Challenges Remain in Developing Capabilities for Naval Surface Fire Support

What GAO Found

In December 2005, more than a decade after the Navy and Marine Corps began to formulate requirements, agreement was reached on the capabilities needed for naval surface fire support. However, quantifiable measures are still lacking for volume of fire—the delivery of a large quantity of munitions simultaneously or over a period of time to suppress or destroy a target. Until further quantifiable requirements are set for volume of fire, it is difficult to assess whether additional investment is necessary or the form it should take.

The Navy’s Extended Range Munition and Zumwalt class destroyer have cost more, taken longer to develop and field than anticipated, and will deliver fewer capabilities than originally promised. Largely due to technical challenges, the Extended Range Munition is expected to exceed the original cost estimate for development by 550 percent, and the Navy has delayed delivery of initial capability by 11 years. The munition’s path for development and fielding remains uncertain as key technologies and munition design have not been adequately demonstrated. The Office of the Secretary of Defense recently assumed oversight of the program, and while a comprehensive review has not yet been held, there are ongoing studies that could assist such a review. The Navy has reduced Zumwalt class land attack munitions by 50 percent and cut ship quantities from 32 to 7. The primary reason for reduced capabilities are cost pressures created by the Navy’s original concept of revolutionary performance at an unrealistically low cost. The Navy plans to begin construction of the first two ships in the Zumwalt class in fiscal year 2008.

The recent study of future fire support needs approved by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council identifies four capability gaps: command and control of fire support; engaging moving targets in poor weather; engaging targets when collateral damage is a concern; and engaging targets that require a large volume of fire. The analysis that forms the basis of the joint study contends that while the Extended Range Munition and Zumwalt class destroyer offer significant capabilities in some scenarios, they do not provide enough capability to meet all fire support needs. The Navy, through its surface warfare directorate, has begun analyzing the three engagement gaps, but the Navy has not chosen an organization to analyze the gap in command and control, which is essential for target assignment and information. Any attempts to accept the risks or invest in programs to fill remaining gaps should also involve the expeditionary warfare directorate as the Marine Corps representative. The expeditionary warfare directorate does not have a formal role in developing requirements, determining capabilities, and managing resources for systems that provide naval surface fire support.