



Force Design and U.S. Southern Command

Testing the Viability of Stand-in Forces Outside the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract: The introduction of the U.S. Marine Corps' Force Design in 2020 presented new concepts and a dramatic force restructuring, orienting the Service away from the operations and battles it had fought during the previous two decades. These changes, focused on the Indo-Pacific region and a peer adversary, were criticized, in part, for a perceived lack of global applicability. This article summarizes research meant to address these criticisms through deliberate qualitative analysis. The conclusions include proposed changes to the Force Design concept and a proposed analytic technique that can be leveraged to help analyze other concepts and strategies.

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Keywords: Force Design, stand-in forces, SIF, Marine Forces Reserve, MARFORRES, Marine Forces South, MARFORSOUTH, U.S. Southern Command, USSOUTHCOM, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, USINDOPACOM, SWOT analysis, security cooperation, expeditionary advanced base operations, EABO, Marine Corps Task List, MCTL

Introduction

As many U.S. Marines recall, the initial publication of *Force Design 2030* (now Force Design) in March 2020 was met with a startling amount of criticism.¹ As new documents and concepts continued to be released, the criticisms seemed to grow substantially. Although the debate appeared quite divisive, it also presented an opportunity for research and analytic evaluation. This article summarizes one such research effort performed during a thesis program at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.² The desired outcome was to advance a new Marine Corps theory while also threading together a fresh perspective on the concepts at hand. The topic selected from Force Design was *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* (SIF).³ This concept was then evaluated using a business planning tool while incorporating Marine Forces Reserve (MARFORRES) capabilities and requirements from outside the Indo-Pacific region. Below is an excerpt from the original problem statement that is meant to help conceptualize the thesis of this article:

This study is meant to evaluate possible shortcomings of a region-specific focus on Marine Corps formations and concepts while evaluating their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to security cooperation missions in the Western Hemisphere. Although

both [U.S. Southern Command] and [U.S. Indo-Pacific Command] describe actions by the same threats, the character and nature of those threats are different. Similarities between adversaries but differences in threats may present gaps in preparedness for conflict. The regional focus may also present risks to Marine Corps missions, which drove this study. Complementing the analysis of regional requirements for [Force Design] concepts was an evaluation of how these same concepts can benefit a security cooperation mission in the Western Hemisphere.⁴

The exploration of this problem statement provided clear results for the greater community's consumption: that *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* is best viewed as a menu of activities, not a doctrinal formation; that updates to *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* and the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* will better align each to the tenets of Force Design; and that updates to *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* will improve its global applicability.⁵ These results were validated by subsequent revisions to the *Marine Corps Task List*, published after the original thesis, which track the conclusions and recommendations outlined in this article.⁶ What follows represents a personal effort to help leaders better configure their forces to face adversaries across the globe.

Criticisms of Force Design, Marine Forces Reserve, and U.S. Southern Command

Since March 2020, the Marine Corps has released 10 documents under Force Design.⁷ Each document proposes distinct changes from past policies,

concepts, and structures. However, it was the initial publication, *Force Design 2030*, that drew much of the original criticism. In this document, divestments were announced, which included Reserve and active-duty infantry battalions, cannon artillery batteries, heavy and light attack helicopter squadrons, and the attention-grabbing complete divestment of tank companies.⁸

These changes brought a substantial number of criticisms, many from former Marine Corps leaders who openly questioned a perceived reduction in “combined arms flexibility” while adopting capabilities provided by other U.S. military Services.⁹ Additional criticisms focused on the emphasis of a single region: the Indo-Pacific theater, or the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). One article published in a national security journal opined about the likelihood of predicting the location of the next conflict. This article offered that it is more likely that the Marine Corps will face many smaller crises outside USINDOPACOM that will have no relation to Force Design concepts.¹⁰ The aggregate of criticisms was interpreted by this research to focus on two topics: that Force Design is a departure from traditional doctrine and that its concepts are not applicable across the globe.

To address these criticisms, this research required a focused group of topics that would incorporate Force Design concepts and a distinct operating environment. The U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) region was selected due its differences in resources and environmental factors relative to USINDOPACOM. USSOUTHCOM also retains one of the most important pieces of key terrain across the globe: the Panama Canal.

The selection of USSOUTHCOM as an operating environment created an impetus for the evaluation of MARFORRES capabilities, as in recent years the Reserve has become more closely tied to missions in USSOUTHCOM due

to the commander of MARFORRES now also commanding U.S. Marine Forces, South (MARFORSOUTH).¹¹ With USSOUTHCOM selected as the operating environment, the research then turned to selection of a Force Design concept.

A Concept for Stand-in Forces was chosen due to its perception as a departure from previous Marine Corps concepts. SIF, with its new theory for forward-deployed forces, contains individual functions that are viewed as helping to facilitate systematic analysis.¹² Factors related to security cooperation were also included in the analysis due to the prevalence of these missions in the USSOUTHCOM region. The incorporation of Force Design criticisms, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, and factors specific to USSOUTHCOM framed this article's problem statement. Based on that problem statement, the below research questions were developed.

Primary research question: What factors demonstrate how *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* can be integrated into Marine Corps security cooperation missions in Panama when evaluated based on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats?¹³

Secondary research question: What are the key components and capabilities that MARFORRES can provide to support MARFORSOUTH conducting SIF missions in Panama?¹⁴

In his closing comments in the initial *Force Design 2030* document, General David H. Berger, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, stated, "We have much more work to do to ensure our recommendations rest upon solid analytical foundation."¹⁵ The problem statement and research questions

listed above serve as the beginnings of this project's analytical foundation. Prior to a review of the findings, conclusions and recommendations, this article will provide a brief background on the sourced literature and analytic methodology.

The Literature and a Methodology for Analysis of Concepts

The research's methodology sought to provide a simple approach to defining what may be good or bad about the concept of SIF. As stated previously, SIF was selected because the nine functions listed in *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* were perceived to facilitate analysis.¹⁶ The research then broke each function into component tasks or actions. Each component was evaluated within the context of "measures of performance," as defined by *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0.¹⁷ Consequently, SIF components were evaluated in the same way that an operation would evaluate specific tasks via its measures of performance. The table below represents the nine SIF functions with their components.

Table 1. Nine SIF functions with components

Functions	Components		
Persistent presence	Gain and maintain contact with adversary	Achieve a forward persistent presence	Provide timely support to sea denial
Win maritime reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance battle	Supportable by all elements of the force	Conduct reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance via all-domain maneuver	
Deter, detect, expose, counter nonlethal and malign activities	Enable friendly forces actions in the operating environment	Conduct maneuver in the information domain and via the electromagnetic spectrum	
Deny enemy freedom of action at sea	Conduct sea denial		
Set conditions for introduction of naval/joint forces	Gain and maintain custody of high-value targets		Disrupt adversary intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting
Enable allies and partners with complementary capabilities	Enhancing partner capabilities with complementary capabilities		
Survivability	Light footprint	Train/prepare Marines to perform multiple tasks	Signature management
Deception	Employ military deception to obscure SIF activities and support counter-reconnaissance activities		
Sustainment	Avoidance	Redundancy	

Source: courtesy of the author.

A SWOT analysis (evaluating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) was selected due to its simplicity in analyzing current and future operations.¹⁸ The business and management consultant Albert S. Humphrey distilled SWOT into two questions: “What [is] good and bad about the operation?” and “What is good and bad about the present and future?”¹⁹ The SWOT analysis was perceived to provide a straightforward approach to analyze whether or not each function of SIF could be tied to a doctrinal

concept and/or a requirement of the operational environment. This method links directly to the criticisms of *Force Design 2030*.

Analysis was made based on qualitative determinations: current strengths were SIF functions that were connected to a requirement of the operational environment and to doctrine; current weaknesses did not demonstrate strong connections to the operational environment but could be connected to doctrine; future opportunities demonstrated connections to the operational environment but not to doctrine; and future threats demonstrated weak connections to both doctrine and the operational environment. The table below summarizes the rubric used for this SWOT analysis.

Table 2. SWOT analysis categories and connections

	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Doctrine	All components connected	All components connected	Not all components connected	Not all components connected
Operational environment	All components connected	Not all components connected	All components connected	Not all components connected

Source: courtesy of the author.

So far, this article has discussed the primary research question relating to *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* and Panama, and by extension USSOUTHCOM. The secondary research question pivots toward the fitment of MARFORRES within the construct of Force Design. This question was researched by first building on the findings of the initial research question and then qualitatively evaluating how current MARFORRES capabilities could accomplish the activities of the specific functions of SIF. This allowed distinctions to be made between the means of active-duty component and Reserve component forces executing

a SIF mission.²⁰ The secondary research question builds on the initial findings, not just via the discussion of SIF employment across the globe but also how the Reserve component can support the Marine Corps in this effort.

Primary Research Question Findings

Current Strengths

The SIF functions found to have met the criteria of a “current strength” included the following: maintain persistent forward presence; win the maritime reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle; enable allies and partners with complimentary capabilities; and deception. Each of these functions was evaluated to have a clear connection to specific tasks from the *Marine Corps Task List*, Joint doctrine via the *Universal Joint Task List*; and/or the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.²¹

The primary resources demonstrating the needs of the operational environment of USSOUTHCOM and Panama were the USSOUTHCOM Posture Statement to Congress from 2023 and the unclassified components of the 2020 USSOUTHCOM Campaign Plan.²² Each resource provides a description of the environment, threats, and objectives, which were qualitatively evaluated based on the description of each function of SIF within *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*.²³

Current Weaknesses

The research’s methodology contrasted a weakness versus a strength based on an absence of connections to the environment of Panama and the USSOUTHCOM region.²⁴ There were two functions of SIF found to be current weaknesses: set conditions for the introduction of naval and Joint forces; and

deny enemy freedom of action at sea.²⁵ Both functions were evaluated to have multiple connections to doctrine. However, the literature did not bear out any qualitative relationship between the components of these SIF functions and the requirements of the environment.²⁶

Future Opportunities

The SIF function of deter, detect, expose, and counter coercive behavior and other malign activities was evaluated as a future opportunity due to an absence of doctrinal connections. While *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* espouses how functions must enable friendly actions, doctrinal references focus on increasing the effectiveness of friendly actions.²⁷ It is important to note that new doctrine released after the publication of this author's original thesis now includes tasks that specifically mention enabling actions of friendly forces. This change validates the research's SWOT methodology for analyzing strategy and concepts. This update would likely cause this function of SIF to be found as a current strength.

Future Threats

A function of SIF evaluated as a future threat was assessed to have one or more of its components demonstrate no connection to doctrine or the operational environment.²⁸ The SIF functions of survivability and sustainment were found to be future threats, demonstrating that the environment of USSOUTHCOM and Panama do not have a need for either function and that all their components could not be qualitatively linked to doctrine.²⁹

The table below summarizes the findings of the primary research question.

Table 3. Findings of the primary research question

Current strengths	
Finding code	SIF function
1.a	Maintain persistent forward presence
1.b	Win the maritime reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle
1.c	Enable allies and partners with complementary capabilities
1.d	Deception
Current weaknesses	
Finding code	SIF function
2.a	Set conditions for the introduction of naval and Joint forces
2.b	Deny enemy freedom of action at sea
Future opportunities	
Finding code	SIF function
3.a	Deter, detect, expose, and counter nonlethal coercive behavior and other malign activities
Future threats	
Finding code	SIF function
4.a	Survivability
4.b	Sustainment

Source: courtesy of the author.

Secondary Research Question Findings

The research relating to the secondary research question focused on the functions of SIF found to be current strengths or future opportunities, with one exception: the function of deception.³⁰ Deception operations are doctrinally executed through information-related capabilities.³¹ The full range of information-related capabilities reside in the active-duty component of the Marine Corps.³² Therefore, the findings indicate that MARFORRES retains the capabilities to execute three of the four functions of SIF that were found to be current strengths. The table below provides a summary of the findings related to MARFORRES and the secondary research question. Greater detail concerning the references can be found in the original research.³³

Table 4. Findings related to MARFORRES and the secondary research question

Relevant function of SIF	Primary research question finding	Capabilities required by SIF	MARFORRES supporting capabilities
Maintain persistent forward presence	Current strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner operations in the littorals • Achieve and maintain a forward persistent presence • Gain and maintain contact with the adversary • Support sea denial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide security forces • Deploy tactical forces • Battlespace surveillance company • Partnered operations
Win the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle	Current strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance • Total force supporting reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance mission • Defensive cyber • All-domain operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance and sensor operations: reconnaissance battalion, battlespace surveillance company, counterintelligence/human intelligence company • Total force supporting reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance
Enable allies and partners with complementary capabilities	Current strength	Provide the ways and means to assist allies and partners to secure maritime sovereignty via complementary capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security cooperation: UNITAS maritime exercises • Train, advise, and assist foreign security forces • Security force assistance
Deter, detect, expose, and counter nonlethal coercive behavior and other malign activities	Future opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable friendly force actions • Deter, detect, expose, and counter malign activities • Maneuver in the information domain and electromagnetic spectrum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No tasks located that specified enabling Joint forces, the interagency, allies, and partners • No information operations capability observed in MARFORRES • MARFORRES capable of security cooperation and security force assistance per finding 1.c

Source: courtesy of the author.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This project culminated with specific conclusions and recommendations meant to guide planners and decision makers in their employment of SIF. Included are suggested revisions and updates to doctrine and Force Design documents that will assist this concept in its applicability outside of USINDOPACOM. These conclusions and recommendations were framed by an important question: should SIF be viewed as a doctrinal formation?³⁴

Three functions of SIF were categorized as current strengths and evaluated as applicable to capabilities within MARFORRES. Qualitative analysis also concluded that these functions are aligned with two MARFORRES lines of effort: conflict and competition.³⁵ These functions demonstrate where *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, and by extension Force Design, have a strong foundation with current doctrine and are applicable to operations outside of USINDOPACOM.³⁶ These three functions are:

1. Maintain a persistent presence forward.
2. Win the maritime reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle.
3. Enable allies and partners with complementary capabilities.³⁷

Two functions of SIF—setting conditions for the introduction of Joint/naval forces and denying the enemy freedom of action at sea—were found to be connected to Joint and Marine Corps doctrine but not a requirement of the operational environment of USOUTHCOM and Panama.³⁸ This finding provides evidence that certain functions of SIF are not applicable outside USINDOPACOM. The critical factor leading to this conclusion was the omission of including allies and partners within each of these functions. The

activity of information-sharing with allies and partners while supporting the introduction of Joint/naval forces was noticeably absent from *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, as was mention of supporting allies and partners in their efforts to deny an adversary freedom of action at sea.³⁹

The research process also noted critical differences between the descriptions of specific functions of SIF and that of doctrinal tasks and activities from two important references: the *Marine Corps Task List* and the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*. However, a new update to the *Marine Corps Task List* released after the completion of this research addressed many of the perceived disparities.⁴⁰ The central thrust of the thesis's conclusions was that certain tasks must include enabling friendly actions as a component of participation in Joint and multinational operations. This change would better align doctrine to *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*. Separately, the SIF functions of survivability and sustainment contain components not connected to the references. Survivability describes Marines performing multiple tasks across different specialties with no corresponding explanation in the *Marine Corps Task List* or the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.⁴¹ The SIF function of sustainment included a discussion of avoidance, whose description also could not be qualitatively connected to the same references.⁴²

The most important conclusion produced by the research was how to perceive *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*. Viewing this concept as a doctrinal formation will limit its global applicability. Instead, it was concluded that *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* should be viewed as a menu of activities from which planners and leaders can choose to build their forward-deployed

forces. This lens will allow for greater flexibility in the creation of SIFs for employment across different unified combatant commands.⁴³

The research's recommendations were borne out of the above conclusions. Below is a condensed listing of those recommendations:

1. Revise/update *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* to include an activity within the function of setting conditions for the introduction of forces, which relates to information-sharing with allies and partners.
2. Revise *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* to state that a SIF may support allies and partners as the ways and means of denying the enemy freedom of action at sea.
3. Revise/update *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* to be conceptualized as a menu of activities meant to guide force planners as they plan operations for their most forward-deployed forces.
4. Expand Marine Corps Task 5.5.1 to include measures or activities that facilitate the effects of Joint, interagency, and multinational forces.
5. Expand chapter 6 of the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* to elaborate on the purpose and methods of avoidance within the context of the SIF function of sustainment.
6. Revise/update the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* and/or the *Marine Corps Task List* to reflect tasks, methods, and measures of training Marines to conduct multiple duties within the context of the SIF function of survivability.⁴⁴

It is important to note that the update to the *Marine Corps Task List* in 2024 addressed the fourth recommendation listed above. Marine Corps Task 5.5—conduct Joint and multinational operations—now specifically references

enabling Joint or multinational military organizations.⁴⁵ It is because of this change that this article concludes that the SWOT methodology is a powerful tool for evaluating new concepts and strategies. The SWOT methodology created for this research can be turned to other Force Design components to facilitate continued refinement.

This article, and its source thesis, represent a personal and concerted effort to contribute to the discussion of Force Design. The results are tangible with clearly defined recommendations for concept refinement, employment of MARFORRES capabilities, and fresh analytic methods. It is this author's hope that this article will foster more discussion and concept improvement. It is this drive for improvement that will help prepare Marines to face the new and complex threats seen across the globe.

¹ Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020).

² Maj Clayton K. Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations: Evaluating New Marine Corps Concepts Applied to Security Cooperation Missions Outside of the Indo-Pacific Region" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2024).

³ Gen David H. Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2021).

⁴ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 20–22.

⁵ Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*; and LtGen Karsten S. Heckl, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023).

⁶ *Marine Corps Task List* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2025).

⁷ "Force Design," Marines.mil, accessed 12 July 2025.

⁸ Berger, *Force Design 2030*, 7.

⁹ LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, USMC (Ret), "Jeopardizing National Security: What Is Happening to Our Marine Corps?," *Marine Corps Times*, 21 March 2022.

¹⁰ John F. Schmitt, "Force Design 2030 Is Trying to Solve the Wrong Problem," *National Interest*, 13 December 2022.

¹¹ LtGen David G. Bellon, *Marine Forces Reserve Campaign Plan 2030* (Washington, DC: Marine Forces Reserve, 2021), 5.

¹² Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, 1.

¹³ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 23.

¹⁴ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 23.

¹⁵ Berger, *Force Design 2030*, 13.

¹⁶ Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, 5, 10–22.

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- ¹⁷ *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), xxix.
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- ²¹ *Marine Corps Task List; Uniform Joint Task List* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2024); and *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.
- ²² Statement of Gen Laura J. Richardson, USA, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, before the House Committee on Armed Services, 118th Cong. (8 March 2023), 13–15; and *Summary of United States Southern Command Campaign Plan 6000-20, Fiscal Years 2020–2024* (Doral, FL: U.S. Southern Command, 2020), v–vi.
- ²³ Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, 10–21.
- ²⁴ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 94.
- ²⁵ Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, 18–19, 21–22.
- ²⁶ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 94–97.
- ²⁷ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 115.
- ²⁸ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 100.
- ²⁹ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 100–4.
- ³⁰ Berger, *A Concept for Stand-in Forces*, 20.
- ³¹ *Military Deception*, JP 3-13.4 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), ix.
- ³² *Organization of the United States Marine Corps*, Marine Corps Reference Publication 1-10.1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020), 11-2.
- ³³ See Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations."
- ³⁴ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 109.
- ³⁵ Bellon, *Marine Forces Reserve Campaign Plan 2030*, 12.
- ³⁶ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 119.
- ³⁷ United States Marine Corps, *Concept of Stand-In Forces*, 10–13, 17–18.
- ³⁸ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 14, 16–17, 119.
- ³⁹ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 119.
- ⁴⁰ *Marine Corps Task List*, 418–26.
- ⁴¹ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 115–16.
- ⁴² Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 102–4.
- ⁴³ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 116.
- ⁴⁴ Anderson, "Force Design and Global Operations," 116–18.
- ⁴⁵ *Marine Corps Task List*, 438.