



Military Readiness Overview

Ready or Not? U.S. Military Readiness Now and for the Future

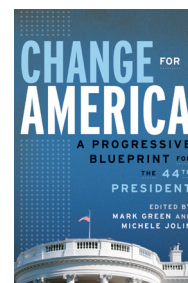
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Summary

The high tempo of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has taken a substantial toll on the U.S. military, particularly the Army and Marine Corps. Each of the three components of readiness—personnel, training, and equipment—has been under sustained stress, which is damaging the armed forces’ ability to maintain their capabilities, and prevents them from modernizing and preparing for the full range of strategic challenges that the United States will face in the coming years. The 44th president and his new administration must set a course to restore the readiness and resilience of the U.S. armed forces while increasing their agility and capabilities and broadening their aperture beyond Afghanistan and Iraq. To accomplish these goals, the new president will have to: prioritize adjusting force commitments in Iraq; reestablish a ready reserve of ground forces; fully fund force reset, modernization, and expansion; rebalance the force; reexamine the terms of service; and increase civilian agencies’ deployable operational capacity.

Introduction

The U.S. military, particularly the ground forces and special operations forces, is stretched to the breaking point from years of conducting two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Soldiers, Marines, and their families are struggling with the stress of more than six years of repeated combat tours with little time at home. The nation’s Navy and Air Force are operating on a continual basis while relying on rapidly aging ships and aircraft that are degrading faster than they are being replaced. Taken together, compressed and repeated deployment cycles, worn equipment, and stressed personnel are decreasing our armed forces’ readiness and increasing the level of strategic risk to the United States.



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The United States faces an unusually daunting set of national security challenges—the global network of violent Islamist extremists, instability in Pakistan, a hostile Iran bent on acquiring nuclear weapons, a rising China, a resurgent Russia, and a host of weak and failing states. The new president must therefore give high priority to restoring the readiness of the U.S. military for the full spectrum of possible missions. As a global power with global interests, the United States needs its armed forces to be ready to respond whenever and wherever our strategic interests are threatened.

Readiness 101

Readiness measures the degree to which a military force is prepared for and capable of conducting operational missions. In peacetime, the U.S. military prepares for a broad range of missions derived from the National Security Strategy, the National Military Strategy, and the operational plans of the regional combatant commanders. During times of war, units slated to deploy focus their preparation on the specific missions they will be tasked to undertake in the given theater of operations.

A military force does not have a high level of readiness unless it has the personnel, training, and equipment it needs to accomplish its assigned missions. It can be judged unready if, for example, a unit does not have enough deployable personnel to fill out its ranks or does not have people with the right mix of skill sets. It can also be judged unready if a unit has not successfully completed the individual and unit training required for a given mission, or if it lacks a full complement of functioning equipment. Recruiting and retaining personnel, having time and facilities available for training, and acquiring and maintaining equipment all affect a unit's ability to maintain readiness.

But readiness means more than having forces ready to deploy to ongoing operations. The U.S. military must also maintain its readiness for possible contingencies, such as a conflict in the Middle East, with North Korea, or with China. Because such contingencies may differ significantly from Afghanistan or Iraq, maintaining the readiness of the U.S. military writ large is a balancing act between the demands of ongoing operations and the possible requirements of other missions that may arise. The services must therefore ensure that their forces train and equip for a broad array of potential missions—something the Army calls “readiness for the full-spectrum of operations.”

Successfully maintaining this balance between readiness for current operations and readiness for possible contingencies is important because it buys the United States critical insurance against emerging threats to our national security. A ready force gives the United States the flexibility to respond rapidly to a variety of scenarios, and can help build trust among partner nations, as evidenced by programs such as the NATO-led Partnership for Peace. Ready and available forces may also enable us to deter potential adversaries from taking aggressive action against U.S. interests and allies.

Conversely, failure to maintain an adequate reserve of ready forces can expose the United States to tactical, operational, and strategic risks. These risks include being unable to respond rapidly or with enough forces to safeguard U.S. interests in a crisis, performing poorly in operations, and accepting increased risk in terms of the time, effort, and costs required to achieve U.S. objectives. When the U.S. military’s “readiness is being consumed as fast as we can build it,” as General George W. Casey, Jr. has described the current state of our armed forces, its ability to respond to future contingencies decreases and strategic risk to the nation increases over time.¹

The sustained high tempo of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan will have long-reaching effects on military preparedness. These two conflicts have affected critical facets of the American military’s long-term health and capabilities, including the recruitment and retention of high quality personnel for the All-Volunteer Force, and the reset and modernization of equipment essential to ensuring that the force has the mix of capabilities it needs for the future.

Challenges to readiness today

Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have taken a substantial toll on the U.S. military. Each of the three components of readiness—personnel, training, and equipment—has been under sustained pressure over the past several years due to relentless operational demands. Such stress affects each element of the force uniquely, and puts the military as a whole under increasing strain.

Stress on personnel

The duration and intensity of current operations, along with an increasingly challenging recruiting environment, put unprecedented strains on U.S. military personnel, especially the ground forces. Multiple, back-to-back deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, with shorter “dwell” times at home and longer times away mean that Army and Marine Corps personnel are spending more time deployed than either they or their respective services planned. The deployment of Army forces on 15-month tours with only 12 months at home in between are particularly hard on soldiers and their families. At the same time, the Navy and the Air Force are providing so-called nonstandard forces for certain high-demand tasks such as training and advising Iraqi security personnel. This practice is disrupting these services’ own training cycles and the supply of senior leaders.

According to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen, today’s operational tempos are not sustainable at current force levels.² President Bush ordered the Army to return to a one-to-one ratio between time deployed and time at home in the short term, but getting to a more sustainable one-to-two ratio in the mid- to long-term

would require either a substantial increase in troop supply, a substantial decrease in troop demand, or some combination of both.

The Army and Marines have turned to the Navy and Air Force to try to relieve some of their troop shortages by augmenting the ground forces with approximately 17,000 individuals from the nation's air and sea forces as of this writing. A May 2008 Government Accountability Office report details the challenges behind training and coordinating these individuals, asserting that the Army's need to borrow from other services is disrupting the Navy and Air Force's own deployment-to-dwell ratio for some occupational specialties, and is risking the services' abilities to "meet other standard mission requirements."³ The Navy reported in February of 2008 that over 11,000 sailors were fulfilling ashore missions in the Central Command area of operations.⁴

There are, meanwhile, signs that repeated deployments are taking a human toll, especially on the Army. Studies show that repeated tours in Iraq increase a soldier's likelihood of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, and indeed, cases of PTSD have risen dramatically in recent years.⁵ In one study, 14 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans reported symptoms of PTSD, and 19 percent reported symptoms consistent with a traumatic brain injury.⁶ The rates of suicide, alcohol abuse, divorce, desertion, and AWOLs among Army personnel are all increasing.

Recruiting and retaining personnel

Military recruiters are facing a shrinking supply of eligible recruits. All four services have met or exceeded their active duty recruiting targets in recent years, but they are taking some extraordinary measures to do so. Each service relies increasingly on enlistment bonuses to attract the decreasing number of young Americans (only 3 in 10) who meet the educational, medical, and moral standards for military service.⁷ The small supply of eligible applicants is even more constrained for jobs that demand a specialized skill set, compelling the services to offer greater incentives for enlistment. Incentives for recruiting Navy health professionals were up to \$25,000 in 2007, and the Air Force is offering between \$1,500 and \$13,000 in Initial Enlistment Bonuses for jobs such as pararescuer and linguist.⁸

The Army faces the greatest recruiting challenges of all the services. Since missing its 2005 recruiting target by a margin of 8 percent, the Army bolstered its accessions to meet its annual targets by raising the maximum age for enlistment from 35 to 42, offering a shorter-than-usual 15-month enlistment option, giving a \$2,500 bonus to personnel who transfer into the Army from another service, and providing a new accession bonus to those who enter Officer Candidate School.⁹ Most notably, the Army accepted more recruits without a high school diploma,¹⁰ and increased the number of waivers granted for enlistment.¹¹

More than 20 percent of new recruits, or 22,186, required a waiver in 2007; of those, 1,492 required a waiver for drug and alcohol use.¹² The number of waivers given to recruits with felony convictions jumped 105 percent for the Army and 68 percent for the Marine Corps from 2006 to 2007.¹³ An Army study assessing the quality and performance of waiver soldiers compared to their overall cohort found that the waiver population had higher loss rates in six of nine adverse loss categories but had slightly higher valorous award and promotion rates in some communities.¹⁴ This mixed record highlights the importance of continuing to monitor the performance of waiver soldiers over time.

Loss rates for company grade officers (second lieutenant, first lieutenant, and captain) have remarkably remained fairly stable in recent years, despite the demands of multiple tours in quick succession. Yet as the size of the Army grows, the number of officers the Army needs has grown by 8,000 between 2002 and 2006; 58 percent of this growth is in the ranks of captain and major.¹⁵ The Army has an acute gap at the major level, particularly for those in medical, intelligence, and engineering specialties.¹⁶ As the Army expands, it will need to retain a higher percentage of its experienced officers to lead the force.

To decrease the historical loss rate of company grade officers, the Army is offering unprecedented incentives to those captains who agree to extend for three years, including the opportunity to transfer or change jobs, assignment at their post of choice, professional military or language training, fully funded graduate education, and receipt of up to \$35,000 in a critical skills retention bonus.¹⁷ Given the criticality of retaining experienced field grade officers as it grows, the Army is paying particular attention to issues that affect retention.¹⁸

Recruitment and retention challenges will likely drive a renewed debate over qualifications for military service early in the next presidential term. The Army's and Marine Corps' choices to raise enlistment ages and waive some classes of previously denied applicants, along with the increasing cost for training and retaining recruits, may require the new administration to reexamine the terms of military service. Restrictions on women in combat and gays and lesbians in the services may become impractical in light of the operational and educational requirements of a U.S. military that needs every patriotic American who qualifies for service.

Compressed and narrowed training

The U.S. military must prepare for current operations as well a broad range of future contingencies, from sustained, small-unit irregular warfare missions to military training and advising missions, and high-end warfare against regional powers armed with weapons of mass destruction and other asymmetric means. Yet compressed training time between deployments means that many of our enlisted personnel and officers only have time to train for the missions immediately before them in Iraq and Afghanistan and not for mis-

sions over the horizon. These just-in-time training conditions have created a degree of strategic risk for the military.¹⁹ Marine Corps Commandant General James T. Conway has stated, for example, that the Corps is only training for the terrain of Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving them underprepared to take on missions in other environments.²⁰

Army units have also found themselves racing to get certified for their next deployment with a 12-month dwell time that is compounded by personnel turnover, institutional education requirements, and unavailable equipment that is either returning from or deploying to theater. While home station training and exercises at the major training centers are evolving, units' ability to train for the full spectrum of operations has been severely limited by time. This same compressed timeline has contributed to the overall stresses on the force.

Equipment shortages and wear-out

Near-continuous equipment use in theater has meant that aircraft, vehicles, and even communications gear have stayed in the fight instead of returning home with their units. Twenty-six percent of the Marine Corps' equipment is engaged overseas and most does not rotate out of theatre with units.²¹ Roughly 20 percent of the National Guard's equipment remains overseas or has worn out.²² And after 17 years of continuous operations, with fewer aircraft being used at higher rates,²³ the Air Force is seeing its fleet wear out in unanticipated ways—including mid-flight.²⁴ Given the high tempo of operations and the harsh operating environments, equipment has been worn out, lost in battle, or damaged almost more quickly than the services can repair or replace it. And near-continuous use without depot-level maintenance has substantially decreased the projected lifespan of this equipment, and substantially increased expected replacement costs.

The resulting equipment scarcity leads to the widespread practice of cross-leveling—taking equipment (and personnel) from returning units to fill out those about to deploy. The Marine Corps and the Army is also drawing increasingly from prepositioned stocks around the world. So far, these measures have met readiness needs in theatre, but they also decrease the readiness of nondeployed units and impede their ability to train on individual and collective tasks. Even those deployed are at an increased risk as their equipment becomes unusable: Army equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan is wearing out at almost nine times the normal rate.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Army told the Government Accountability Office that it will need between \$12 and \$13 billion per year to replace lost, damaged, and worn equipment for the duration of the war in Iraq and at least two years beyond.²⁶ The GAO's own estimates put the number closer to \$118 billion cumulatively between fiscal years 2004 and 2013.²⁷ The Marine Corps states that it will need \$15.6 billion and four to six years of equipment depot maintenance for full reset.²⁸ But in the current budgetary environment, the military services are struggling to balance resources between reconstituting current stocks and modernizing for the future.

The problem of aging equipment is perhaps most acute for the Air Force, whose aircraft average more than 24 years of age.²⁹ The Air Force is flying 50-year-old KC-135E tankers that rolled off the assembly line as early as 1957.³⁰ As these aircraft age, the Air Force must spend a larger percentage of its budget simply keeping them safe to fly, replacing wiring and repairing mechanical components with increasing frequency. The Air Force's cost per flying hour has increased 28 percent since 1996 and operating costs are up 179 percent.³¹ As fleets age, cost per flying hour rise, and as the number of aircraft in hangars falls, the long-term readiness of the Air Force declines.

The Navy is also wearing down its aircraft at faster-than-anticipated rates, leading the chief of naval operations to predict a shortfall in strike aircraft by 2016.³² Replacing these aircraft will be costly, take time, and force the Navy and the Air Force to make some tough trade-offs—between strike aircraft and tankers, for example—as they modernize their inventories to rebuild for an uncertain future. None of these repairs or replacements can be achieved overnight. Years of recapitalization and modernization work lie between the armed forces and full-scale equipment readiness. Hard choices must be made as soon as possible to avoid dangerous shortfalls in the future.

The reserve component: unique challenges

The Reserves comprise over a third of the total force and their battle rhythm has accelerated enormously since operations in Afghanistan began in 2001. Each of the National Guard's 34 combat brigades has been deployed to Operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom at least once, and 600,000 selected reservists had been activated as of January 2008.³³

Cross-leveling is especially acute for reserve units, which do not possess equipment at authorized levels. The Army National Guard lacks more than 20 percent of its authorized equipment and will need an average of \$5 billion a year through 2013 to obtain it.³⁴ Additionally, a dramatic shortage of personnel—including 10,000 company-grade officers—has forced the Reserve Component to borrow people from other units along with equipment.

The Reserve Component is intended for use in overseas operations and homeland defense, but it is not fully manned, trained, or equipped to perform these missions. This gap in reserve readiness creates a significant and little-noticed vulnerability in both domestic disaster response and readiness for operations abroad.

Building the right capabilities for tomorrow

The strains on the military outlined above pose more than just short-term readiness challenges. The next president will inherit not only a military that has been severely stressed by years of war, but also an international security environment that will force

the United States to adapt to and prepare for a much broader spectrum of contingencies and missions. The U.S. military must recover from the past as it adapts to the future. The next administration must set a course to restore the readiness and resilience of the U.S. armed forces while increasing their agility and capabilities and broadening their aperture beyond Afghanistan and Iraq to consider the full range of military options that should be preserved for the president.

The U.S. military must be prepared to deal with four key strategic challenges in the coming years: the long struggle against violent Islamist extremists; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the risks associated with weak and failing states; and the rise of new military powers. At the same time, it must remain prepared for three enduring missions: shaping the international environment to prevent conflict and promote stability; deterring and, if necessary, defeating aggression against U.S. allies and interests; and defending the U.S. homeland.

These strategic challenges and enduring missions will pull the U.S. military in very different directions in terms of how the force is organized, trained, and equipped. Yet the Department of Defense is facing the makings of a “perfect budgetary storm,” with soaring operations and maintenance costs, runaway personnel costs, mounting reset and recapitalization costs, and persistent modernization requirements—all at a time when the U.S. economy is sliding toward recession and our deficit and debt are on the rise. The 44th president will have to make some tough choices about where to prioritize and where to accept or manage a degree of risk in what is likely to be a more constrained budgetary environment. One of the principal challenges for a new commander in chief will be determining how best to shape and balance the U.S. armed forces for the future.

Rebalancing our risk portfolio as we expand and adapt the ground forces and update our naval and air capabilities will take clear vision, substantial investment, and careful management. The next administration should begin by initiating a phased transition in Iraq; reestablishing a ready reserve of ground forces; funding a full reset and modernization of military equipment; rebalancing the force; reexamining the terms of services; and increasing civilian agencies’ deployable operational capacity.

[Begin a phased transition in Iraq](#)

The new president should adopt a strategy of conditional engagement in Iraq and begin to reduce the level of U.S. ground forces in the country. Decreasing the number of deployed troops will allow for increased dwell time between deployments, reduce strain on personnel and their families, and allow more adequate time for full-spectrum training, rather than just training focused on the mission in Iraq.

The 44th president will have to balance the competing strategic imperative of safeguarding U.S. interests in and around Iraq with regaining a degree of strategic flexibility by reducing the over commitment of the nation's ground forces.³⁵

Reestablish a ready reserve of ground forces

The new president should, over time, work toward building up a reserve of ground forces. Several Brigade Combat Teams and Marine Expeditionary Units should be ready and available for rapid response to other contingencies. It is critical that the United States has not only air and naval forces but also ground forces that are ready to deal with crisis situations in order to safeguard U.S. interests around the world and reduce our current level of strategic risk.

The new president should work with Congress to ensure that the costs associated with resetting equipment lost or damaged in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as those associated with growing and modernizing the force, are fully funded. As supplemental war funding decreases and pressures on the defense budget increase, it is imperative that we continue to fund the recovery and expansion of the Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Forces, while at the same time appropriately providing the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force with the modern equipment they need to perform the full range of future missions.

Rebalance the force

The new president will have to work with the Department of Defense to grow and reshape the force for the future. This will require rebalancing the armed forces' mix of capabilities. The services have thus far converted more than 100,000 personnel from less-stressed career fields to more in-demand specialties, and plan to rebalance nearly 100,000 more over the next four years.³⁶ This may mean allocating more of the planned growth in the Army to high-demand and low-density assets such as engineers, military police, and civil affairs specialists.

Conventional and unconventional skill sets should exist across the services. But the ground forces will have to maintain a degree of conventional capabilities and the Air Force and Navy will have to expand their irregular and stabilization capacities during the rebalancing process. In the case of the Air Force, this may mean investing more in unmanned systems and critical enablers such as tankers, airlifts, and communications and intelligence assets.

The new administration will also have to strive during the rebalancing process to increase the percentage of personnel in each service—particularly the Army—that are deployable at any given time in order to increase the size of the operational force relative to the institutional force.

Reexamine the terms of service

The new president and Congress should convene a commission of experts to reexamine the terms of service for Americans willing and able to volunteer for the nation's armed forces. Restrictions on women in combat, gay and lesbian personnel, and noncitizen military volunteers should be examined.

The 44th president, upon taking office, should also issue a new call to military service to America's youth, and should direct the Defense Department to reassess and enhance both recruiting and retention incentives. These should include everything from bonuses to educational and professional opportunities for combat veterans, family support initiatives, and greater predictability surrounding deployments and time at home. The new administration should also explore expanding the variety of service contracts to enable easier movement between the active and reserve components as well as a return to service after a period spent outside the military. Giving as many Americans as possible the opportunity to serve will both bolster the strength of the armed services and reinvigorate the contract between the U.S. military and the society it protects.

Increase civilian agencies' deployable operational capacity

The next president and Congress should work together to increase the capacity of civilian agencies to send technically skilled personnel to assist in post-conflict reconstruction missions as well as regions where conflict prevention is a priority. The operational capacity of the United States Agency for International Development in particular could be revitalized, but the deployable elements of a variety of other government agencies should also be expanded. Doing so would reduce the burden on the U.S. military while enriching the spectrum of capabilities needed for the future. It would also enable the military to transfer many rightly civilian tasks back to those agencies best suited to undertake them.

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