

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Congress Should Avert Delays in the Army's Aviation Restructuring Plans

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The Army's decision to transfer AH-64 Apache helicopters from the National Guard to the active force has sparked a debate that ultimately concerns the roles, missions, and contributions of these ground components. Congress should prevent unnecessary delays in the implementation of these plans while making a stronger commitment to providing the resources that the armed forces need to maintain national security.

The past decade of conventional combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which relied heavily on National Guard units, has led to a renewed recognition of the contributions made by Guard (and Army reserve) units to the security interests of the nation. It has also fostered a conviction that Guard units are primarily conventional combat units that should mirror active Army units in mission, equipment, and employment. Rather than perceiving the Army's proposal as a trivialization of the historical contributions of the citizen soldier and demeaning the sacrifices of the Guard personnel, Congress should see the plan as an opportunity to build on the successes of both components.

Congress should support the Army's efforts to rebalance its assets in a way that benefits both

active and Guard components. This can be done by resisting attempts to slow the plan from being executed as quickly as possible while also striving to fund the requirements of the Army and other services more robustly.

**Win-Win for Active Army and National Guard.** As proposed, the Army's Aviation Restructure Concept will transfer all of the Guard's 192 AH-64 Apache attack helicopters to the active component and 15 percent of the active component's UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopters to the Guard and Reserve.<sup>1</sup>

After surveying its aircraft inventory to account for mission, age, cost to operate, relevance to the anticipated readiness and employment posture of the various components, and available funding to sustain and modernize the aircraft fleet, the Army concluded that the transfer plan was the most efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars. Further, the Army's plan reduces the different models of aircraft used by the service from seven to four, leading to additional efficiencies and greater operational effectiveness. The resulting consolidation of assets into fewer units achieves marked savings in manpower training and utilization, simplification of maintenance and supply systems, and decreased complexity of operation planning while gaining increased operational readiness and tactical proficiency.

Critics of the plan cite the difference in AH-64 Apache and OH-58 Kiowa mission profiles and aircraft characteristics—the Apache is optimized for attack, while the Kiowa was designed for “armed reconnaissance”—implying that the Apache is not suited for Kiowa missions. The Kiowa has been slated for retirement due to its age, increased operating

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costs, and relatively high cost to modernize should it be retained in inventory. The Army's planned substitution of the Apache for the Kiowa would consolidate its primary combat attack helicopter in active component squadrons—which are primarily postured for warfighting—and arguably increase tactical employment options and effectiveness.

By leveraging advances in unmanned systems—i.e., pairing the AH-64 Apache with the RQ-7B Shadow unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)—the Army plan would extend the Apache flight crew's situational awareness and enhance survivability and tactical effectiveness by doubling the “eyes in the sky,” generating a multi-axis approach to reconnaissance and surveillance missions, and enabling the flight crew to apply the UAV against higher-risk surveillance missions while preserving the ability to respond to targets of opportunity at lower risk and increased surprise.

Army leadership has highlighted that the UH-60 Blackhawk is more suited to the Guard's role than the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter. The National Guard, in its role as a state-directed force, has admirably and pricelessly performed countless missions in disaster response, assisting civil authorities, and responding to domestic emergencies—missions from which active component forces are prohibited unless specifically requested by a governor and authorized by the President. Blackhawks can pluck stranded civilians from rooftops of flood-ravaged homes, quickly move rescue teams and critical supplies to the scene of a disaster, or sling-load heavy emergency equipment.<sup>2</sup> Apaches, designed to destroy tanks and provide suppressive fire in support of ground combat troops, lack the Blackhawk's broad utility in domestic situations.

**How Congress Can Help.** As Congress begins its markup of the President's fiscal year 2015 budget request, it should:

- **Reject calls for an unnecessary commission to study the Army aviation restructuring, which would delay implementation.** The Army's decision to transfer respective elements

of its aviation fleet to the Guard, reserve, and active-duty forces makes the most effective and efficient use of taxpayer dollars while best preserving their respective roles and missions. Congress should support a swift transfer of these assets. Any additional commissions, studies, or reports would only delay the Army's ability to provide the right balance of capabilities.

- **Provide the Guard and active-duty forces with the ability to execute their respective missions.** The National Guard is the only readily available force explicitly intended and designed to provide support to state and local authorities in times of crisis. The transfer of additional UH-60 Blackhawks to the Guard enhances its ability to provide such support and benefits with an immediacy and local understanding across the broadest range of possible scenarios not otherwise possible. Meanwhile, the Apache fleet will continue to serve as a capable attack aircraft platform—so long as proper training hours are sustained and leveraged. Congress should help streamline the Army's plan to enhance the capability of both its Guard and active-duty components.
- **Reinvest savings into modernization accounts.** Though the U.S. Army is making the best use of resources in its aviation restructuring plans, this should not be an excuse to reduce the budget further. As with all the service branches, any savings should be reinvested in modernization accounts, especially as the military resets from over a decade of war. This will ensure that the active-duty Army, National Guard, and other services can continue to provide for the common defense of the nation.

**Best Value for the Taxpayer, Best Support to National Security.** The U.S. Army and Army National Guard each have critical roles to play in defending the country against threats, protecting U.S. interests at home and abroad, and serving the

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1. Andrew Feickert, “Army Drawdown and Restructuring: Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, February 28, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42493.pdf> (accessed April 4, 2014). The Guard's remaining 72 Apaches and 112 Lakotas would be divested due to age, cost of maintenance, and reduction of the force (fewer combat aviation brigades). The Army's plan sacrifices older aircraft to preserve funding for newer models and development of replacements in future years.

2. Louisiana National Guard, “Louisiana Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk Helicopter Transports 5,000-Pound Generator,” September 5, 2012, <https://geauxguard.com/louisiana-army-national-guard-uh-60-black-hawk-helicopter-transport-5000-pound-generator/4844/> (accessed April 4, 2014).

American public. Both components do this best in their respective spheres of responsibility. The current plan to realign aviation assets is wholly consistent with these considerations. Congress and the White House can enable the Army and National Guard to provide the best support possible to the country by helping them realize the aviation realignment plan.

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