U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

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The Honorable John McCain
Chairman
The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

Defense Headquarters: Geographic Combatant Commands Rely on Subordinate Commands for Mission Management and Execution

To perform its variety of missions around the world, the Department of Defense (DOD) operates six geographic combatant commands which manage all military operations in designated areas of responsibility: U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, U.S. Northern Command, U.S. Pacific Command, and U.S. Southern Command. In March 2015, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee announced his priorities which included a review of DOD's organization and lines of authority established as a result of the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 which modified Title 10 of the U.S. Code to establish combatant command authorities and created a requirement for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to periodically review the missions, responsibilities and force structure of each combatant command.[1] Additionally, in November 2015, the Secretary of Defense directed a review of DOD's organizational structures and is considering a number of actions, including strengthening the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Staff to help prioritize activities and resources across combatant command boundaries. At a time of growing fiscal constraints and evolving security challenges, it is important to ensure the combatant commands are organized to meet their mission requirements in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

You asked us to review missions and structures of the combatant commands. This report describes (1) DOD's current allocation of personnel to the geographic commands and their subordinate commands (service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces), excluding U.S. Central Command; and (2) how the geographic combatant commands utilize their subordinate commands to accomplish assigned missions. We briefed committee staff on our preliminary observations in May 2016 (See enclosure). This report formally transmits an updated briefing and communicates the final results of our work.

To describe DOD's allocation of personnel at the geographic combatant commands and their service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces we obtained and analyzed documentation on authorized permanent and temporary military and

[1]DOD has met this requirement by publishing a Unified Command Plan establishing the missions and geographic responsibilities of the combatant commands. This review is scheduled to occur biennially and last occurred in 2013, but DOD officials stated that no significant changes have occurred since the 2011 Unified Command Plan was published.

civilian personnel for fiscal year 2016. We found the data contained in these documents to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing the personnel authorizations at the commands. To describe how the commands utilize their subordinate commands to accomplish assigned missions we collected strategic classified and unclassified documents detailing the missions assigned to each command. We also interviewed knowledgeable officials regarding the authorized personnel at each command and how they meet their assigned missions. We included 5 of the 6 geographic combatant commands (U.S. Africa Command, U.S. European Command, U.S. Northern Command, U.S. Pacific Command, and U.S. Southern Command) and their service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces within our scope. Additionally, we included the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) because, according to U.S. Northern Command officials, each command has personnel that support both commands. We excluded U.S. Central Command and its corresponding subordinate commands from our scope due to its responsibilities to support ongoing military operations in the Middle East.[2]

We conducted this performance audit from September 2015 to June 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In summary, we found data provided by DOD shows that 22,170 total authorized permanent and temporary military and civilian personnel are allocated to the 5 geographic combatant commands and their service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces. Service component commands are established by the individual military services and provide administrative control over assigned forces, but can provide operational control when delegated from the combatant command; subordinate unified commands, are established by the Secretary of Defense and manage operations within a geographic area or on a functional basis; and joint task forces are, in most cases, established by the combatant commander for a focused and temporary purpose, although they may be more long-lasting organizations if there is a continuing requirement. The service component commands account for the largest allocation of the total personnel with about 10,799 (48 percent). Additionally, military personnel make up 14,656 (66 percent) of the total authorized personnel among all the commands. Some commands are also supported by contractor personnel, but the availability of data on the number of contractor personnel varies and could not be quantified consistently by all the commands.

We found that the combatant commands delegate operational and tactical level mission execution to the service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces, allowing the combatant command headquarters to focus on planning and oversight. For example, U.S. Southern Command has delegated its mission to manage the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to Joint Task Force Guantanamo (JTF-GTMO). However, the extent to which each combatant command utilizes service component commands, subordinate unified commands, and joint task forces to execute assigned missions varies. For example, U.S. Northern Command includes four service component commands, two subordinate unified command, and three joint task forces, while U.S. Pacific Command includes four service component commands, three subordinate unified commands, and a joint task force. The joint task forces in the geographic combatant commands within our scope are utilized to address continuing mission requirements and have existed for at least a decade and several pre-date

[2]For the purposes of this report, we will use the term “combatant command” to refer specifically to the 5 geographic commands we included in our review.

their parent combatant command. For example, Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa, a subordinate command to U.S. Africa Command, was originally established in 2002, prior to the combatant command itself, and continues to address an ongoing mission requirement.
We are not making any recommendations in this report.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Defense. The report is also available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report include Richard Geiger, Assistant Director; Tracy Barnes; James Krustapentus; Steven Putansu; and Grant Sutton.

John H. Pendleton
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Briefing Enclosure Defense Headquarters: Geographic Combatant Commands Rely on Subordinate Commands for Mission Management and Execution: Information Provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee

See PDF in portfolio for text of briefing.

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