INTRODUCTION

The new Navy-Marine Corps leadership team (with the appointments of both a new Chief of Naval Operations and Commandant of the Marine Corps in recent months) are pushing a more integrated and sustainable force design and structure than ever before. Under the leadership of Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer, it is clear that a fully integrated naval force is at the forefront of all discussion, plans and driving policies regarding resources. With this in mind, the Navy League’s Maritime Policy document drafted over the course of 2018 for the beginning of the 116th Congress requires a brief addendum. In June a change of command brought in the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. David Berger, followed in September by the 32nd Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday. While the guidance used to design force planning and structure around the “Great Power Competition” was laid out in the National Defense Strategy and the new Commandant’s Planning Guidance, the upcoming Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment due in December 2019, will further elaborate what that means for congressional authorizers and appropriators. While the Marine Corps has its planning guidance for the foreseeable future laid down in print, Navy fleet force planning is fluid as leadership designs their future capability requirements. For now, the Navy leadership says what is not in flux is the requirement that the future integrated naval force grow, and be more modern, networked, talented and ready.

WHAT’S DIFFERENT: FORCE DESIGN

Since the end of the Cold War, America’s naval forces have focused on power projection with no peer competitor to worry about. In the last decade with the rise of the Great Power Competition and near-peer competitors, Navy-Marine Corps planners are shifting to think about sea control and denial. We now have potential existential and pacing threats to force the change. Centered around the Navy’s Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) concept, the Navy and Marine Corps team will no longer build forces concentrated around large capital ships and operating as separate forces.

Though the Navy hasn’t backed off the number 355 — the number of ships in the 2016 Force Structure Assessment (FSA) made law by the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act — over the last year, the focus has shifted to the capability of the ships in the fleet rather than the number. What is undeniable however is that, whatever the number is, the type of ships the Navy wants to buy will change and the readiness of ships in the fleet must increase. The new Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment may call for a slightly smaller manned force structure but will likely be backfilled with large number of medium and large unmanned surface vehicles (USVs). A 355-ship Navy is an important aspirational goal, “But more important is ensuring that we have the maximum capability to address every challenge we’re going to be facing” according to Secretary Spencer. But Navy leadership has repeated for the last several years the fleet is not simply about its platforms, but its people. Following turmoil in the surface warfare community, the Navy implemented the Ready Relevant Learning program to modernize the service’s Professional Military Education efforts and minted a Chief Learning Officer. These education initiatives are just part of what will have to be a focus on retention as all the services face a “war for talent.”

General Berger argues that “we need the [Marine Corps] to remain inside the surveillance range, inside the weapons range, of an adversary — inside that envelope.” This is only possible with a force that is lighter, smaller, more portable and “attributable” with new command and control ideas and
systems that are hardened against electronic attack. Though the changes detailed in the Commandant’s Planning Guidance are significant, the Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concepts from the 2016 Marine Operating Concepts (MOC) produced by 37th Commandant Gen. Robert Neller provided a foundation for future force planning design. The main departure from conventional wisdom is the dropping of future reference to the two Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2.0 MEB) and 38-ship amphibious shipbuilding requirement included in the 2016 FSA. Additionally, since the Amphibious Ready Group–Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG–MEU) construct is primarily for support missions and not a warfighting construct, it will not be a focus of future force planning. The Corps may even reduce the end strength in order to reorient funds for modernization, including unmanned vehicles and other systems to provide sea denial for the naval force.

These plans will still require buying more ships, but as Marine Corps planners have been clear big-deck amphibious ships are more vulnerable inside an enemy’s weapons engagement zone where Marines want to be prepared to fight. Keeping with the theme of smaller, lighter and more attritable, the services will need to buy more small, affordable unmanned ships and vehicles.

CONCLUSION

Many of the assumptions for the future force laid out in the Navy and Marine Corps sections of our 2019–2020 Maritime Policy remain relevant — the need for resilient command and control, electronic capabilities, long-range precision fires, air defense and enhanced maneuverability. However, the basis for force planning has undeniably shifted. This sharpening and cementing of a new direction will require congressional buy-in to help the Navy–Marine Corps team alter and shrink major programs where needed as well as assist with the divestment of legacy platforms and programs. When it comes to the effectiveness of our naval forces, parochial interests must take a back seat to preparing for the future fight in which American dominance is not assured.

The Navy League Recommends: supporting the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps use of experimentation and focus on force design to achieve a more Integrated Naval Force. The Navy League also supports the aspirational goal of a 355-ship fleet, while acknowledging the fleet of the future will change in mix of manned and unmanned platforms, and adapt to supporting more distributed operations to take back the initiative in a great power competition.