

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-125](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

China and Russia are strengthening their militaries to neutralize U.S. strengths, including mobility—the ability of U.S. military airlift and air refueling aircraft and sealift ships to rapidly move equipment and personnel from the United States to locations abroad to support DOD missions.

Senate Report 116-48 included a provision for GAO to review DOD's ability to operate in a contested mobility environment. This report assesses the extent to which DOD has studied contested mobility and tracked the implementation of study recommendations, assesses the extent to which DOD has revised its training to incorporate contested mobility challenges, and describes the technologies that DOD uses to mitigate contested mobility challenges.

GAO identified contested mobility studies conducted or sponsored by DOD; evaluated DOD's processes for monitoring implementation of study recommendations; analyzed training and exercise documents from DOD combatant commands, the Air Force, and the Navy; and reviewed DOD plans for technological improvements to its mobility forces.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD designate an oversight entity to track the implementation of study recommendations, and that DOD and MARAD evaluate and update sealift training. DOD and the Department of Transportation concurred or partially concurred with each recommendation. GAO believes each recommendation should be fully implemented, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-21-125](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE TRANSPORTATION

DOD Can Better Leverage Existing Contested Mobility Studies and Improve Training

What GAO Found

From 2016 through 2019, the Department of Defense (DOD) conducted or sponsored at least 11 classified or sensitive studies on contested mobility—the ability of the U.S. military to transport equipment and personnel in a contested operational environment. The studies resulted in more than 50 recommendations, and DOD officials stated they believed that some of the recommendations had been implemented. However, officials did not know the exact disposition of the recommendations, as they are not actively tracking implementation activities. Further, no single DOD oversight entity evaluated the studies' recommendations and tracked implementation across the department. As a result, DOD may be missing an opportunity to leverage existing knowledge on mobility in contested environments across organizations, and strengthen its mobility efforts for major conflicts as envisioned in the National Defense Strategy.

DOD has updated aspects of wargame exercises and mobility training to prepare for a contested environment, but has not updated training for the surge sealift fleet—ships owned by DOD and the Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration (MARAD) and crewed by contracted mariners. These crews are primarily trained and qualified to operate the ship, but receive limited contested mobility training. While DOD has updated air mobility training and other aspects of mobility training, sealift crew training requirements have not been updated by DOD and MARAD to reflect contested environment concerns because DOD has not conducted an evaluation of such training. Since sealift is the means by which the majority of military equipment would be transported during a major conflict, it is important that crews be trained appropriately for contested mobility to help ensure that ships safely reach their destinations and complete their missions.

C-17 Performing Defense Maneuvers



Source: U.S. Air Force/Senior Airman William Johnson. | GAO-21-125

DOD has begun to mitigate contested environment challenges through improved technology and related initiatives. The Navy is acquiring improved technologies to deploy on surge sealift ships and replacement ships. The Air Force is equipping current mobility aircraft (see photo above) with additional defensive technologies and planning for the development of future replacement aircraft. According to U.S. Transportation Command, the command is revising its contracts with commercial partners to address cyber threats, and funding research and development projects that address contested mobility concerns. Many of these efforts are nascent and will take years to be put in place.