

Background

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Approaching the “Invisible Red Line”: Why Congress Must Act Now to Restore Military Readiness

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All the military services, including the National Guard and Reserves, are experiencing lower levels of readiness after seven years of major combat operations overseas and more homeland defense missions in the United States. Symptoms include delayed, shortened, or less diverse training; cross-leveling of personnel and equipment from disparate units to plug deploying-unit shortfalls; less maintenance for worn-out weapons; and shortened rest time at home before redeploying overseas. While Congress has provided much-needed funding for many urgent needs of the services, more must be done to restore immediate readiness within the U.S. military (without sacrificing long-term readiness).

Short-Term Readiness in Jeopardy

General George Casey, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, warned the Senate Armed Services Committee in February:

While the Army remains the best led, best trained, and best equipped Army in the world, it is out of balance. The combined effects of an operational tempo that provides insufficient recovery time for personnel, families, and equipment—a focus on training for counter-insurgency operations to the exclusion of other capabilities, and Reserve Component assigned missions for which they were not originally intended nor adequately resourced—result in our readiness being consumed as fast as we can build it.¹

Talking Points

- All branches of the military are experiencing reduced readiness levels after seven years of major combat operations overseas and increased homeland defense missions in the United States.
- A trained, rested, and prepared military force is the linchpin of the ability to respond to future threats, whether at home or abroad. Restoring readiness is critical because the nation currently does not have the residual capacity in many units, particularly the Army, to respond to domestic emergencies.
- Congress must prevent the U.S. military from crossing any “invisible red line” of dangerously reduced readiness levels by recognizing that a sustained commitment of resources and funding is required long after victory in Iraq and Afghanistan are achieved.

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All Army combat brigades currently in the United States or preparing to deploy are rated as not ready. The readiness of ground forces is roughly measured by four factors: personnel, training, available equipment, and critical enablers for joint operations, such as actionable intelligence, global communications, and space superiority.²

Short-term readiness is typically evaluated through unit ratings, recruitment and retention goals met, full-time manning in the Reserves, and operations tempo. Long-term readiness may be analyzed by reviewing current military construction projects, assessing the health of installation facilities, recapitalization of equipment, modernization of major weapons systems, and research and development of next-generation technology. Short-term readiness is dangerously low in the U.S. Army and has been for several years, thereby jeopardizing long-term readiness, as well.

Similar to the case of the Army, the U.S. Marine Corps' successful operations abroad have also led to decreased unit readiness here in the United States. In February, Marine Corps Commandant General James Conway testified that one consequence of successful operations overseas is an "increase in the maintenance required per hour of operating time." He continued, stating:

Equipment across the Marine Corps is continuously cross-leveled to ensure that units preparing to deploy have sufficient equipment to conduct our rigorous pre-deployment training programs. Because the stateside priority of equipment distribution and readiness is to units preparing to deploy, there has been a trade-off in unit training for other types of contingencies. The timely

delivery of replacement equipment is crucial to sustaining the high readiness rates for the Marines in theater, as well as improving the rates for the forces here at home. While additional equipment has been purchased, long lead times and production rates mean that, although funded, much of this equipment is still many months from delivery.³

While Congress has been sympathetic to the reset needs by providing funding to the military, it is not enough. According to General Conway, "Reset funding has partially alleviated this strain, but continued funding is needed as we are simply running short of aircraft on our flight lines due to age, attrition, and wartime losses."⁴ He testified that while reset programs have helped mitigate degradation of aircraft materiel readiness through aircraft modifications, proactive inspections, and additional maintenance actions, additional requirements for depot level maintenance on airframes, engines, weapons, and support equipment will continue well beyond the conclusion of hostilities.⁵

Policies that allow cross-leveling of equipment and personnel have a negative effect on the active component as well as the National Guard and Reserves—entities that are on the mend after years of reduced readiness and over-use in order to meet deployment needs. The demands of warfighting missions, particularly in Iraq, have badly depleted the Army National Guard's domestic store of vehicles, weapons, and communications gear.

On average, states have only 40 percent of their Guard equipment on hand to respond to crises, such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires.⁶ Congress has provided billions in funding specifically for Reserve Component equipment over the past sev-

1. The Hon. Pete Geren and General George W. Casey, Jr., "2008 Army Posture Statement: A Campaign Quality Army with Joint and Expeditionary Qualities," February 26, 2008, at <http://www.army.mil/aps/08/APS2008.pdf> (October 22, 2008).
2. Mackenzie M. Eaglen, "A New Look at Readiness: Solving the Army's Quandary," *National Security Watch*, March 30, 2001, at <http://www3.ousa.org/pdfdocs/nsw01-130mar01.pdf> (October 22, 2008).
3. General James T. Conway, testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 28, 2008, p. 8, at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2008/February/Conway%2002-28-08.pdf> (October 22, 2008).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Mackenzie M. Eaglen, "Equipping the Army National Guard for the 21st Century," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 1983, November 13, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1983.cfm> (October 22, 2008).

eral years. The next step in restoring readiness and easing current strains will be to further grow the endstrength of the National Guard and Reserves.

Today, no service is immune to readiness challenges—including the Navy and Air Force—since all the services fight and win together in joint operations. Barely half of all Air Force units were fully mission-capable in March 2007.⁷ The U.S. Navy recently discovered that two surface combatant warships were unfit for combat, and senior Navy leaders called for a “strategic pause” to comprehensively reevaluate and take stock of the current fleet of surface ships.⁸

Vice Admiral D.C. Curtis, commander of Naval Surface Forces, wrote in a memo to sailors: “Recent formal and informal assessments and inspections indicate that our self-assessment capability has declined, resulting in reduced readiness. We made a lot of changes in the surface force in the past few years.... We must conduct a rigorous assessment of the impact on readiness of these changes so we can make appropriate course corrections.”⁹ Press reports indicate a review is underway by senior Navy leaders to determine whether sailors received enough hands-on training “as fiscal realities drove [the Navy’s surface force] to place more reliance on computer-based training. We are looking at this from an enterprise perspective to see if we have reduced en route training too much.”¹⁰

Ancillary Training Creep

A significant component to maintaining readiness is training. Training does not just include preparing forces about to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan in counterinsurgency operations, but also conventional warfare training in non-desert terrains, for example. Military service members receiving train-

ing do not have the luxury of preparing for or focusing on only one type of conflict. They must be trained on all weapons systems and platforms for all types of contingencies—even while major combat operations are going on elsewhere.

Senior military commanders in Iraq have noted that soldiers and Marines currently “lack training for major combat operations using their entire range of weapons.... For example, artillerymen are not practicing firing heavy guns but are instead doing counterinsurgency work as military police.”¹¹ General Robert Magnus, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, has noted the Marine Corps’ ability to train for potential conflicts has been “significantly degraded.”¹² While some stress was relieved after the Marine units provided for the “surge” in Iraq completed their missions, “new demands in Afghanistan, where 3,200 Marines are headed and more are likely to follow, have kept the pressure on the force unchanged.”¹³

Former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General T. Michael Moseley, was concerned that airmen—particularly those in the Guard and Reserves—are spending too much time training outside their mission specialties. In one of his “Chief’s Notes” to all airmen, he described this phenomenon as “ancillary training creep” that jeopardizes mission accomplishment with the potential to overshadow combat focus.¹⁴ Maximizing the use of airmen’s time was of primary concern to General Moseley.

Beyond potentially misspent time, there are secondary and tertiary effects of reduced training in a service member’s core competency. These negative possibilities may include an altered career path where professional military education, specialty certifications, or other development and education suffers thereby affecting the perfor-

7. William McMichael, “Iraq Ops Taxing Readiness, Experts Say,” *Defense News*, December 3, 2007.

8. Philip Ewing, “U.S. Surface Force to ‘Pause’ Amid Readiness Worry,” *Defense News*, April 28, 2008.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Ann Scott Tyson, “Heavy Troop Deployments Are Called Major Risk,” *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2008.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. General T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, “CSAF’s Scope: Reduce Ancillary Training,” May 21, 2007.

mance reviews that, in part, help determine promotion and pay increases.

National Consequences: Higher Risk, Less Strategic Flexibility

The potential consequences of reduced readiness levels across the U.S. military range from the practical—such as more time in depot for maintenance on equipment used at five or six times the peacetime rate and more mechanics required to keep older planes, ships, and vehicles running—to the dire, such as an unforeseen crisis requiring aid from the U.S. military. Restoring readiness is absolutely critical because the nation does not have the residual capacity in many units, particularly the Army, to respond to domestic emergencies should they arise.

In addition to a reduced ability to respond quickly to crises here in the United States, there are many second-tier effects of low readiness levels in the military. Regional combatant commanders beyond Central Command—which includes Iraq and Afghanistan in its area of responsibility—have seen their personnel and equipment diverted to these two countries over the past several years. Admiral Timothy Keating, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, recently noted that current mission demands have hindered his ability to respond to an unforeseen crisis in the military's largest geographical command region because 30,000 ground forces that are typically under his control are in the Middle East instead.¹⁵

Strategic engagement has also suffered as exercises with foreign militaries and alliances have been curtailed over the last several years. These demands have also hamstrung Pacific Command's "ability to conduct exercises and forge alliances with foreign nations that could one day prove instrumental," particularly in building relationships to reduce the potential for future conflict.¹⁶

Large and small exercises with foreign militaries provide an effective display of capabilities—acting

as a deterrent to would-be aggressors—and are important methods for enhancing military readiness. An effort to increase these exercises would be especially useful in the Asia-Pacific—where China and Russia continue to modernize their naval and air capabilities—and in places like the Horn of Africa and the Strait of Hormuz, where increased coordination is required to stem the threat posed by both pirates and terrorists.

Similarly, since 9/11 the U.S. has worked diligently to train and equip foreign militaries in counterterrorism as well as other security and stability operations. The U.S. military participates in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the Regional Strategic Initiative, the DOD Counterterrorism Fellowship Program, and the Building Global Partnerships Train and Equip program carried out under section 1206 authority, under which DOD may spend appropriated funds to train and equip foreign militaries to undertake counterterrorism or stability operations.¹⁷

Both U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Africa Command have made building partnerships and enhancing strategic cooperation central pillars of their missions. In addition to the benefits offered by training foreign militaries, these initiatives also serve to strengthen respect for the civil-military relationship and should not be bill payers for readiness.

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are not immune to the vast demands in Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently, more than 80 percent of America's SOF are deployed in one region: Central Command.¹⁸ These elite forces have been deployed at this unsustainable rate since 2001, and as a result are under-represented in other critical theaters of the world—including Latin America—and unable to respond to competing mission priorities elsewhere.

According to Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because of the demand for SOF by Central Command leaders, "there's a lot of Special Forces work that they've

15. Bryan Bender, "Fewer Pacific Forces Ready to Respond," *Boston Globe*, February 27, 2008.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Nina Serafina, *et al.*, "The Department of Defense Role in Foreign Assistance: Background, Major Issues, and Options for Congress," Congressional Research Service, August 25, 2008, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL34639.pdf> (October 22, 2008).

18. *Ibid.*

been doing for years in other parts of the world that just isn't getting done [now].... That builds risk over time, and we have to assess that."¹⁹ This problem was also highlighted in the Department of Defense 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review.

In response, U.S. Special Operations Command is growing to a force of 55,890 civilian and military personnel, including five additional special forces battalions, four additional Ranger companies, 300 new Navy SEALs, 2,500 Marine Special Operations Forces, and additional special operations aviators by the end of fiscal year 2009.²⁰ SOF growth is essential, but additional forces alone will not fully restore readiness levels until units and capabilities are spread more evenly among the military's regional areas of responsibility.

Further consequences of continued low readiness levels include recruitment and retention difficulties and the overall decline in the condition of the nation's all-volunteer force. While all the services have done tremendous work in meeting high recruiting and retention goals since 2001, there are palpable signs of strain.

The U.S. Army is currently experiencing a shortfall in mid-career officers that poses long-term risks to the service. In 2007, the U.S. Army was "short about 3,000 mid-career officers.... As a result, the Army is promoting captains and majors at rates well above its own guidelines and, in the process, is probably retaining more underachieving officers."²¹ Admiral Mullen carefully tracks what he calls lagging indicators, including promotion rates, noting that the Army is "promoting captains and majors at eight years on average rather than at nine or 10 years, as in the recent past."²²

Restoring Readiness Levels in the U.S. Military

A trained, rested, and prepared force is the linchpin of the nation's core capacity to respond to future threats—sometimes on only a moment's notice. Congress has been responsive in providing significant funding for restoring readiness levels in the military over the past several years as the stress on the force has become more acute.

Congress must not ignore the ongoing pleas from military and defense officials, however, for sustained defense spending (at today's levels) for at least three years *after* major combat operations in Iraq subside in order to reset the force and modernize at the same time. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently reflected this opinion in a speech at National Defense University, where he warned of the "important lessons learned" from deep cuts to the defense budget following the Cold War.²³ While readiness is low, particularly in the Army, there are direct steps Congress can and should take to provide immediate relief and help restore short- and long-term military readiness, including:

- **Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance.** Timely maintenance on all the military's major platforms is mandatory to maintain or extend the service lives of equipment being used at wartime rates. Proper planning and prioritization of maintenance also allows the services to reduce lifecycle costs while supplying equipment back into the hands of warfighters more quickly.
- **Reset old equipment and modernize.** A significant element of restoring readiness levels includes the procurement of new platforms and resetting older, worn-out items. The Government Accountability Office estimates that the cost for the Army to equip modular units,

19. Bender, "Fewer Pacific Forces Ready to Respond."

20. Andrew Feickert, "U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2008, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS21048.pdf> (October 22, 2008).

21. James Kitfield, "For the Army: Code Yellow," *National Journal*, April 9, 2007.

22. Jim Garamone, "Lengthy, Repetitive Deployments Risk Forces, Mullen Says," American Forces Press Service, April 1, 2008, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=49443> (October 22, 2008).

23. "Gates Predicts No Sharp Cuts in U.S. Defense Budgets," Reuters, September 29, 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/bondsNews/idUSN2940425220080929> (October 23, 2008).

expand the force by 74,000 personnel, reset equipment, and replace pre-positioned equipment will cost \$190 billion between 2004 and 2013.²⁴ This funding cannot be cannibalized within the defense budget, but should instead come in the form of a topline increase.

- **Avoid training creep.** The 2008 Army Posture Statement accepts that the “current operational requirements for forces and insufficient time between deployments require a focus on counterinsurgency training and equipping to the detriment of preparedness for the full range of military missions.”²⁵ As Iraq continues to stabilize and U.S. force levels there decline, U.S. ground forces must resume training for both irregular and conventional missions (amphibious assault, combined-arms, etc.) using their entire range of weapons.
- **Increase live-fire training and reduce reliance on simulation when necessary.** Congress should direct the services to review the percentage of forces trained by simulation compared to live-fire training to determine if it is indeed the right mix for today’s mission requirements. As Lt. Col. James Rice, operations officer at Fort Carson in Colorado, astutely observed, “We maximize use of simulators and simulations, but that only goes so far. You need training that puts realistic combat stress on soldiers, stress on their vehicles and stress on their communications systems (so they can) live with and deal with the friction you encounter on the battlefield.”²⁶
- **Reinvigorate multi-national exercises and foreign military engagements.** Long-term stability and security is served by building military partnerships and preserving coalitions by training and advising foreign military forces. Larger military engagements, such as the biannual Rim of the Pacific exercise, and smaller bilateral training opportunities that target specific operational issues serve to increase interoperability between the United States and its friends and allies. These important exercises and engagements should be restored or increased overseas based on combatant commander assessments.
- **Continue to grow Special Operations Forces at a rate that will maintain overall quality.** Congress must carefully monitor the growth of these highly skilled and professional forces to ensure that quality is not sacrificed for the sake of expediency. Congress should understand that this growth, while helping to address shortfalls, must also be designed to retain the quality of SOF by remaining consistent with the U.S. Special Operations Command’s “SOF Truths.” These include: humans are more important than hardware; quality is better than quantity; Special Operations Forces cannot be mass-produced; and competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.²⁷
- **Reduce reliance on Navy and Air Force personnel for ground missions overseas.** The use of non-U.S. Army personnel serving “in lieu of” soldiers overseas has grown in the past several years. For instance, between June 2007 and June 2008, the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan increased from 26,480 to 48,250. This increase of 21,770 forces included a total of 13,416 Air Force and Navy active and reserve personnel—representing 62 percent of the total increase in force levels.²⁸ This may prove to be unhealthy for the Navy and Air Force given the potential long-term damage to individual sailor and air-

24. Janet A. St. Laurent, “Restructuring and Rebuilding the Army Will Cost Billions of Dollars for Equipment but the Total Cost is Uncertain,” testimony before the Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, April 10, 2008, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08669t.pdf> (October 23, 2008).

25. Geren and Casey, “2008 Army Posture Statement: A Campaign Quality Army with Joint and Expeditionary Qualities.”

26. Patrick O’Driscoll, “Army Wants More Elbow Room,” *USA Today*, June 21, 2007, at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-06-20-army-training_n.htm (October 23, 2007).

27. “US SOCOM Posture Statement 2007,” United States Special Operations Command, 2007, at <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/posture2007.pdf> (October 23, 2008).

28. JoAnne O’Bryant and Michael Waterhouse, “U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” Congressional Research Service, July 15, 2008, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22633.pdf> (October 23, 2008).

man promotion rates and military career specialties. Congress should exercise stringent oversight of this practice to ensure that no good deeds are being inadvertently punished.

- **Institutionalize the Joint Army–Air Force Memorandum of Agreement.** A recent memorandum signed by Army and Air Force officials outlined each service’s commitment to providing direct support liaisons at multiple levels of command in order to identify opportunities for joint development of doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures through the exchange of personnel between service schools. Congress should conduct adequate oversight to ensure this effort is being implemented on an operational level and provide the necessary resources for success.
- **Re-stock America’s pre-positioned programs and strategic stockpiles.** A mandatory hedge against future contingencies resides in fully stocked weapons reserves. The U.S. Army should have five full combat brigades’ worth of weapons available: two stocks in Kuwait, one in South Korea, and two aboard ships in Guam and at the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean. But the afloat stocks were emptied last year to supply larger numbers of troops in Iraq as part of a surge, and the Kuwait stocks are being rotated in and out of the country.²⁹ Only the South Korea pre-positioned stock is close to complete. Congress should provide immediate funding so that all may be restored fully as soon as possible.

Conclusion

It may come as a surprise to many people, both in Congress and the general public, to learn that even with the military budget increases of recent years, the U.S. military is essentially living paycheck-to-paycheck. As Admiral Gary Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, testified before Congress in February, “The execution of our current readiness and force structure plans faces many challenges, but affordability is the most pressing. I refuse to cede our technological advantage to competitors; however current readiness, manpower, and escalating procurement costs make pacing the threat exceptionally difficult.”³⁰

Congress must prevent the U.S. military from crossing any “invisible red line” of dangerously reduced readiness that would likely be detected only after the fact.³¹ In order to prevent this type of perilous situation from occurring, Congress must provide a sustained commitment of resources and funding long after victory in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is crucial that Congress and the next Administration commit now to providing defense funding at current levels of roughly 4 percent of gross domestic product for the next several years in order to repair and replace worn-out equipment, modernize the force, and restore military readiness. The security of the country depends on it.

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29. Ann Scott Tyson, “Heavy Troop Deployments Are Called Major Risk,” *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2008.

30. Admiral Gary Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, testimony before the Committee on Armed Services Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, March 6, 2008, at http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/FC030608/Roughead_Testimony030608.pdf (October 23, 2008).

31. General George Casey, Chief of Staff of the Army, remarks at The Brookings Institution, December 4, 2007, at <http://www.army.mil/-speeches/2007/12/04/7139-army-chief-of-staff-remarks-at-brookings-institution-dec-4th-2007> (October 23, 2008).