

Why GAO Did This Study

Wargames are an analytic method that can provide valuable insights to complex problems and inform decisions about warfighting concepts, capabilities, and plans. DOD credits wargames with making key contributions to military planning for pivotal operations in the Pacific during World War II. In 2015, DOD began an initiative to reinvigorate wargaming in line with the strategic shift to prepare for near-peer power competition.

GAO was asked to review DOD's use of analytic wargames. This report examines: (1) the scope of DOD's wargaming activities; (2) DOD's use of internal and external wargame providers; and (3) the extent to which DOD ensures wargame quality.

GAO analyzed wargame data for fiscal years 2017 through 2021; relevant DOD guidance and documentation; and leading practices for wargame quality. GAO also observed wargames and interviewed wargaming officials from DOD and external wargame providers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 10 recommendations to DOD, including to assess the use of internal and external wargame providers; develop effective approaches for managing wargame data and sharing information about upcoming wargames; and evaluate the costs and benefits of developing standard wargaming education and qualifications. DOD concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105351](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

DEFENSE ANALYSIS

Additional Actions Could Enhance DOD's Wargaming Efforts

What GAO Found

Wargames—representations of conflict in which the game's players make decisions and respond to the consequences of those decisions—are used widely across the Department of Defense (DOD) to provide insights on challenges and to inform decisions. DOD and other wargame providers plan, conduct, and analyze wargames (see figure), and DOD uses the results in conjunction with other analytic methods like military exercises and modeling. For example, in May 2022, GAO observed a Navy contested logistics wargame that included over 200 participants from over 40 organizations across DOD as well as international partners. The Navy planned to use the results to inform logistics planning in support of a distributed naval force.

General Department of Defense (DOD) Wargaming Process



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-23-105351

A number of internal DOD organizations operate as wargame providers, and DOD also uses external wargame providers—federally funded research and development centers and contractors. The mix of wargame providers used across DOD varies and comes with advantages and disadvantages including varying capacity, timeliness, information access, expertise, and independence. However, DOD has not assessed its use of wargame providers, including the sufficiency of its internal wargaming capabilities or the risks associated with relying on external wargame providers. As such, DOD's wargaming resources may be misaligned.

GAO identified 13 common quality principles DOD organizations use to guide their wargaming. DOD has collaborative wargame forums, information systems, and some education related to wargames. However, GAO found that there are barriers to accessing wargame data, information on upcoming wargames is not shared, and the services have not developed standard education and qualifications for wargamers. Addressing these issues would enhance the effectiveness of DOD's wargaming efforts.