

## Why GAO Did This Study

DOD is emphasizing security force assistance (e.g., efforts to train, equip, and advise partner nation forces) as a distinct activity to build the capacity and capability of partner nation forces. In anticipation of its growing importance, DOD has identified the need to strengthen and institutionalize security force assistance capabilities within its general purpose forces. Accordingly, a committee report accompanying the Fiscal Year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act directed GAO to report on DOD's plans. GAO evaluated: (1) the extent to which DOD has established its concept for conducting security force assistance, including defining the term and identifying actions needed to plan for and prepare forces to execute it; (2) the extent to which the geographic combatant commands have taken steps to plan for and conduct security force assistance, and what challenges, if any, they face; and (3) what steps the services have taken to organize and train general purpose forces capable of conducting security force assistance, and what challenges, if any, they face. GAO reviewed relevant documents, and interviewed officials from combatant commands, the services, and other DOD organizations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends DOD clarify its intent for security force assistance, including how combatant commands should adjust their current planning efforts and provide a means to track activities. DOD partially concurred, stating that recent guidance addresses planning requirements. GAO continues to believe that more specific direction is needed.

View [GAO-12-556](#). For more information, contact Sharon Pickup, (202) 512-9619, [pickups@gao.gov](mailto:pickups@gao.gov).

## SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE

### Additional Actions Needed to Guide Geographic Combatant Command and Service Efforts

## What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has taken steps to establish its concept for conducting security force assistance, including broadly defining the term and identifying actions needed to plan for and prepare forces to execute these activities. For example, in October 2010, the department issued an instruction that broadly defines security force assistance and outlines responsibilities for key stakeholders, including the geographic combatant commands and military services. DOD also identified gaps in key areas of doctrine, organization, and training related to the implementation of security force assistance and tasks needed to address those gaps. The tasks include reviewing joint and service-level doctrine to incorporate security force assistance as needed and developing measures to assess progress in partner nations. Citing a need to clarify the definition of security force assistance beyond the DOD Instruction, DOD published a document referred to as a Lexicon Framework in November 2011 that included information to describe how security force assistance relates to other existing terms, such as security cooperation.

The geographic combatant commands conduct activities to build partner nation capacity and capability, but face challenges planning for and tracking security force assistance as a distinct activity. Notwithstanding DOD's efforts to present security force assistance as a distinct and potentially expansive activity and clarify its terminology, the commands lack a common understanding of security force assistance, and therefore some were unclear as to what additional actions were needed to meet DOD's intent. Specifically, officials interviewed generally viewed it as a recharacterization of some existing activities, but had different interpretations of what types of activities should be considered security force assistance. Further, some command officials stated that they were not clear as to the intent of DOD's increased focus on security force assistance and whether any related adjustments should be made in their plans and scope or level of activities. As a result, they do not currently distinguish security force assistance from other security cooperation activities in their plans. DOD intended the Lexicon Framework to provide greater clarity on the meaning of security force assistance and its relationship to security cooperation and other related terms. However, some officials said that they found the distinctions to be confusing and others believed that additional guidance was needed. GAO's prior work on key practices for successful organizational transformations states the necessity to communicate clear objectives for what is to be achieved. Without additional clarification, the geographic combatant commands will continue to lack a common understanding, which may hinder the department's ability to meet its strategic goals. Moreover, the system that the commands are directed to use to track security force assistance activities does not include a specific data field to identify those activities. The commands also face challenges planning for and executing long-term, sustained security force assistance plans within existing statutory authorities, which contain some limitations on the types of activities that can be conducted.

The services are taking steps and investing resources to organize and train general purpose forces capable of conducting security force assistance based on current requirements. For example, to conduct activities with partner nation security forces, the Army and the Air Force are aligning certain units to geographic regions, and the Marine Corps has created tailored task forces. However, the services face certain challenges. Due to a lack of clarity on how DOD's increased emphasis on security force assistance will affect future requirements, they are uncertain whether their current efforts are sufficient or whether additional capabilities will be required. Further, services face challenges in tracking personnel with security force assistance training and experience, particularly in identifying the attributes to track.