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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Marines Are Reforming to Prepare for War With China

Gen. David H. Berger seeks a more agile force.

By Tom Rogan

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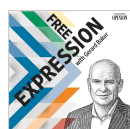
Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David H. Berger at a base in Bardufoss, Norway, March 23.

PHOTO: YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

The art of war is always evolving. Those who anticipate these changes are most likely to prevail the next time conflict arrives. But pre-emptive reforms, which are by nature untested, are often controversial. This is the problem facing Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David H. Berger's dramatic reform program. Critics, such as former Navy Secretary Jim Webb, [argue](#) that he is making a terrible mistake, but the commandant's ideas would prepare the U.S. to better face its primary enemy: China.

It's certainly true that Gen. Berger's [Force Design 2030 reforms](#) are near revolutionary. Under his plan, the Marine Corps would dramatically shrink its

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cannon artillery and helicopter forces while eliminating its tank forces. Several infantry battalions and their supporting elements would be cut. Gen. Berger admits these reforms carry risk and have sparked controversy within the Marine Corps. But the Marines have finite resources, which are organized around maintaining democratic international order and defeating the largest threat to America. In today's world, that's China.

The U.S. military anticipates combat with the People's Liberation Army has a significant likelihood of breaking out within the next 10 years given Beijing's imperial claims over Taiwan and almost the entirety of the South China Sea. America is currently not in a strong position to win in a conflict against the Chinese military. China could easily surge at least 1,000 fighter-bomber and strategic-bomber aircraft from Hainan Island and its mainland bases. Hundreds of increasingly capable ships and submarines would join them at sea. U.S. forces would often be outgunned and outmanned.

America has conducted war games to help predict what a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and U.S. conflict with China in the South China Sea would look like, and the U.S. record in these games has been damning: U.S. forces struggle to array with sufficient speed, are blinded by Chinese electronic warfare, antisatellite and long-range missile systems, and are forced into pockets of isolated resistance which are then eliminated. As Gen. Berger says in his 2030 vision, it was these war games that shaped his "conclusion that modest and incremental improvements to our existing force structure and legacy capabilities would be insufficient to overcome evolving threat capabilities."

In a war with China, which would likely be largely amphibious, the Marines would play a central and distinct role from that of the other branches. As set down in federal law, the Marines' primary mission is to provide "service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign." In the

South China Sea, this means the Marines would often operate far from other U.S. resources out of small land bases that will be easily cut off from support from U.S. military command and control, intelligence platforms, longer-range weapons systems, and combined-arms capabilities.

The PLA could throw excellent long-range antiship missiles at U.S. Navy aircraft carriers to keep their F-35 squadrons too far from the fight to make a difference. PLA warships, long-range bombers and fighters would aim to overwhelm U.S. forces in scale and in various locales. The PLA is also likely to use massive cyber and satellite attacks to blind the U.S. military and deplete Washington's resolve. As Gen. Berger explained in a February podcast, he believes the Marines will need to operate as an organic kill chain that doesn't rely on support from other U.S. military surveillance, strike, logistics and command assets.

Not every sort of materiel would be useful in that sort of fight. The helicopter squadrons Gen. Berger wants to cut are highly unlikely to be able to sustain operations against the PLA under saturated fire. The tanks and cannon artillery he'd like to dump would have next to no utility in the South China Sea and would struggle to get to Taiwan in time to make a difference. Massed infantry formations would have limited strategic effect in a fight over such small pieces of land and would drain American resources.

This is not to say it's time to abandon tanks and artillery across the military. The Army must retain those forces amid rising threats in Europe and the Korean Peninsula and for its own contribution to a defense of Taiwan. But as the Russians are learning in Ukraine, it's not enough to have good equipment if you can't deploy it, sustain it, and use it to kill the enemy before he kills you. As the Ukrainians are demonstrating, agile forces armed with potent portable weapons can deliver major battlefield gains.

That's how the Marine Corps must operate to prevail against the PLA. Gen. Berger wants small groups of Marines to be able to seize artificial island territories in the South China Sea. His plan would enable Marines to rapidly establish potent combat units on Taiwan and the Philippines. These units would deploy small-unit portable antiship, antisubmarine and antiair capabilities to deny the PLA freedom of movement, action and resupply. The Marines would then seek to protect these territories as strongholds to support the supply and forward projection of other

U.S. and allied forces as well as the collection of intelligence for targeting PLA units.

In the 1930s, two Soviet generals, Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Semyon Budyonny, pushed Stalin in different directions. Tukhachevsky believed mechanized armor had to become the Red Army's linchpin. Budyonny insisted that horse cavalry would remain key. Budyonny won, and Tukhachevsky was purged. When war with the Nazis arrived, Budyonny's forces were annihilated along with many other Red Army units. Tukhachevsky's reforms eventually prevailed and assisted the Soviet victory. But by then the suffering of the Soviet people had been immense.

Gen. Berger's reforms seek to avoid that experience. Let's hope his fellow service chiefs find the courage to heed their colleague's example.

Mr. Rogan is a national-security writer for the Washington Examiner.

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