

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD's 2018 National Defense Strategy continues the department's shift toward focusing on the challenges posed by major powers—China and Russia. The strategy concludes that DOD must pursue urgent change at a significant scale and starkly warns that failure to properly implement the strategy will rapidly result in a force that is irrelevant to the threats it will face. To implement the change DOD envisions, senior leaders must have quality information.

Senate Report 115-125 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's analytic approach for informing force structure decisions to implement the National Defense Strategy. This report assesses, among other things, whether DOD's analytic approach has provided senior leaders with the support needed. GAO reviewed DOD guidance, assessed whether DOD was meeting the objectives identified in its guidance, and interviewed agency officials. This is an unclassified version of a classified report issued in February 2019. Information that DOD deemed classified has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD (1) determine the analytic products needed and update them, (2) provide specific guidance requiring the services to explore a range of alternative approaches and force structures, and (3) establish an approach for conducting joint force structure analysis across the department. DOD concurred with the recommendations and noted the department has begun addressing them.

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DEFENSE STRATEGY

Revised Analytic Approach Needed to Support Force Structure Decision-Making

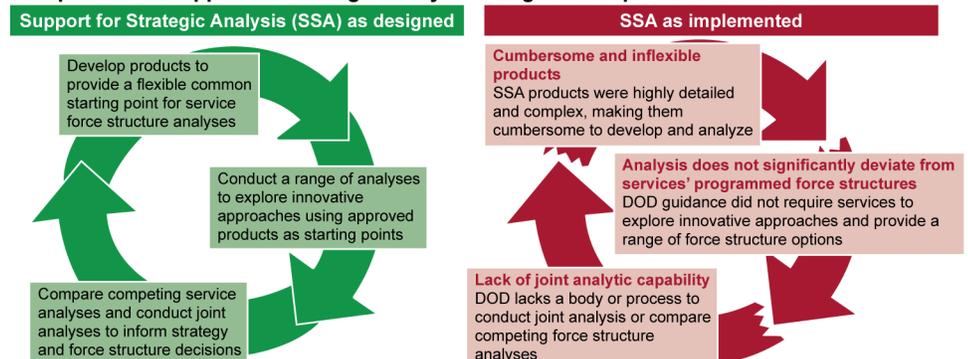
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense's (DOD) analytic approach has not provided senior leaders with the support they need to evaluate and determine the force structure necessary to implement the National Defense Strategy. DOD's analytic approach—Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA)—is used by the services to evaluate their force structure needs and develop their budgets. However, GAO found that SSA has been hindered by three interrelated challenges:

- **Products are cumbersome and inflexible.** Although DOD guidance states that SSA products are to be common starting points for analysis on plausible threats, including threats identified in strategic guidance, DOD has not kept the products complete and up to date in part because they were highly detailed and complex and therefore cumbersome to develop and analyze.
- **Analysis does not significantly deviate from services' programmed force structures or test key assumptions.** Although DOD's guidance states that SSA should facilitate a broad range of analysis exploring innovative approaches to mitigate threats identified in the strategy, the services generally have not conducted this type of analysis because guidance has not specifically required the services to do so.
- **DOD lacks joint analytic capabilities to assess force structure.** Although DOD guidance states that SSA is intended to facilitate the comparison and evaluation of competing force structure options and cross-service tradeoffs, the department has not conducted this type of analysis because it lacks a body or process to do so.

DOD efforts to revise its analytic approach are in the early stages and have not yet identified solutions to these challenges. Moreover, DOD has attempted reforms in the past without success. Without a functioning analytic process that addresses the above challenges, senior leaders do not have the analytic support they need to prioritize force structure investments that would best manage risk and address the threats outlined in the National Defense Strategy.

Comparison of Support for Strategic Analysis Design and Implementation



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) documents and interviews with officials. | GAO-19-385