

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-841](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

For over a decade, DOD deployed forces to support operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is now supporting increased presence in the Pacific and emerging crises in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. These deployments have significantly stressed the force.

The House Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 included a provision that GAO review DOD's efforts to rebuild military readiness. This report (1) describes the factors that affect reported readiness levels and DOD's efforts to manage the impact of deployments on readiness, and (2) assesses DOD's implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts. This report is a public version of a previously issued classified product and omits information DOD identified as SECRET, which must be protected from public disclosure.

GAO analyzed and reviewed data on reported readiness rates and departmental readiness rebuilding efforts. GAO interviewed DOD, Joint Staff, and combatant command officials regarding current demand and readiness rates and challenges with rebuilding military readiness. GAO also conducted separate reviews of the readiness of the military services.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that DOD and the services establish comprehensive readiness goals and strategies for implementing them, as well as associated metrics that can be used to evaluate whether readiness recovery efforts are achieving intended outcomes. DOD generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-841](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov

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MILITARY READINESS

DOD's Readiness Rebuilding Efforts May Be at Risk without a Comprehensive Plan

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) recognizes that more than a decade of conflict, budget uncertainty, and force structure reductions have degraded military readiness, and the department has efforts under way to manage the impact of deployments on readiness. The military services have reported persistently low readiness levels, which they have attributed to emerging and continued demands on their forces, reduced force structure, and increased frequency and length of deployments. For example, the Air Force experienced a 58 percent decrease in the number of fighter and bomber squadrons from 1991 to 2015 while maintaining a persistent level of demand from the combatant commands for the use of its forces. In addition, the Navy has experienced an 18 percent decrease in its fleet of ships since 1998 and an increase in demand, resulting in the deployment lengths for many ships increasing from 7 months to a less sustainable 9 months. DOD officials have indicated that overall demand has been decreasing since 2013, but the department has reported that the ability to rebuild capability and capacity is hindered by continued demand for some forces. To mitigate the impact of continued deployments on readiness, the Joint Staff has focused on balancing the distribution of forces for high-priority missions with the need to rebuild the readiness of the force. Efforts include revising major plans to better reflect what the current and planned force is expected to achieve and improving the management of DOD's process for sourcing global demands by, among other things, balancing the supply of forces with the minimum required to meet global demands. However, it is too soon to tell what impact implementation of these initiatives will have on DOD's readiness recovery efforts because the department is still working to complete implementation.

DOD has stated that readiness rebuilding is a priority, but implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts have not fully included key elements of sound planning, putting the rebuilding efforts at risk. Key elements of sound planning for results-oriented outcomes include a mission statement supported by long-term goals, strategies for achieving the goals, metrics, and an evaluation plan to determine the appropriateness of the goals and effectiveness of implemented strategies. In 2014, DOD tasked the military services to develop plans for rebuilding readiness. Each service developed a plan based on the force elements that were experiencing a high pace of deployments or facing challenges in achieving readiness recovery. In 2015, the services reported their readiness rebuilding plans to DOD, which identified readiness goals and timeframes for achieving them, but these goals were incomplete and some of the timeframes have been extended. GAO found that the services have also not defined comprehensive strategies, with the resources required for achieving the identified goals, nor have they fully assessed the effect of external factors such as maintenance and training on readiness rebuilding goals. Moreover, the services have not fully established metrics that the department can use to oversee readiness rebuilding efforts and evaluate progress towards achieving the identified goals. Without DOD incorporating key elements of sound planning into recovery efforts, and amid competing priorities that the department must balance, successful implementation of readiness recovery plans may be at risk.