

Why GAO Did This Study

According to DOD, its ability to deploy military forces from the United States to a conflict area is being increasingly challenged as potential adversaries pursue capabilities designed to deny access. Access can be denied by either preventing an opposing force from entering an operational area or limiting an opposing force's freedom of action within an operational area. DOD has a joint concept that broadly describes how DOD will operate effectively in such access-denied environments. DOD's initial efforts have emphasized the roles of the Air Force and Navy.

GAO was mandated to review the role of the Army and Marine Corps in access-denied areas. This report (1) describes Army and Marine Corps efforts to address operational access challenges and (2) analyzes the extent to which DOD is able to gauge how its efforts support implementation of its concept for future operations in access-denied environments. GAO analyzed DOD, Army, and Marine Corps concepts; reports on service-level exercises; DOD policy and guidance on concept implementation; and documents specifically related to the joint concept. GAO also interviewed cognizant DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD establish specific measures and milestones in future iterations of the JOAC Implementation Plan to improve DOD's ability to gauge implementation progress. DOD agreed with the importance of assessing the plan and said it is developing measures and milestones and will continue to refine these tracking tools in the future.

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DEFENSE PLANNING

DOD Needs Specific Measures and Milestones to Gauge Progress of Preparations for Operational Access Challenges

What GAO Found

The Army and Marine Corps are undertaking multiple efforts to address operational access challenges—challenges that impede a military force's ability to enter and conduct operations in an area—that impact a broad range of their existing missions. For example, they are incorporating operational access challenges into their wargames and revising their service concepts, which inform their assessments of capability needs, gaps, and solutions. In addition, the Army and the Marine Corps have identified important roles they play in overcoming operational access challenges and are examining ways to carry them out in access-denied environments, including

- engagement activities—improving access conditions through such activities as multinational exercises, prepositioning supplies, and forward presence, and
- entry operations—deploying forces onto foreign territory to conduct missions such as eliminating land-based threats to access.

In addition, the Army has identified areas specific to its role, including

- logistics—sustaining forces despite increased vulnerabilities from access threats and challenges associated with new operational approaches, and
- missile defense—providing defense against increasingly accurate, lethal, and available ballistic and cruise missiles.

The Department of Defense (DOD) is unable to gauge the extent to which its efforts to overcome operational access challenges support the implementation of the 2012 *Joint Operational Access Concept* (JOAC). The JOAC describes how the department will operate effectively in future operating environments with access challenges and is intended to guide the development of capabilities for the joint force of 2020. The Joint Staff is leading a multiyear DOD-wide effort, initiated in June 2013, to coordinate, oversee, and assess the department's implementation of the JOAC. DOD plans to issue the first iteration of the JOAC Implementation Plan in 2014 and to assess and update the plan annually. The draft plan focuses on the highest-priority JOAC-required capabilities and identifies related actions, but does not fully establish specific measures and milestones to gauge progress. While DOD has stated its intent to assess progress in the future, its current planning lacks specific details about the measures it will employ and the milestones it will use to gauge that progress. Until DOD establishes specific measures and milestones in future iterations of its implementation plan, the department will not be able to gauge implementation progress and assess whether efforts by the joint force, to include the Army and the Marine Corps, will achieve DOD's goals in desired time frames. As a result, DOD may lack assurance that efforts, including those currently being undertaken by the Army and the Marine Corps to address areas such as engagement activities, entry operations, logistics, and expeditionary missile defense, will fully align with the JOAC.