# Marine Corps Phase Zero Capabilities: Transforming the Corps to Meet a Volatile Future Security Environment

## Abstract

The pursuit of United States national interests will continue to be shaped by politics and economics. In this context, strong efforts will be made to avoid large scale military deployments as recently illustrated by Iraq and Afghanistan. An increased focus on phase zero operations geared toward preventing crisis will be required in order to meet strategic guidance based on the future security environment. The Marine Corps should therefore strengthen its phase zero operations capabilities by transforming existing force structure in order to overcome future challenges. In order to maximize its potential for phase zero operations, the Marine Corps should divide its operational forces into two separate entities; a larger force geared towards its traditional amphibious and conventional warfare capabilities and a smaller but significant sized force geared toward phase zero operations.

## Subject Terms

Phase zero operations; Security Cooperation

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. REPORT</th>
<th>b. ABSTRACT</th>
<th>c. THIS PAGE</th>
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FUTURE WAR PAPER

Marine Corps Phase Zero Capabilities: Transforming the Corps to meet a Volatile Future Security Environment

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED WARFIGHTING OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT
Executive Summary

Title: Marine Corps Phase Zero Capabilities: Transforming the Corps to meet a Volatile Future Security Environment

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Thesis: The Marine Corps should strengthen its phase zero operations capabilities by transforming existing force structure in order to overcome future challenges.

Discussion: The pursuit of United States national interests will continue to be shaped by politics and economics. In this context, strong efforts will be made to avoid large scale military deployments as recently illustrated by Iraq and Afghanistan. An increased focus on phase zero operations geared toward preventing crisis will be required in order to meet strategic guidance based on the future security environment. The Marine Corps’ expeditionary character makes it a strong candidate to perform these types of operations. The Marine Corps should therefore strengthen its phase zero operations capabilities by transforming existing force structure in order to overcome future challenges. In order to maximize its potential for phase zero operations, the Marine Corps should divide its operational forces into two separate entities; a larger force geared towards its traditional amphibious and conventional warfare capabilities and a smaller but significant sized force geared toward phase zero operations. This smaller force should provide a robust security cooperation capability for combatant commanders and incorporate interagency expertise to facilitate broader engagement activities.

In order to maximize its potential and meet the Geographic Combatant Commands’ engagement demand signal for phase zero operations, the Marine Corps needs to transform its structure. The Marine Corps should stand up two engagement brigades from existing force structure on the west and east coasts geared towards phase zero operations each built around a Marine regiment, which would directly report to Marine Forces Pacific Command and Marine Forces Command respectively. These organizations should be regionally focused and possess the capabilities only now available at the service level that reside in MCIOC, MCSCG, and CAOCL among others.

The Marine engagement brigades should take responsibility for all Marine Corps security cooperation endeavors. Each brigade should incorporate limited combat support capabilities such as combat engineers, tanks, artillery, and amphibious assault vehicles to facilitate combined arms training and survivability in uncertain environments. The brigade structure should resemble an Army brigade combat team more than a MAGTF, but should incorporate a composite squadron to facilitate combined arms training, transportation, and training for partner nation air forces. It should also include a combat logistics battalion for not only logistics support, but for training partner nation militaries in ground logistics concepts and procedures.

The Marine Corps would only make a minor conventional sacrifice in establishing two engagement brigades geared towards phase zero operations. Based on the demand signal, the Marine Corps must provide more desirable forces to global combatant commanders to meet the challenges of the future security environment. This will secure its utility for the future, but more importantly it will safeguard national security and protect national interests in a volatile future security environment.
The pursuit of United States national interests will continue to be shaped by politics and economics. In this context, strong efforts will be made to avoid large scale military deployments as recently illustrated by Iraq and Afghanistan. An increased focus on phase zero operations geared toward preventing crisis will be required in order to meet strategic guidance based on the future security environment. The Marine Corps’ expeditionary character makes it a strong candidate to perform these types of operations. The Marine Corps should therefore strengthen its phase zero operations capabilities by transforming existing force structure in order to overcome future challenges. In order to maximize its potential for phase zero operations, the Marine Corps should divide its operational forces into two separate entities; a larger force geared towards its traditional amphibious and conventional warfare capabilities and a smaller but significant sized force geared toward phase zero operations. This smaller force should provide a robust security cooperation capability for combatant commanders and incorporate interagency expertise to facilitate broader engagement activities.

The 2010 National Security Strategy identifies four enduring national interests, which should be pursued through a strategic approach. The fourth enduring national interest is an international order advanced by United States leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges. This national interest has substantial implications for the types of forces that Marine Component Commanders will be required to provide to their respective Combatant Commanders over the next 15 years. The force composition and availability of these forces will help shape Theater Engagement Plans among other initiatives, which are instrumental in pursuing this enduring national interest.
Global trends point towards a future that reveals United States interests threatened throughout the globe. Security experts contend that ongoing trends will cause the international system to experience profound changes over the next 15 years, which have implications on the types of forces the U.S. will deploy to respond to crises. The Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University contends that:

"The large scale trends most often cited are increasing globalization; the continued rise of China and India; the quickening pace of technological innovation; the accelerating proliferation of mass disruption/destruction technologies; the growing power/capacity of non-state actors relative to nation-state; the persistence of corrosive regional, ethnic and religious conflicts, and increasing scarcity and environmental degradation."\(^1\)

While some regional trends, such as the youth bulge in the Middle East or water shortages in Africa forewarn of predictable outcomes, some events are unpredictable and can change the international system overnight. It is therefore imperative that the United States carefully exert its influence throughout regions that exhibit drivers of instability.

In light of the challenges of the future security environment, the United States is currently attempting to determine how to maintain its influence in relation to its interests throughout the globe. Economics will be the driving factor on how this is accomplished throughout the current global fiscal crisis. Difficult decisions must be made about where to deploy forces and what programs should be developed there. Every opportunity to apply economy of force in employment of the nation’s military services must be exploited.

An example of a shift in interest is the Pacific region. Statements made by the Secretary of State indicate that the Pacific region will be the main region in which the United States will exert influence over the next 15 years. Recent events such as the passing of Kim Jong Il, the launching of China’s first operational aircraft carrier, and continued cyber attacks by China
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indicate future challenges in this region. Efforts to avoid a major theater war while balancing the side effects of influencing nations on a multilateral and unilateral basis will require military efforts. In spite of heightened awareness across the globe, the Department of Defense is currently facing the threat of a downsizing effort, which although historically typical after a major war, has the potential of realizing epic proportions. Military organizations that are most capable of conducting military engagement efforts may come away the most unscathed.

Over the past several years, U.S. policy makers have resurrected the “soft power” approach reminiscent of the Clinton administration years. Despite President Bush’s pledge to remove the military from roles such as security force assistance, he increased such missions by 200 percent. President Obama has maintained the same number of non-traditional commitments throughout the globe. Once the Department of Defense has departed from Afghanistan, more forces will be available for such endeavors. This “soft power” approach has been largely centered on global military engagement in order to prevent weak states from becoming failed states, which have the potential to threaten national interests. The creation of United States Africa Command and its interagency influenced command structure reflect the United States’ commitment to such endeavors. This has required United States military forces to deploy in support of capacity building efforts.

The international military education and training budget reflects the engagement approach with an increase of 52 million dollars from 2000 to 2009. Foreign military financing has increased to 1.6 billion dollars over the same time frame. Military deployments with preventive focuses are a key to U.S. foreign policy and enhance United States national security strategy. The Department of Defense’s experiences in places such as Somalia, Haiti, and
Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrate that preventing state failure is more effective than responding to it. Fostering relationships with states with a need for military assistance such as training can pay dividends later. For example, the security relationships established with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan through training and engagement during the early 1990s paved the way for basing rights in preparation for the war in Afghanistan in 2001. This sort of shaping is the essence of phase zero operations.

In preparation for the future security environment, phase zero operations should be strengthened in order to prevent a crisis or be better positioned to respond to one. The phase zero or shaping phase refers to the first phase of the joint phasing model intended by contingency planners. Joint Publication 3-0 (JP 3-0) *Joint Operations* defines phase zero operations as “those that are designed to dissuade or deter adversaries and assure friends, as well as set conditions for the contingency plan and are generally conducted through security cooperation activities.” Joint Publication (JP 5-0) *Joint Operation Planning* expands the definition and states that “they are executed continuously with the intent to enhance international legitimacy and gain multinational cooperation in support of defined national strategic and strategic military objectives.”
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The Marine Corps is no stranger to phase zero operations and has been conducting these types of activities for decades. Its presence in the Pacific region is predicated on its ability to maintain military alliances with partners like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, The Philippines, and Australia to name a few. Large scale bi-lateral training exercises are conducted annually with each of these countries and serve multiple purposes under the guise of phase zero operations. Prior to participating in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps' forward deployed Marine Expeditionary Units were primarily deployed to conduct security cooperation efforts under the cognizance of regional combatant command theater engagement plans. These Marine formations have been a key to the United States' efforts in responding to natural disasters, which boost engagement efforts and strengthen its international reputation through strategic communications. Today's security cooperation efforts not only maintain alliances or respond to natural disasters, they help maintain regional stability and prevent domestic and external conflict. The Marine Corps' expeditionary character makes it a prime candidate to conduct such activities throughout the world. The ability to deploy to a region with a light footprint, operate, and quickly redeploy can provide Combatant Commanders and Ambassadors with the ultimate diplomatic tool.

Over the past several years, the Marine Corps has been fairly aggressive in transforming its organization to meet the challenges of the future security environment. In 2010, the Marine Corps Combat Development Command published the third edition of the Marine Corps Operating Concepts manual, with a chapter on “Engagement: Forward Presence to Prevent Crisis, Build Partnerships and Relationships, and Assure Access.” The chapter outlined a concept for being better prepared to conduct phase zero operations using Marine Corps general
purpose units. The chapter explains that the requirements to conduct these types of missions outnumber the traditional type of engagement units such as Marine Expeditionary Units. The chapter also identified gaps and proposed solutions on how the Marine Corps can better adapt to making itself a premiere tool for engagement on behalf of U.S. national security strategy.

This document clearly demonstrates that the Marine Corps recognizes the need to provide a better engagement tool for global combatant commanders. However, with looming personnel and defense budget cuts, it will be difficult to pursue these types of initiatives and maintain a force prepared to conduct large scale combat operations against adversaries such as Iran or North Korea. The 2010 Marine Operating Concepts Manual defines the problem as follows:

"The challenge is to engage globally distributed, mission-tailored forces across a wide range of missions that promote stability, prevent crises and combat terrorism; while maintaining the capability to regionally concentrate credible combat power to protect U.S. vital interests, assure friends, and deter and dissuade potential adversaries. Forward forces and forces surged from the United States, along with those of allies and partners, must be sufficiently ready and interoperable to respond effectively across a broad spectrum of crises."

The 2010 Marine Operating Concepts manual points out that requests for Marine Corps engagement units outnumber available forces to fulfill requests from global combatant commanders. The Marine Corps is currently exploring alternatives to traditional phase zero operations to increase its capacity to perform such missions to meet the global combatant command's needs. The Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Security Cooperation is the most widely known example of how the Marine Corps is scaling and tailoring forces to meet those needs. These Marine Air Ground Task Forces are generally designed to train other nations' security forces including police in small unit tactics, marksmanship, combined arms, leadership, equipment maintenance, intelligence cycle, manpower management, and communications. They also assist partner nations in forming new
security forces, assist in improving local infrastructure and integrate with DOS and/or USAID to
ensure a long-term regional approach to assistance.\textsuperscript{10} This criterion fits the Marine Corps’ vision
and strategy for 2025 that requires the Marine Corps to develop and hone the enduring core
competency of persistent naval engagement that is grounded in shaping the operational
environment and contributing to the prevention of conflict.\textsuperscript{11}

In his 2010 Commandant’s planning guidance, General James F. Amos stated that:

“Engagement activities seek to improve the capability of local governments and their
security forces to increase stability and prevent conflict. This requires Marines who are
not only fighters, but also trainers, mentors and advisors-roles requiring unique and
highly-desirable skills. Through forward engagement, we can prevent a situation from
degrading to a point where it threatens our national interests.”\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Security Cooperation, the Marine
Corps is pursuing complementary efforts in the engagement and conflict prevention arena. The 2010 Marine Operating Concepts manual states that the Marine Corps is examining several
initiatives to increase its capacity to engage and prevent crisis. These include increasing
employability and availability of Marines aboard ships other than amphibious platforms,
regionalizing Marine forces to increase understanding, blending general purpose forces with
specialized capabilities to enhance engagement activities, and developing engagement enabling
capabilities to expand the options for Geographic Combatant Commands’ engagement and
security force assistance requirements.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus far, the Marine Corps’ approach to transformation in meeting the challenges of the
future security environment has been positive, but conversely it has been a “have your cake and
eat it too” approach. The buzzword used by Marine Corps leadership highlighting this approach
is the “middle-weight” force, which is light enough to get there quickly, but heavy enough to
carry the day. Unfortunately, this approach creates Marine forces that become a “jack of all
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trades, but master of nothing.” Using Marine general purpose forces, temporarily reinforced by organizations such as the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group (MCSCG), Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA), and Marine Corps Information Operations Center (MCIOC) are essential to military engagement efforts; however, this does not maximize the Marine Corps’ potential for such operations nor does it give global combatant commanders’ a precision tool for phase zero operations.

In order to maximize its potential and meet the Geographic Combatant Commands’ engagement demand signal for phase zero operations, the Marine Corps needs to transform its structure. The Marine Corps should stand up two engagement brigades from existing force structure on the west and east coasts geared towards phase zero operations each built around a Marine regiment, which would directly report to Marine Forces Pacific Command and Marine Forces Command respectively. These organizations should be regionally focused and possess the capabilities only now available at the service level that reside in MCIOC, MCSCG, and CAOCL among others. The brigades should incorporate interagency positions within the structure to provide direct links to country teams in the respective regions to foster a unified effort in cooperative security and stability missions.

The Marine engagement brigades should take over responsibility for all Marine Corps security cooperation endeavors and replace the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group. Each brigade should incorporate limited combat support capabilities such as combat engineers, tanks, artillery, and amphibious assault vehicles to facilitate combined arms training and survivability in uncertain environments. The brigade structure should resemble an Army brigade combat team more than a MAGTF, but should incorporate a composite squadron to facilitate combined arms training, transportation, and training for partner nation air forces. It should also include a combat
logistics battalion for not only logistics support, but for training partner nation militaries in ground logistics concepts and procedures.

Proposed Marine Engagement Brigade

The Marine engagement brigades should be scalable in order to distribute company size forces or smaller throughout the geographic combatant command's areas of responsibility and
large enough to take overall responsibility for a joint task force in support of a training mission or humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operation. The engagement brigades should field all forces assigned to Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces-Security Cooperation. The brigades should employ forces aboard non-traditional maritime platforms including Coast Guard vessels and littoral combat ships that already deploy to strategic areas of a geographic combatant commander's area of operation. The brigades should be able to augment Marine Expeditionary Units with specific training packages for deployments. They should take over responsibility for the training and employment of expeditionary mobile training teams in support of expeditionary operations. These capabilities would give a combatant commander the flexibility in providing task organized forces for phase zero operations. A permanent standing phase zero organization would allow the Marine Corps to become the service of choice for such operations. It would also allow the Marine Expeditionary Forces to focus on developing its conventional and amphibious capabilities.

There are obvious implications for I and II Marine Expeditionary Force’ force structures and capabilities. To stand up one Marine engagement brigade from the existing force structure within a Marine Expeditionary Force would require the removal of a significant portion of existing combat power or force structure. I and II Marine Expeditionary Forces would ultimately resemble III MEF in that its headquarters and major subordinate commands would be comprised of smaller sized forces. The engagement brigade and its respective Marine Expeditionary Force could potentially compete for resources. Marine Corps Forces Pacific and Marine Corps Forces Command would need to be clear in delineating responsibilities for habitual phase zero missions and slicing organizational and equipment tables. Despite the competition, the focuses would be different but complementary. The Marine Expeditionary Forces could solely focus on deploying
against present and emerging conventional threats while the engagement brigades focus on phase zero operations.

The highlighted implications to the Marine Expeditionary Forces could be overcome to a degree. In the event of a major theater war, the engagement brigade should be able to quickly disaggregate and become absorbed into a Marine Expeditionary Force. An operation of this magnitude may instead dictate a change of operational control from its respective component command to its respective Marine Expeditionary Force. Although its focus on phase zero operations would limit the engagement brigade’s warfighting ability, it could act in a maneuver role if necessary. Its experience in phase zero operations would also make it a force multiplier in the stabilization phase of a campaign. The negative implications of reducing the Marine Expeditionary Force’s warfighting ability are not entirely founded.

The implications are not limited to the Marine Corps. The various Operational Plans to which each Marine Expeditionary Force is tied would potentially require significant updates. These changes may require Army formations to assume maneuver roles under the command of the ground combat element, which carries a new set of problems. It could also limit the role of the Marine Corps in various Operational Plans from a Marine Expeditionary Force to a Marine Expeditionary Brigade. There is, however, a payoff at the theater level. This sacrifice would enable a theater commander to employ a Marine engagement brigade with a significant capability during a stabilization phase of a campaign or to backfill high priority multilateral training exercises.

Similar proposals have been previously made by soldiers who called for the need to stand up a peace-keeping brigade within the Army after its eastern European deployments in the Balkans. Such a brigade would have capitalized on peace keeping lessons from Bosnia and
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Kosovo and provided a precision tool for the National Command Authority. The Marine Corps is no stranger to quickly altering its force structure in anticipation of future challenges. After the attacks of September 11, the Marine Corps stood up an Anti-Terrorism Brigade focused on preparing for anti-terrorism missions. Arguably, the formation of this unit was a knee-jerk reaction to the 9/11 attacks and anticipated a much stronger demand signal than realized and therefore disbanded. In the case of phase zero operations, the demand signal continues to grow stronger.

A transformation of this magnitude would undergo scrutiny among many military and civilian stakeholder circles. These include current and former influential Marine leaders, the joint community, sister services, think tanks, and civilian policy makers. This concept would require development with associated assessments and would need to prove its utility in a rapid manner in order to survive. The Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Security Cooperation could be a stepping stone towards a permanent standing engagement brigade. The United States' recent renewed commitment towards the Pacific region provides a great opportunity for the Marine Corps to test this concept. Once the war in Afghanistan has wound down over the next several years, the Marine Corps could build this structure around an infantry regiment from First Marine Division such as the Fifth or Seventh Marines.

Marine Corps Forces Pacific Command could then begin to source registered phase zero requirements through the global force management system and assign them to the brigade for action. The brigade would possess the capability to provide the Pacific Command with numerous scalable options from small detachments to multiple tailored special purpose Marine air ground task forces, designed to integrate with Department of State cooperative security missions for specific countries or humanitarian and civil military operations initiatives. These
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types of missions would bolster U.S. strategic communications efforts and build partner capacity and undermine drivers of instability for allied nations. The 2008 establishment of AFRICOM provides a similar opportunity for an east coast brigade.

In the early part of the 20th Century, the Marine Corps’ expeditionary character made it an effective tool used by policy makers to protect the country’s national interests. While the bulk of the U.S. Army deployed to Europe in support of the allies, the Marine Corps was training gendarmes in the Caribbean. Yet, in spite of its cooperative security efforts in Latin America, it also augmented the Army in Europe with an expeditionary force that carved out a reputation for successfully conducting large scale conventional operations.

The Marine Corps was never intended to become a conventional force capable of large scale military operations. However, it has continuously proven its utility and remains a viable option to conduct large scale conventional operations. This doesn’t need to change, however the size of the forces it deploys for such operations can be scaled back. This is the conventional sacrifice that would be made by the Marine Corps if it were to stand up two engagement brigades geared towards phase zero operations. Based on the demand signal, the Marine Corps must provide more desirable forces to global combatant commanders to meet the challenges of the future security environment. This will secure its utility for the future, but more importantly it will safeguard national security and protect national interests in a volatile future security environment.
Endnotes


Bibliography


