, reflected in Figure 1, is one demonstration of their reorientation.¹¹

Figure 1: Active-Duty USMC Personnel Permanently Stationed Abroad by Combatant Command



Note: Data for 2021 are reported for Q4; data for 2026 are reported for Q1; data for all other years are reported for Q3.

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country," DOD Personnel, Workforce Reports and Publications, U.S. Department of Defense, 2008–2026, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

Advocates, including then-Commandant General David H. Berger, argued that force structures for sustained onshore counterinsurgency operations were increasingly vulnerable to long-range precision weapons, electronic warfare, and contested logistics.¹² Force Design 2030 thus tied a defined operational problem—campaigning inside a highly contested, dispersed engagement zone—to a specific goal: creating access for the joint force.¹³

The core of this force design concept is a dispersed, low-signature force able to operate and strike from austere positions across contested littorals. Marine Littoral Regiments provide the structural building blocks for this force posture, their persistence in key terrain designed to generate effects

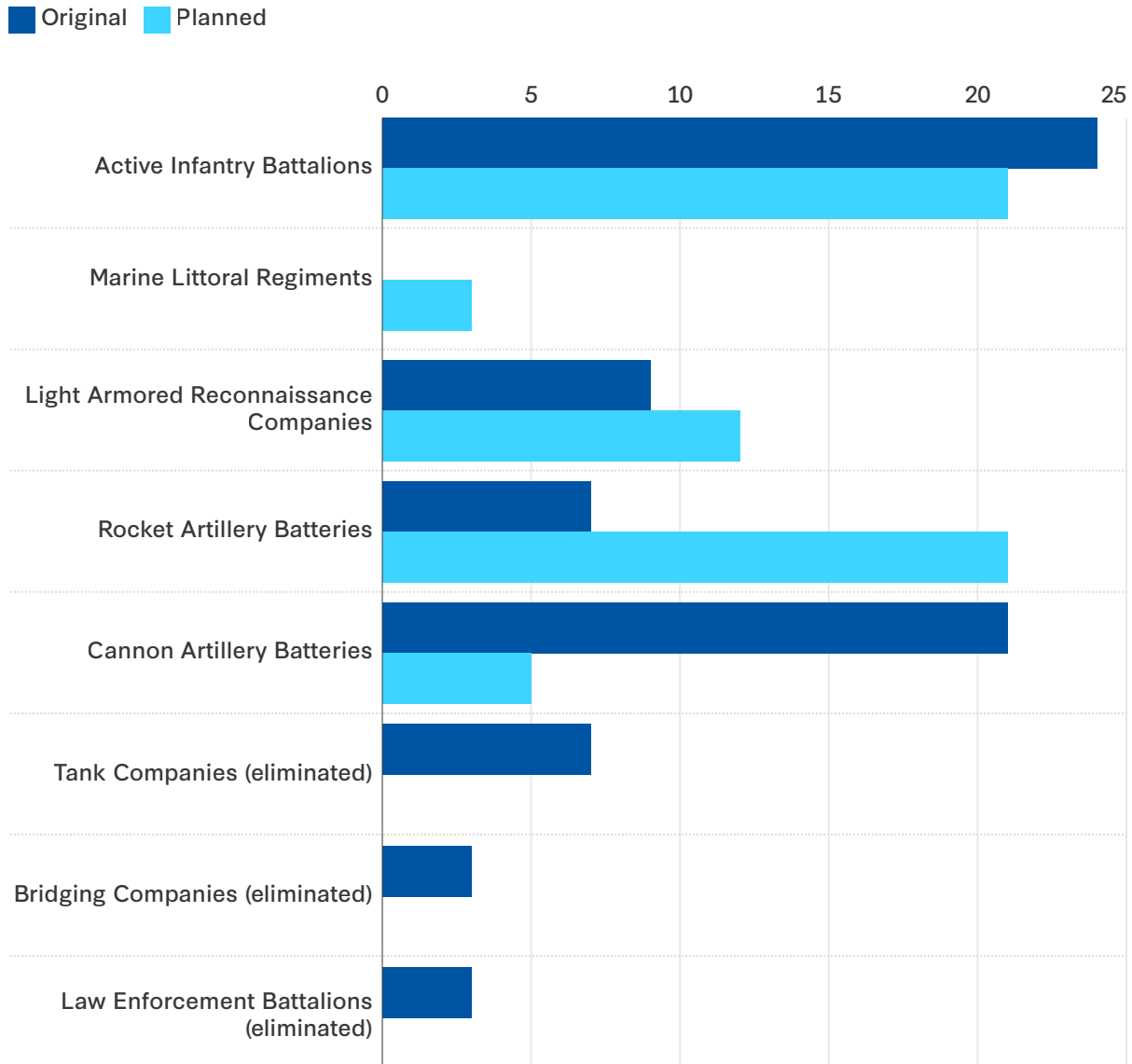
across sea, land, and air. These formations are intended to conduct reconnaissance and counter reconnaissance, support maritime domain awareness, coordinate air and missile defense, attack ships and land targets, and move before enemy sensors can complete a targeting cycle.¹⁴

Implementation has followed a “divest to invest” method, given effectively fixed budgets in the initial implementation period (Figure 2).¹⁵ The Corps eliminated its bridging companies, tanks, and law enforcement battalions; cut cannon artillery and some infantry battalions; and invested in long-range precision fires, unmanned systems, air-defense sensors, and lighter kit.¹⁶ Implementation was fused with experimentation: For instance, when redesigned infantry battalions underperformed in exercises, they were swiftly enlarged.¹⁷ By 2025, the Corps described Force Design 2030 as being in the implementation phase, with concepts moving into doctrine and new systems entering fleet units.¹⁸

The controversy surrounding Force Design 2030 reflects how sharply it broke with the status quo, impacting joint operations as well as doctrine while not attempting to please all internal constituencies. In this sense, it is a courageous choice that took tenacity.

This transition was not without controversy. Critics have argued that cutting tanks, cannons, and rotary-wing aviation could weaken the Corps in sustained land combat and non-Pacific contingencies (for which supporters characterize these systems as operationally unsuitable).¹⁹ They have also noted that distributed units require dependable littoral mobility, low-signature sustainment, resilient communications, and access to allied territory; they questioned whether appropriate investments were being made in such capabilities.²⁰ The controversy surrounding Force Design 2030 reflects how sharply it broke with the status quo, impacting joint operations as well as doctrine while not attempting to please all internal constituencies. In this sense, it is a courageous choice that took tenacity. Force redesign cannot inherently please all stakeholders and inevitably reflects hard choices that need to be made to address a changing threat environment.

Figure 2: USMC Force Design 2030: Projected Change in Select Unit Counts



Source: U.S. Marine Corps, "Force Design 2030," March 2020, <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20I%20and%20II.pdf>.

The Marine Corps has also released Ground Combat Element 2040, a doctrinal framework that offers a vision of land power building on Force Design 2030 while retaining an emphasis on the full range of ground combat missions.²¹ It anticipates a battlefield shaped by ubiquitous sensors, drones, artificial intelligence, contested electromagnetic networks, and long-range precision fires, making concentrated formations increasingly vulnerable and compressing the time available for maneuver and decisionmaking. In response, the Corps plans to build modular, dispersed formations with stronger organic and joint fires; layered air and drone defenses; resilient logistics and command networks; improved tactical and littoral mobility; and extensive use of autonomous systems and AI decision support. The framework retains the Marine Littoral Regiment's specialized reconnaissance

and sea-denial role while emphasizing the continuing need for larger formations capable of seizing, holding, and defending key terrain.

From the Army Transformation Initiative to How the Army Fights

The 2025 Army Transformation Initiative (ATI) built on a series of doctrinal and organizational efforts to define and assert the Army's utility in an era of strategic competition. Multi-Domain Operations, Army AimPoint (and WayPoint), Army 2030, Transformation in Contact, and Army Force Structure Transformation each sought to adapt the service for the post-counterinsurgency era, reevaluate its force structure, and reaffirm its strategic relevance.²²

While this initiative was being developed, the war in Ukraine accelerated the emergence of unmanned systems, electronic warfare, and long-range fires, forcing armies everywhere to adapt relentlessly.²³ These events coincided with a broader institutional imperative to focus on large-scale combat operations in the wake of drawing down from stability operations. On April 30, 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth directed the Army to become “leaner” and “more lethal” while prioritizing homeland defense and Indo-Pacific deterrence.²⁴ Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll and General Randy George issued the ATI announcement the next day, presenting it as the first installment of a continuous transformation effort.²⁵

How the Army Fights now takes the first step in implementing the strategic vision of the Army Azimuth by aligning the operational environment and challenges with four elements: convergence, strike, close battle, and endurance.

The ATI announced three lines of effort: to deliver critical warfighting capabilities, optimize force structure, and eliminate waste and obsolete programs. The capability agenda included new long-range missiles by 2027, unmanned systems in every division by the end of 2026, counter-UAS systems at the company and platoon levels, AI-enabled command and control (C2), additive manufacturing within operational units, and greater Indo-Pacific prepositioning. The initiative also called for reducing headquarters and general-officer billets and, in its initial FY 2026 implementation, converting 14 active-component infantry brigade combat teams into mobile brigade combat teams.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Army hoped that increases in recruiting could expand capacity, as previous changes in 2024 reduced special operations (SOF) enabler billets and “conventional” capabilities to bring force structure in better alignment with end strength.²⁷ Recent budget documents seek an 18,000-troop increase in manning.²⁸

The Army's recently released “How the Army Fights” warfighting guidance document is a significant step toward addressing concerns that the Army's modernization approach lacked sufficient detail connecting doctrine and design.²⁹ Current guidance has emphasized a leaner and lighter force with resources being allotted to mitigate operational problems, but had not clearly articulated the

problem it was trying to solve. How the Army Fights now takes the first step in implementing the strategic vision of the Army Azimuth by aligning the operational environment and challenges with four elements: convergence, strike, close battle, and endurance.³⁰ The Army has redefined brigade roles and has focused more on pulling capabilities up to the division level to lighten the cognitive load on brigades. But how big should divisions be, and what is the proper space of control to reflect current battlefield geometry?³¹

A consistent challenge to this series of Army initiatives has been a lack of clear policy articulation and effective advocacy, particularly in the halls of Congress.

Congress has been supportive of the Army modernization, although members have raised concerns about its negative effects on combatant commander requirements, disaster response, and the existing workforce.³² Appropriations have also maintained funding for programs that the Army itself has characterized as obsolete—most prominently the High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle.³³ While ATI lacked a focused operational narrative comparable to the USMC Force Design, it identified desired technological and administrative shifts with some specificity. Implementation of How the Army Fights can therefore be judged through fielding, savings, and assessing whether the reorganized force can demonstrate a distinctive contribution to joint campaigns across several theaters.³⁴ A consistent challenge to this series of Army initiatives has been a lack of clear policy articulation and effective advocacy, particularly in the halls of Congress.

Land Power as Joint Force Enabler

Today, U.S. land power helps set the foundation for the joint force by establishing regional—or theater—architectures for the joint force to operate. Both the Army and the Marine Corps need to be present at the right time, in the right place, to demonstrate capability—and, if necessary, to act. In Donn Starry’s time, the Army designed itself around a Fulda Gap scenario; today, the Army needs to configure itself to be ready just about everywhere. If the Army is forced to rapidly move troops out of the continental United States into a contested zone of engagement, it will rely on the joint force for protection and transportation overseas. The difficulty of such an operation at scale amplifies the importance of prepositioning. Regardless of regional focus, both services are attempting to restore freedom of action and maneuver, even if accomplishing this will look different in the Pacific and Central Europe. The Army talks about “inside forces” and “outside forces.” The Marines talk about operating inside the “weapons engagement zone.” Because of this shift in focus, more attention to the role of the theater army—over tactical units—is required.

As described in the first working paper, the United States configures its ground forces largely in an expeditionary format, whether it be a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) or a Brigade Combat Team designated as a Regionally Aligned Force. Both formations are the “pointy end” of the force—designed to contest an enemy and prevail in conflict. Just as important, however, are the force echelons that permit the MEU and brigade to get to their area of operation in the first place. For the Army, this is the theater army, and for the Marines, the Marine Expeditionary Force, working in tandem with naval logistics. Brigades will be irrelevant if the environment to which they deploy prohibits their access, or if they cannot protect their battlespace to enable the survivability of their soldiers. The Army’s unique contribution to the joint force hinges on its ability to hold key terrain



A U.S. Marine Corps corporal and a U.S. Army soldier engage a practice drone during Exercise Tenacious Archer in Ngatpang, Palau, July 30, 2026.

Photo: Cpl. Ryan Sotodavila via DVIDS

abroad, setting the conditions for the U.S. military to bring follow-on capabilities to bear on the conflict. Infrastructure, supply lines, depots, ports, and other bases all reside on land; the theater army is thus responsible for the architecture that not only enables freedom of action but permits mobilization and reconstitution, should conflict escalate beyond limited interventions.³⁵ This “spearhead” theater architecture should center on forward logistics, enhanced protection, and C2.

The Army’s unique contribution to the joint force hinges on its ability to hold key terrain abroad, setting the conditions for the U.S. military to bring follow-on capabilities to bear on the conflict.

Forward Logistics: Logistics has always been contested, but the proliferation of long-range fires makes it even more so. U.S. ground forces often maintain the critical supply hubs, prepositioned stocks, and communications nodes that are instrumental in forward-based posture to maintain deterrence. Logistics also naturally depends on the infrastructure that can house it; the Army Corps of Engineers therefore contributes to base infrastructure throughout the Pacific region with detachments in Honolulu, Korea, and Japan. Theater sustainment commands exemplify

land power's outsized contribution to joint operations, with the Army managing much of the logistical architecture that converts theater access into usable combat power.³⁶ U.S. ground forces' contribution to forward theater-based logistics is sizable; nonetheless, it warrants further investment to strengthen resilience and increase readiness. Low capacity in key capabilities is likely prevalent for logistical, sustainment, and other support functions due to those skills typically allotted to the Reserve component, as per the 1993 Offsite Agreement.³⁷

Enhanced Protection: U.S. ground forces have always been responsible for air defense and must reinvest in this capability to provide robust and layered protection for forces in theater. This protection function, from both terrestrial and airborne threats, is core to land forces' role in the joint force; U.S. air and naval capabilities would be severely limited if access to airfields and ports were denied. As seen with the wars in Ukraine and Iran, the output of air threats—be they drones or ballistic missiles—outpaces the production of systems to mitigate them. Current air and missile defense battalions focus on logical key terrain but are insufficient to defend everywhere. Investments in Integrated Air and Missile Defense, short-range air defense (SHORAD), and counter-UAS (C-UAS) capabilities require corresponding and expanded force structure to mitigate the most salient air defense asymmetries, such as drone swarms and missile barrages. Furthermore, the increased vulnerability of military bases abroad—regardless of service responsibility—prompts questions of whether a standard joint doctrine and equipping could increase effectiveness and interoperability.

Command and Control: Finally, both forward logistics and protection rely on enhanced C2 systems and command structure to anticipate and manage a complicated battlespace. The best way to think about “setting the theater” should include the management, coordination, and synchronization of functions across space and time to achieve discrete results. The Army plays an appropriately outsized role in the formation of Joint Task Force organizations—subsidiary organizations that enable the joint force to create theater conditions that permit follow-on action. Army Corps and Marine Expeditionary Force headquarters architecture are ideal for providing the decision and staffing scaffolding for their respective wartime missions. Requisite “next-generation” communications should be built to that echelon, and headquarters should require expertise for theater-level operations and logistics. Both the Army and Marines are increasing theater-level capabilities, but shortcomings remain. For example, both theater armies for Europe-Africa and the Pacific report low personnel fill rates at the staff level, despite being prioritized over other theater armies.

Forward logistics, enhanced protection, and C2 all hinge on the proper formations being in theater to execute them. Force structure in U.S. Army Europe-Africa and U.S. Army Pacific shows similar capabilities, if with substantially more capacity allocated to the Pacific theater. However, this is only true on paper: In reality, the forces are based in the United States. Forward permanent basing of these capabilities—and the forces that use them—would not only provide real deterrence capability and close the time-distance gap but also reduce the time away from families for the service members and units that execute these tasks.

Personnel and an Echeloned Force

Enhancements in joint theater-level capabilities are reflected not only in unit configuration and task but in the types of skills and functions the Army cultivates among its leaders. Aside from conventional combat and support operations, the Army recruits and accesses talent into many different “functional areas,” which are occupational specialties that support Army operations. Force structure is not only about ensuring that units possess the right skill sets; it means establishing that the Army has enough of those skill sets to go around in the first place. Army personnel management leadership is already adapting its recruitment strategies to the changing nature of conflict.³⁸ To further support a more robust theater architecture, the Army could recruit more network engineering officers, foreign area officers, and simulation operations officers.

Force structure is not only about ensuring that units possess the right skill sets; it means establishing that the Army has enough of those skill sets to go around in the first place.

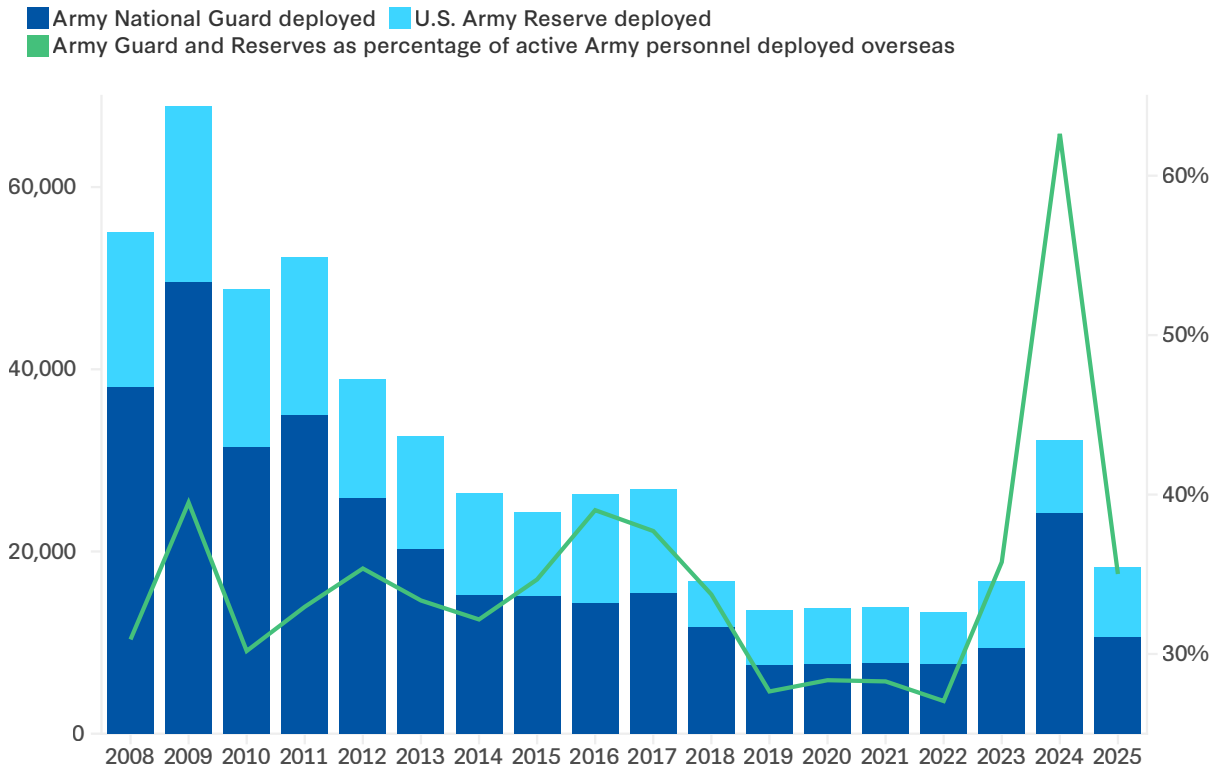
Attempted changes in force structure point to broader institutional constraints that may limit land power’s effectiveness at the theater level. For example, compared to the Marines and Air Force, the Army has the highest degree of internal structural flexibility, constrained only by budget and end strength. Counterintuitively, however, the Army’s wide latitude in deciding force structure insulates it from making hard choices to prioritize theater resources over tactical resources. Certainly, a balance must be made between maintaining the fighting architecture that permits these units to operate in theater and building lethal capabilities for the “close fight.” Maneuvers, mass fire, and the taking of territory are still desired. The Army as an echeloned force must focus on the former to maintain a decisive role on the battlefield as it observes years of positional warfare in Ukraine dominated by autonomous systems. And changing force structures—for example, shifting reconnaissance elements from brigade to division—looks good on paper but is difficult in practice. More work is therefore required to articulate which echelon does what and to shape the right balance of force structure to meet current needs.

The Reserve Component

U.S. active-duty land forces benefit from two supporting pillars: the National Guard and the Reserve, referred to as Component (or Compo) 2 and 3, respectively. Compo 2 has a dual role, serving the federal government as well as its respective states' missions; Compo 3, however, reports exclusively to its respective service organizations. Both the National Guard and Reservists typically juggle civilian life with part-time military duties. Members of Compo 2 and 3 are assigned to three major categories: the Ready Reserve, the Standby Reserve, and the Retired Reserve, all of which are spearheaded by Ready Reserves "Selected" units and individuals—those most likely to be activated when the need arises.

Historically, these two components functioned as the nation's strategic reserve that would support the active military in a prolonged conflict, but with the reality of the Cold War and the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the National Guard and Reserves have increasingly become an operational reserve deployed around the world.³⁹ Figure 3 illustrates the recurring scale of reserve mobilization: During the Iraq counterinsurgency campaign, and even during more limited Middle East deployments in 2024, Guard and Reserve deployments approached the size of the regular Army's entire overseas presence.

Figure 3: Army National Guard and Reserve Overseas Mobilization, FY 2001–2025



Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, “Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country,” DOD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications, U.S. Department of Defense, 2008–2026, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

While the National Guard is often associated with homeland service—rapid response to natural disasters and supporting law enforcement or other functions (commonly referred to as Title 32 or state active duty), it is often called to support Title 10 functions. Ultimate command authority depends on duty status: Under state active duty and Title 32, the governor remains commander-in-chief, while under Title 10 federalization, that authority shifts to the president. Apart from state-level active deployments, the National Guard is funded by the federal budget. Thus, the Guard prepares for and equips itself as a fighting force, which in turn provides the capabilities and skills to also fulfill important noncombat functions in the United States.

The National Guard’s Title 10 warfighting functions extend to all U.S. active-duty operations, and the Guard has played significant roles in major U.S. military engagements, boasting over 250,000 deployments alone in the conflict in Iraq, for instance.⁴⁰ The Guard has also played a prominent role in military diplomacy and security cooperation via its State Partnership Program, which has paired 116 partner nations with all 54 of the Guard’s state and territorial units to support training and interoperability with partners and allies worldwide.⁴¹ Given the National Guard’s mandate, it is also uniquely well positioned to serve as a fusing organization between agencies, particularly between the DOD and DHS.

The Army and Marine Corps Reserves, totaling over 200,000 soldiers and marines, are an exclusively federal organization and operate under Title 10.⁴² The Army Reserve is organized to manage specialized capabilities, including such critical sustainment as theater-level transportation, engineering, and logistics units.⁴³ Indeed, the Army Reserve comprises nearly half of the Army's maneuver support and a quarter of its force mobilization capacity at only 6 percent of the total Army budget.⁴⁴ The Marine Corps Reserves have been a near-mirror image of their active-duty counterpart.⁴⁵ In recent years, the Marine reserves have taken on all military law enforcement functions, maintained roughly half of the Corps' total rocket artillery capacity, and integrated reserve aviation units with the active-duty Air Wing.

Despite the vital role of the National Guard and Reserves in U.S. national and homeland defense, there could be deeper engagement between the active and reserve forces, akin to the interservice joint duty assignment required for promotion to general or flag officer. No such parallel leadership requirements exist to better link active duty to Compos 2 and 3. However, as long as U.S. land forces are an expeditionary force entrusted with upholding U.S. national security and interests abroad, the reserve components must be both better connected with and viewed as vital complements to the active-duty force in serious conflicts.

Recruitment and Training

Modernization for both the Army and the Marines also needs to address the human element. The nature of the modern strategic environment suggests that the United States may face coordinated adversary threats across multiple theaters. As a result, personnel strength needs cannot be assessed solely based on even the most severe individual scenarios; they must account for the possibility of geographically distinct simultaneous contingencies.

Advances in technology and automation may change the type of soldier needed, but they will not supplant the need for soldiers on the battlefield.

Despite the importance of autonomous unmanned systems on the battlefield, U.S. military modernization still hinges on service members and leaders driving change, and systems for attracting this talent should similarly keep pace. Advances in technology and automation may change the type of soldier needed, but they will not supplant the need for soldiers on the battlefield. What's more, the largest portion of the defense budget is still devoted to personnel costs that continue to increase, impacting other critical spending categories. Recruiting should leverage data to better understand societal drivers underpinning the all-volunteer force; training management needs to routinely increase the feedback loop to more rapidly incorporate lessons learned from active battlefields.

Recruitment Modernization

From the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 through the late 2010s, the U.S. Army faced routine recruiting challenges but was able to largely mitigate the effects, and the service regularly met its annual fiscal year recruitment targets for active-duty enlisted personnel.⁴⁶ In 2022 and 2023, however, low eligibility rates among American youth, low unemployment rates, higher-paying salaries in the private sector, a new medical records platform that increased the need for waiver issuances, and a declining propensity to serve all combined to produce the service's two lowest accession rates since the all-volunteer force was established in 1973.⁴⁷

Seeking to arrest these trends, in 2023 the Army announced sweeping recruiting reforms across three key pillars: the recruits, the recruiters, and their recruiting methods.⁴⁸ First, it bolstered the Future Soldier Preparatory Course (FSPC), a program piloted in August 2022 that offers pre-basic training improvement plans to otherwise physically or academically unfit recruits.⁴⁹ Army leadership helped institutionalize the program while significantly expanding the scope of potential participants to include those who did not initially satisfy both academic and fitness conditions.⁵⁰ By 2024, FSPC graduates who would have been ineligible for military service before the program's introduction comprised roughly 24 percent of the Army's total accessions for the year.⁵¹ The Army further enlarged its recruiting pool by raising its enlistment age ceiling from 35 to 42 in March 2026.⁵² Confronting the increasingly complex nature of warfare and defense systems, then-Secretary Christine Wormuth and Chief of Staff General Randy George also elevated the educational and technical background that the service required by focusing on the college-educated labor market, aiming to have a third of the Army's newest soldiers possess more than a high school degree by 2028 (compared to 20 percent in 2023).⁵³

Simultaneously, U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) created a new talent acquisition workforce to better develop the Army's recruiting talent.⁵⁴ Following an extensive analysis of historical Army recruiting data, the service established new specialized enlisted and warrant officer recruiting fields to replace the existing military occupational specialty.⁵⁵ The Army also surged medical providers to military entrance processing stations to speed the enlistment process.⁵⁶ Notably, the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (USMEPCOM) is adopting artificial intelligence tools to streamline medical record review, travel, and HR processing, as well as to filter out unwaivable conditions early.⁵⁷ Lastly, the Army improved its marketing, embracing increased pay and new technologies. The Army led all services in recruiting and advertising spend in FY 2023 with over \$900 million—an over 1,383 percent increase from FY 1993 levels.⁵⁸ These reforms have generated organizational momentum, and the recruiting crisis has abated to the point of permitting the Army to tighten its Future Soldier Preparatory Course in October 2025, once again requiring potential enlistees to satisfy either the fitness or academic standards before passing into the program.⁵⁹

With its elite image and robust digital outreach, the Marine Corps has met its annual recruitment goal of roughly 25,000 to 30,000 active-duty enlisted service members every year since 1994.⁶⁰ When recruitment struggles hit the entire joint force in FY 2022, the branch cut its accession goal rather than lowering standards.⁶¹ Absent acute recruitment issues, the service has devoted its focus to retention and building a longer-serving, more experienced force.⁶² Under its Talent Management 2030 framework, the Marine Corps is deliberately shifting from a “recruit and replace” mentality

to one of “invest and retain.”⁶³ Rather than plan for attrition—particularly marines completing their first enlistment—the new strategy focuses on adaptable career paths, family support, and professional flexibility. These changes have yielded successes. In 2024, the Marine Corps achieved record-breaking retention rates, keeping 13,700 marines in the service and exceeding its first-term reenlistment goal by 114 percent.⁶⁴ In 2026, the service hit its goal less than one month into the new fiscal year.⁶⁵ The broader effectiveness of these policies, as well as more recent ones, will likely require further years and better data before definitive conclusions can be made.⁶⁶



U.S. Marines run to a firing point with an FIM-92 Stinger during a training exercise at Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, January 25, 2025.

Photo: Sgt. Jacqueline Parsons via DVIDS

Training Trends

In terms of training, the Army’s current focus on lethality continues recent efforts, exemplified by the 2018 Close Combat Lethality Task Force, as well as efforts to imbue modern battlefield lessons into regional training centers in the Pacific and Europe. In April 2026, the U.S. Army announced the implementation of the new Combat Field Test to complement the Army Fitness Test (itself a recent upgrade in measuring physical fitness), intending to align fitness standards with the demanding realities of modern warfare.⁶⁷

Despite earnest attempts to modernize training for both services, more can be done to learn from the experiences of current battlefields.

As noted, however, today's battlefield is not only about lethality. It relies on understanding how to harness technology to improve situational awareness, bringing the right capability to bear at the right moment. In this vein, policies to provide quicker feedback to industry from experimental training—such as Project Convergence, Transformation in Contact, and Jailbreak—advance modernization by helping illustrate the Army's role within the joint and multinational force. Beginning with the Capstone 5 joint exercises, Project Convergence expanded outside the contiguous United States into the Indo-Pacific theater.⁶⁸ While this represents a good step forward toward integrating the joint force and providing real feedback to industry, the next logical step is to build on such experimentation by exercising emerging technology and C2 on a large scale closer to contested environments.

In the Marine Corps, training policy has centered upon harnessing the transition to unmanned autonomous systems (UAS, or drones) through branch-wide training architecture. In February 2026, the Marine Corps' Training and Education Command (TECOM) formally scaled its drone-training effort into a standardized program built explicitly on the "every Marine a rifleman" model to also make "every Marine a drone operator."⁶⁹ In July 2026, the Marine Corps announced it had established the Marine Corps Robotics Integration Group as its service-level hub for training integration, curriculum development, and education across the seven regional hubs that were authorized to conduct the pilot courses when TECOM established the program.⁷⁰ The service aimed to have all infantry, reconnaissance battalions, and littoral combat teams across the Corps equipped to employ first-person view (FPV) attack drone capabilities by May 2026.⁷¹ Part of the integration and training includes increasing troops' proficiency with the technologies through intraservice attack drone competitions. For example, marines with the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment operated drones as part of the Marine Corps Attack Drone Competition at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in March 2026, receiving training and certifications over a two-week period.⁷²

Despite earnest attempts to modernize training for both services, more can be done to learn from the experiences of current battlefields. For instance, it is not clear that U.S. Army training institutions are integrating lessons from Ukraine into doctrine and operations sufficiently, quickly, or deeply. The practical opportunities for contact between training professionals in the United States and Ukraine have diminished due to competing priorities. For instance, the United States declined to participate in Estonia's annual Hedgehog exercise in 2025—during which Ukrainian drone operators took out an entire NATO battle group.⁷³ Fortunately, U.S. land forces did participate in the Aurora exercise earlier this spring, where Ukrainian unmanned systems once again tested NATO combat readiness.

At times of conflict, U.S. land forces have shouldered extraordinary burdens. Analysis of Army deployments during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan determined that more than a quarter of the force had been deployed to those areas for three or more years, with a total of 1.5 million troop-years.

Land forces are distinguished by their extensive exposure to the physical and human environment. Indeed, at times of conflict, U.S. land forces have shouldered extraordinary burdens. Analysis of Army deployments during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan determined that more than a quarter of the force had been deployed to those areas for three or more years, with a total of 1.5 million troop-years.⁷⁴ This is a significant departure from past conflicts. While their air and maritime counterparts face a variety of physical conditions, ground forces must be highly adapted to their local operating environments across an array of variables, including climate, geography, and culture. This creates challenges but also potential: Land forces typically serve as the joint force's foremost theater experts. U.S. land power must continue to challenge itself in real-world environments to modernize in the right direction.

Structural Budget Constraints

Any assessment of Army acquisition strategy must account for the budgetary circumstances under which acquisition takes place. While the Army is often described as an “accordion force,” able to expand and contract as strategic requirements shift, Army modernization faces two persistent constraints: topline funding and limited flexibility.⁷⁵

The Army’s FY 2026 enacted budget totals about \$195 billion, with roughly 40 percent devoted to military personnel and 35 percent devoted to operation and maintenance (O&M).⁷⁶ Procurement and research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E) account for little more than a fifth.⁷⁷ Modernization therefore depends heavily on the Army’s ability to carve out room for investment.

Army funding increased dramatically during the GWOT and significantly declined through the subsequent drawdown, funded largely by supplementary and overseas contingency operations appropriations that limited sustained readiness improvements. Since then, the Army has faced little to no real growth in its budget, limiting its purchasing power while still shouldering large personnel expenses. Personnel costs are difficult to modulate, as compensation is set by congressionally enacted policy, while end strength responds to recruiting conditions, retention needs, and strategic demands. Basic military pay rose by 4.6 percent in 2023, 5.2 percent in 2024, 4.5 to 10.5 percent in 2025, and 3.8 percent in 2026, in addition to recruiting bonuses.⁷⁸ The FY 2027 budget compounds that pressure by seeking increases in both end strength and compensation, totaling a 5.3 percent rise in requested personnel spending.⁷⁹ Additional personnel compounds costs for training, facilities, maintenance, transportation, and equipment.

Modernization depends heavily on the Army's ability to carve out room for investment.

Operations and maintenance represent roughly a third of Army spending and support the recurring costs of readiness, including training, equipment, and sustainment.⁸⁰ Over time, competing demands within the DOD, congressional funding requirements, and the financing of contingency operations have placed persistent pressure on Army operations, maintenance, and facilities funding. Such reductions here usually affect force readiness and quality of life, and commodity and fuel costs can add further pressure outside the Army's control.⁸¹ The combined share of personnel and O&M expenses means procurement and RDT&E compete within a limited portion of the budget.⁸²

The Marine Corps faces similar challenges, though its expenditures fall under the Department of the Navy; its FY 2026 enacted budget amounted to roughly \$58 billion. It maintains its own personnel, O&M, and ammunition accounts, but it has no RDT&E, aviation, or shipbuilding account of its own.⁸³ Amphibious ships and the new Medium Landing Ship are bought through the Shipbuilding and Conversion Navy account, and Marine research and development through the RDT&E Navy account.⁸⁴ Despite Marine end strength remaining constant from 2024 to 2026, personnel costs for the Marine Corps have risen from \$15.4 billion to \$17.5 billion over the same period.⁸⁵

Amid these conditions and a doctrinal realignment toward the Indo-Pacific, the Marine Corps has pursued divest-to-invest more aggressively than the Army. Under Force Design 2030, it eliminated all tank, law enforcement, and bridging units and reduced infantry battalions from 24 to 21, cannon artillery batteries from 21 to 5, and amphibious vehicle companies from six to four.⁸⁶ The Marine Corps has redirected savings toward long-range anti-ship fires, ground-based air defense, unmanned systems, and the Marine Littoral Regiments.⁸⁷ Where the Army's principal constraint is the internal composition of its own budget, the Marine Corps manages that same problem while depending on Department of the Navy prioritization for a significant share of its modernization.

Land Power Procurement Priorities

Land forces are deeply impacted by changes in warfighting and technology. But better technology does not equal better warfighting; the side that harnesses technology better to meet its objectives usually prevails. As we witness a proliferation of airborne threats, an increasingly transparent battlefield that hinders maneuver, and the expansion of long-range fire capabilities, U.S. land power must not only invest in capabilities attuned to these changes but also adapt its processes to enable production and operational deployment at increased scale.

Army Procurement Priorities

Amid evolving battlefield trends, the Army looks to take a step away from its legacy systems toward new capabilities better suited to the operational environment. The Big Five systems—M1 Abrams, UH-60 Black Hawk, PATRIOT, M2 Bradley, and AH-64 Apache—have stood as exemplars of successful Army acquisition from the Reagan defense buildup to the GWOT. Unfortunately, however, major post-Cold War modernization programs have been marred by a series of costly failures, which admittedly did produce some lessons and spin-off technologies. Most notable among these troubled programs were the Crusader artillery system, Comanche helicopter, and Future Combat System, which were canceled after the Army had spent \$2.2 billion, \$7.9 billion, and \$18.1 billion, respectively.⁸⁸ As the Army develops and produces its capabilities for the future, the lessons of the Big Five and less successful programs provide one lens to view the Army's recent acquisition history. The Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA), the M1E3 Abrams, the XM30 infantry fighting vehicle, counter-UAS and short-range air defense, next-generation command and control (NGC2), and long-range fires serve enduring and new roles, adapted to contemporary trends on the

battlefield. Whether adapted, reconstituted, or built anew, the emerging portfolio bends toward clear trends: reducing force signatures; fielding a lighter, autonomy-enabled, and more lethal force; preserving versatility; and extending the depth of the battlespace.

FLRAA is set to complement and gradually replace the UH-60 Black Hawk, optimized for greater speed, range, and industrial compatibility via its Modular Open Systems Approach.⁸⁹ To close counter-air and counter-UAS gaps, the Army is rebuilding a short-range air defense enterprise it largely divested after the Cold War: Short-Range Air Defense (SHORAD). The Stryker-based M-SHORAD—including a 50-kilowatt directed-energy variant—protects maneuvering formations, while the Integrated Fire Protection Capability defends fixed sites against rockets, cruise missiles, and UAS.⁹⁰ The C2 effort, a software and network transformation rather than a platform, replaces stovepiped systems with a data-centric, AI-enabled architecture. Long-range fires span a layered portfolio reaching progressively deeper: The Precision Strike Missile succeeds ATACMS at the lower tier; the Typhon Mid-Range Capability ground-launched SM-6 and Tomahawk missiles compose the middle tier; and the Dark Eagle hypersonic weapon holds the upper tier.⁹¹

The emerging portfolio bends toward clear trends: reducing force signatures; fielding a lighter, autonomy-enabled, and more lethal force; preserving versatility; and extending the depth of the battlespace.

Despite these new technologies, the roles these systems occupy are enduring and adaptive rather than revolutionary, highlighting the trend of adapting current technology to generate new outcomes. FLRAA, the M1E3, and the XM30 each carry forward their predecessors' core missions while shedding weight, signature, or other shortcomings, while long-range fires and C2 are better understood as expansions rather than replacements. Short-range air defense is the exception: It is less a modernization than a reconstitution of a mission the Army deliberately put aside after the Cold War and is now rebuilding under the drone threat laid bare in Ukraine. Of all these procurement efforts, it requires the most holistic joint approach.

These acquisition priorities may be functionally sound, accommodating the versatility, resilience, and expansion needed for today's land forces. However, reform and modernization of the Army acquisition corps remains a work in progress. Procurement is hampered by rather slow production rates, reflecting a defense industrial base optimized for peacetime and hindered by structural weaknesses in the Army's budget. Capacity does not meet current demands; for example, while in 1986 the Lima tank factory cited its capacity at 120 tanks per month, recent cited figures only approximate half of that number *per year*.⁹²

Marine Corps Procurement Priorities

As the U.S. Marine Corps acquisition investment expands beyond the divestment of tank and artillery assets implemented in the Force Design 2030 strategy, the Corps' acquisition attention is squarely focused on amphibious and littoral operations. These investments sometimes align and sometimes diverge from Army selections. In the ground-relevant domain, the Amphibious Combat Vehicle currently being fielded—alongside its smaller counterpart, the developmental Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV)—showcases the desire for agile wheeled vehicles with solid swimming capabilities.⁹³



U.S. Marines exit a CH-53 Super Stallion after being air-inserted during Exercise Deep Water on Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, July 29, 2020.

Photo: Cpl. Elijah Abernathy via DVIDS

For its basic logistics vehicle, the Marine Corps has partnered with the U.S. Army to procure thousands of Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs), though the abrupt early end to the Army's procurement of the vehicle suggested a lack of coordination between the services.⁹⁴ The Marines have extended the JLTV further, mounting additional weapons systems, notably the MADIS short-range air defense system and the NMESIS anti-ship missile system (the latter on an unmanned JLTV variant).⁹⁵

Though the Marines maintain a legacy fleet of AH-1W/Z Viper, UH-1Y Venom, and CH-53 heavy-lift rotorcraft, the Corps is considering an armed variant of the Army's developmental MV-75A Cheyenne II tiltrotor as a potential high-speed replacement for legacy attack and utility aircraft—itsself a design descendant of the USMC V-22 Osprey, with some notable technical changes.⁹⁶ The V-22's tilt-rotor design bridges the strengths of rotor and fixed-wing aircraft, providing speed and reach to connect ships, bases, and distributed forces—a tyranny-of-distance problem increasingly salient to the Corps' Pacific-focused amphibious and littoral missions, and one that has also shaped Army thinking on the upcoming MV-75A.⁹⁷

Land Power Acquisition Challenges

Unmanned and Autonomous Systems

Unmanned and autonomous systems present both a challenging technological development and an enormous opportunity for the side that determines their best application. With the potential expansion of battlespace in future conflict, U.S. land forces are considering unmanned ground systems in support of logistics, casualty evacuation, and combat operations. Some themes stand out. Unmanned and autonomous systems represent a technology step change in existing capabilities. Their applications facilitate intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); facilitate sustainment; and permit missions at dramatically lower operational and cost points than in past decades. Unmanned aerial vehicles have not lessened manpower needs, but they can extend individual capabilities while lessening the human costs of land conflicts, especially when used in risky logistics and evacuations. They expand the battlefield space in terms of both depth and frontage, thereby causing ripple effects across tactical formations, challenging maneuver, and exposing supply chains. Autonomy further enables these systems to operate independently in what is increasingly a highly contested electromagnetic spectrum. These inherent characteristics also demand new ways of thinking about acquisition, deployment, and sustainment, in which they differ notably from legacy manned platforms. Lastly, it is pertinent to remember that the United States is not the leader in innovation in drone warfare and relies on mimicking its adversaries or following the lead of allies such as Ukraine.⁹⁸

From an offensive standpoint, unmanned systems must not be siloed into purely tactical applications but instead also harnessed for operational and theater effects. Current offensive drone

acquisition reflects a bevy of contracts to various providers of ISR, lethal, logistics, and other drones. Importantly, spending must be destined for both hardware providers and their C2 systems—not only for tactical applications but also for overall software-driven networked C2 functions that enable the theater-level application of unmanned systems.

From a defensive standpoint, referred to as counter-UAS (C-UAS), land forces must fully transition from the self-assured mentality bred over years of air superiority and technologically inferior adversaries. This need encompasses both base defense—as demonstrated by recent conflict in the Middle East—and soldier survivability on the front lines, a challenge constantly illustrated in Ukraine. Recent losses incurred in Operation Epic Fury as a result of unmanned attacks suggest considerable gaps. Similar outcomes are evident in training environments. U.S. soldiers have struggled to effectively defend themselves when exposed to battle-tested Ukrainian drone operators during the recent Combined Resolve exercise in Germany.⁹⁹ This is driving a requirement for mobile and modular C-UAS systems, ideally intended to improve on the unfavorable air defense asymmetry and drive new shot doctrine that obviates the need for exquisite—and expensive—interceptors such as the Patriot and THAAD systems. The U.S. Army has taken a leadership role in the new Joint Interagency Task Force 401 (JIATF 401), which is the Pentagon’s new counter-small, unmanned aircraft systems task force.¹⁰⁰ Logically integrated at the joint level, JIATF 401 was created to centralize, accelerate, and coordinate U.S. C-UAS activity across the DOD and federal partners. Nevertheless, integration of piecemeal-acquired defensive systems into a layered air and ground network of sensors and effectors remains a serious challenge, as evidenced during strikes on U.S. bases during Epic Fury; it raises questions about whether air defense capabilities can be shared and optimized across all services, not just Army or Marine bases.

Effective acquisition and deployment of unmanned systems remain a challenge for U.S. land forces.

Effective acquisition and deployment of unmanned systems remain a challenge for U.S. land forces. As demonstrated during the war in Ukraine, unmanned systems often have significant utility in surveillance, sustainment, and logistical roles, while offensive drones—from small, tactical FPV systems to long-range cruise missile-like weapons—have been leveraged with devastating effects. Extensive experimentation and employment of commercial technology from new entrants will be critical to expanding the defense industrial base in this area.

Weight Versus Survivability

Weight has been a concern for land forces and their named platforms. This may have been a factor in the 2025 cancelation of the M10 Booker tank as well as in focused efforts to redesign the Abrams tank to shed considerable heft, while adding survivability systems including active protection systems.¹⁰¹ The proliferation of drones has sharply increased the vulnerability of tanks and other armored vehicles, suggesting that while armored forces remain essential for seizing and holding

terrain as part of combined-arms formations, their design, protection, tactics, and electronic warfare capabilities must evolve to adapt to persistent aerial surveillance and precision attack.¹⁰²

Weight also factors into mobility and deployability. As highlighted earlier, both the Army and the Marines are constrained in their ability to project in ways that were not manifested as recently as five years ago. Force projection must rely on “inside forces” that already reside within contested space to create freedom of action for follow-on forces, or it must depend on forces fighting their way into this contested space aboard smaller and more mobile transport. The ubiquity of unmanned technology and long-range assets that can strike at a stand-off denies the relative sanctuary of rear area operations that could permit the deliberate “time phased force deployment” of the past. As captured in a recent report, “in essence, the Army must cheat the TPFDD (time-phased force deployment data) to be relevant.”¹⁰³ And perhaps not just cheat it but think about global posture in a completely new way.



U.S. Army soldiers conduct hot load training on a CH-47 Chinook helicopter on May 12, 2026, at Vuosanka Training Area, Finland.

Photo: Sgt. Austin Berner via DVIDS

Munition Stockpiles

Munitions and interceptor requirements have continued to be a significant concern. Learning from the Ukraine conflict in 2022-2023, the United States has produced an ever-growing quantity of 155 mm artillery shells, though the 100,000 shell/month goal is yet to be achieved.¹⁰⁴ The U.S.

ground-based missile arsenal, both offensive and defensive in mission, has been particularly taxed. With some older variants sent to Ukraine, and massive use in the Middle East, U.S. stockpiles of Patriot, ATACMS, and PrSM have been deeply depleted, driving considerable policy scrutiny and acquisition demand. This has resulted in large procurement contracts and multiyear acquisition frameworks, but also in a call for more affordable and easily built systems.¹⁰⁵ The Army recently awarded Lockheed Martin a seven-year, undefinitized \$58.6 billion deal for Patriot PAC-3 MSE interceptors.¹⁰⁶ But despite recent investments to boost production rates to around 600 missiles per year, the overall limited capacity for these exquisite systems means it will likely take over three years for these interceptors to be fielded.¹⁰⁷ Affordability and design for manufacturability will be a significant part of the solution to these challenges, with the Army pursuing both newly designed low-cost solutions as well as encouraging existing providers to find ways to speed up production and cut costs.¹⁰⁸

Efforts across the department are also aimed at expanding the breadth of munitions available to the warfighter.¹⁰⁹ Initiatives such as the Drone Dominance Program and the Army's low-cost interceptor initiative are changing the complexion of the munitions industrial base so that half of the munitions in the FY 2027 president's budget request are less than \$600,000 per unit.¹¹⁰ Employing advanced manufacturing (3D printing), commercial off-the-shelf parts, storable liquid or simplified rocket motors, and other strategies—even at the expense of performance and capability—are additional ways to make up for the gap. Equally important is understanding the increased proliferation of ballistic missile technology and resulting risk to forces in theater. Shortages also force scrutiny on subcomponents in shorter supply that require further capacity upgrades, often illustrating supply chain shortfalls. Such shortages also extend to the basic inputs—such as tungsten—the production of which, as with many rare earths, is dominated by China.

Artificial Intelligence

Beyond just bureaucratic structure, U.S. land forces are grappling with how to harness AI for operations ranging from enterprise IT functions to edge computing on the battlefield. The Army's contracting organizations at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Detroit Arsenal, and Rock Island are testing AI prototypes under the Smart Contracting Initiative.¹¹¹ One of those applications simplifies the development of Acquisition Requirement Packages (ARP)—the collection of documents that demonstrate what the government is buying and how applicable laws and regulations are satisfied. Whether in examining a large amount of intelligence data or combing through evolving regulations and laws, AI has proven useful in shortening the time required to sift through data and produce a recommendation that is still subject to human review.

Quickening the Feedback Loop

In the realm of defense tech and land forces acquisition, Project Convergence is perhaps the most salient example of cross-domain and cross-service roles, providing immediate feedback to industry from training and exercise scenarios. Initiated in 2020 to address the burgeoning concept of Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) and led initially by the Army Futures Command, Project

Convergence has matured in a flurry of technological experimentation and integration involving the U.S. Joint Force and allies.¹¹² While this exercise does not lead to immediate procurement, it brings together land forces with their sister services and allies to capture, process, and employ data in novel ways with the goals of driving rapid decisionmaking. Importantly, this event, now in its sixth iteration and boasting 10,000 participants, brings together defense and industry stakeholders to work side-by-side in realistic training environments. This year's principal focus was on NGC2 architecture, whose mission is to unify disparate digital battle-command systems into a single cloud-native and data-centric architecture.¹¹³ While vital, the services will have to be vigilant to avoid experimentation fatigue—endless trials that lead to little or no tangible funding for the most deserving technical solutions.

DOD-Wide Acquisition Reforms

Army and Marine Corps procurements occur at a time of radical change in DOD acquisition philosophy, reflecting the realities of strategic competition. Both services have embraced acquisition reform, moving toward a more holistic view of requirements and acquisition and away from the siloed legacy program construct. At its core, the reform focuses on four acquisition imperatives: a bias for action, putting commercial solutions first, speed, and being outcome focused.¹¹⁴ Land forces' acquisition programs must thus prioritize innovation and accelerate delivery, widening their aperture to look at the fully burdened cost associated with new missions and capabilities, not just platforms. Department-wide, the focus must be on sufficiency: an outcome that does not leave land forces waiting endlessly for a perfect solution.

Both services have embraced acquisition reform, moving toward a more holistic view of requirements and acquisition and away from the siloed legacy program construct.

The introduction of the Portfolio Acquisition Executive role (PAE) is one of the most visible elements of this effort. The Army has designated six PAE organizations that reconfigure and consolidate a myriad of program-specific offices, focused on maneuver air, maneuver ground, fires, sustainment, protection from nuclear and other threats, and C2 (as well as counter-C2).¹¹⁵ The Marine Corps, always emphasizing its lean nature, has subsumed its acquisition structure into one single organization, which replaces its Program Executive Office Land Systems and incorporates programs from Marine Corps Systems Command.¹¹⁶ The Army has further established a Pathway for Innovation office to identify commercial technology, test it with soldiers, and scale successful systems.¹¹⁷

The U.S. Army has also been changing how it communicates demand—often referred to as the “demand signal”—extending from early engagement with innovators, entrepreneurs, and their private capital backers. The Pathway for Innovation and Technology is the Army's unique seventh PAE-like organization, chartered to rapidly transform technology into warfighting capability.¹¹⁸ One of its constituent organizations is FUZE, which applies a venture capital philosophy to scout out

emerging startups, academic institutions, and nontraditional performers that can bring critical capabilities to the warfighter.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

This working paper analyzes ongoing modernization efforts as a means to inform the research team’s forthcoming final report, which will focus on a series of findings and recommendations for the future of U.S. land power. All land forces need to adapt to the national and global circumstances that force their employment and shape their effectiveness. And to be effective, the Army and Marines must not only demonstrate their value on the battlefield but also fulfill their inherent role—to defend the country and to uphold the oath that every service member takes upon entering the profession.

U.S. land power faces a complex task. Its forward presence must be a survivable stabilizing force to deter, contain, and defeat adversaries when necessary. But there are limits to what the United States can do within given resources. To ensure deterrence abroad, access needs to be built and sustained abroad. To defend at home, contemporary trends demand more protection. And strength is not only demonstrated through decisive action but through the sophisticated application of being noticed.

From an organizational standpoint, the Army has a posture challenge and a tactical challenge. First, it must make some hard choices about global posture and how aggressively to forward position capabilities for “inside forces” to be physically present, deterring adversaries and preventing opportunistic moves. Of course, this depends on authorities and strategic decisions well above the Army. Secondly, while the Army understands the dilemma posed by contemporary warfare and the need for cross-domain integration, articulating operational focus for each echelon will help reduce ambiguity surrounding the need to be everywhere all at once. The allocation of capabilities at echelon, and the units that execute them, follows.

U.S. land forces will be limited if they only learn from afar—they must seek to get closer to the action to objectively learn from partners.

Both the Marines and the Army are making important steps in adapting their training for the environment, but challenges remain. An emphasis on “back to the basics” must also incorporate the novel aspects of contemporary battlefields.¹²⁰ U.S. land forces will be limited if they only learn from afar—they must seek to get closer to the action to objectively learn from partners. Keeping abreast of the latest battlefield trends increases lethality and effectiveness. These efforts must begin with a strong recruitment enterprise; while leadership has improved recruitment performance, attention to retention and demographic trends is necessary to prevent the loss of talent.

The Army and the Marines are getting closer to aligning acquisition priorities to meet operational design. Leveraging “How the Army Fights,” the Army must continue to operationalize its vision and clarify priorities at echelon.¹²¹ Initiatives such as Project Convergence cannot be exceptions; they must become the norm for providing real-time feedback to the defense industry. Additionally, some capabilities that span service specifics require higher authorities at the department level to level-set and economize—including multipurpose aviation, layered air defenses (including counter-UAS), and general-purpose utility vehicles.

Next Steps

Both the Marines and the Army have adapted and weathered change throughout their history. They are poised to do so again, but change is always challenging for highly structured institutions. The Marines have chosen their path and are modifying their structure, training, and acquisition accordingly. The Army must also make a choice and strike the right balance. “How the Army Fights” establishes an operational vision that addresses several distinct theaters of operation, with the goals of replicating the transformational impact of the Army’s AirLand Battle and the Marine Corps’ FMFM 1 in their time.¹²² Accustomed to traditionally being first among equals, it may find itself more often the supporting, not supported, service. How far should it go to provide global deterrence while fielding a force that can prevail on the battlefield?

The first working paper in this series presented a historical overview of the use of land power, current trends in warfare that most prominently affect ground forces, and the internal institutional perceptions that guide the employment of land power. It then assessed the utility and relevance of U.S. land forces as part of the joint force in the contemporary global security environment. The analysis led to five overarching characteristics of land forces that reveal both their advantages and limits. First, they establish durable control, security, and deterrence; second, the land domain remains consistently decisive across conflicts; third, land forces have proven versatile and adaptable to a range of missions; fourth, they represent a vital element of expeditionary power, functioning as an enabler for both the U.S. joint force and international partners and allies; fifth and finally, as a function of their persistence and forward-deployed presence, land forces shoulder significant human and material costs in conflict.

This second working paper examines core tenets of U.S. land forces modernization: organization, training and personnel policies, and acquisition processes and systems. The present analysis considered existing U.S. Army and Marine Corps modernization initiatives with an eye on lessons learned from the past. Organization, training, and kit should all demand a clear operating vision, which is evolving in both organizations. The Marine Corps has embarked on the Force Design process, while the Army has initiated a series of transformative concepts and projects, now articulated in *How the Army Fights*. Both services recognize the challenge presented by adversary anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies that limit U.S. military freedom of action. Land forces mitigate this challenge via “multi-domain operations,” which accelerate the integration of fires and effects across domains to permit freedom of action for the joint force and local superiority to defeat armed aggressors on the battlefield.

The upcoming final chapter of this study will look to the future of land forces. The intention is to build on the historical context and analysis of present-day trends to chart a path for the continued relevance of land forces as part of the U.S. joint force in the context of an evolving global threat landscape. This final report will synthesize findings on the strengths of U.S. soldiers and marines, underscore capabilities or resources that are insufficient for future tasks, and highlight the evolving challenges likely to confront land forces in the coming decades. It will conclude the research effort with concrete recommendations for maximizing the potential of U.S. land forces.

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