

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-13-678, a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress and DOD need relevant, accurate, and timely readiness information to make informed decisions about the use of military forces, and related resource needs. To that end, Congress requires DOD to submit a quarterly readiness report addressing various elements related to overall readiness, personnel, training, and equipment. A committee report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 mandated GAO report on the type of readiness information available to Congress and DOD decision makers and the reported readiness of U.S. forces. In May 2013, GAO provided a classified report on readiness trends of DOD forces. For this report, GAO evaluated (1) the extent to which DOD addressed required reporting elements in its quarterly readiness reports to Congress, and (2) what additional information, if any, could make the reports more useful. GAO analyzed various readiness reports and supporting documentation, and interviewed cognizant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD analyze alternative sources of information that could be used to meet the required reporting elements, issue guidance on the type and amount of information to be included by each service, and incorporate contextual information to improve the clarity and usefulness of reported information. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations.

View GAO-13-678. For more information, contact Sharon Pickup at (202) 512-9619 or pickups@gao.gov.

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MILITARY READINESS

Opportunities Exist to Improve Completeness and Usefulness of Quarterly Reports to Congress

What GAO Found

In its quarterly readiness reports that covered the period from April 2012 through March 2013, the Department of Defense (DOD) addressed most but not all required reporting elements. Section 482 of Title 10 of the U.S. Code requires DOD to report on 26 elements including readiness deficiencies, remedial actions, and data specific to the military services in the areas of personnel, training, and equipment. In analyzing DOD's reports, GAO found that DOD addressed 18 of the 26 elements, partially addressed 3 elements and did not report on 5 elements. For the elements partially addressed—personnel stability, training operations tempo, and deployed equipment—reporting was incomplete because some services reported information and others did not report. When all the services reported on an element, they at times did so inconsistently, with varying amounts and types of information. For example, the services all reported information on training commitments and deployments, but used different timeframes when providing information on planned training events in the future. The services reported differently because DOD has not provided guidance on the information to be reported. For the elements that DOD did not address, including borrowed manpower and training funding, GAO found that information may exist in the department but is not being reported to Congress. For example, the Army now requires commanders to report monthly on the readiness impacts of borrowed military manpower and DOD's budget requests include data on training funding. However, DOD has not taken steps to analyze whether this information could be used to meet the related reporting element. Without issuing guidance on the type and amount of information to be included by each service and analyzing alternative information it could provide to meet the required elements, DOD risks continuing to provide inconsistent and incomplete information to Congress.

DOD has taken steps to improve its quarterly readiness reports to Congress, but additional contextual information would provide decision makers a more complete picture of DOD's readiness. Over time, based on its own initiative and congressional requests, DOD has added information to its reports, such as on operational plan assessments. In its most recent report, DOD added narrative information detailing the impact of readiness deficiencies on overall readiness and a discussion of how the services' budgets support their long-term readiness goals. Federal internal control standards state that decision makers need complete and relevant information to manage risks, and GAO found several areas where DOD could provide Congress with more comprehensive and understandable information if it added some additional context to its reports. For example, in some instances, the services report significant amounts of quantitative data, but do not include information on benchmarks or goals that would enable the reader to determine whether the data indicate a problem or the extent of the problem. For example, the Marine Corps and Air Force report mission capable rates for their specific equipment items, but do not provide information on related goals, such as the percentage of the inventory that should be kept at various capability levels. In other instances, the services have not fully explained any connections between the voluminous data they report on the required elements and the information DOD provides in the report on unit and overall readiness ratings. Without providing additional contextual information, DOD's quarterly reports may not provide clear information necessary for congressional oversight and funding decisions.