

Military Forces: What Is the Appropriate Size for the United States?

Updated January 31, 2008

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

RS21754

Summary

For several years, some Members of Congress and many military analysts have argued that the U.S. Armed Forces are too small to adequately meet all the requirements arising after the Cold War, particularly with the advent of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). In January 2004, the Department of Defense acknowledged a problem by temporarily adding 30,000 troops to the authorized active duty end strength of the Army. Congress addressed the issue by raising ground force statutory end strengths in the FY2005 defense authorization bill (P.L. 108-375), the FY2006 bill (P.L. 109-163), and again in FY2007 (P.L. 109-364). In FY2007, the Administration requested a permanent end strength increase—65,000 for the Army and 27,000 for the Marine Corps—and P.L. 110-181 the FY2008 defense authorization bill approved the increase. This report describes the background of these actions, current Administration planning, and assesses potential issues for the 110th Congress. This report will be updated.

Contents

Background	1
Administration End Strength Initiative	2
Permanent End Strength Increase	3
Force Size and Composition Considerations	3
What Kind of Forces Do We Need?	4
Are Specialized Units Needed?	4
Will the 2008 Review of Roles and Missions Result in a Larger or Different Force?	4

Contacts

Author Information.....	5
-------------------------	---

Background

Throughout the Cold War, end strength of the U.S. active duty force never dropped below 2.0 million personnel and peaked at over 3.5 million during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.¹ From 1989 to 1999, end strength dropped steadily from 2.1 million to 1.4 million, where it has remained. Force structure dropped even more with active Army divisions, for example, going from 18 to 10. Expectations that military requirements would diminish, however, were not realized; U.S. forces deployed to new missions in such places as the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and, with the recent advent of the GWOT, Afghanistan and other far-flung places. The most recent experience of *Operation Iraqi Freedom* indicates that U.S. ground forces are stretched thin.

Concerns about increased requirements for a smaller force surfaced over 10 years ago, initially focused on readiness. A 1994 Defense Science Board report found “pockets of unreadiness” attributed to turbulence in the armed forces.² The House Armed Services Committee discerned problems in the field and challenged Administration assertions that readiness remained high; by 1997 they asserted that “The post-Cold War defense drawdown and the expanding demands of manpower intensive peacekeeping and humanitarian operations ... are placing at risk the decisive military edge that this nation enjoyed at the end of the Cold War ...”³ Other studies highlighted problems stemming from the operating tempo of units (OPTEMPO) and personnel (PERSTEMPO).⁴ Various solutions were proposed. Many suggested fewer overseas commitments, but no Administration stemmed demands for U.S. forces. Congress mandated the Department of Defense (DOD) to compensate soldiers who were deployed too long or too often, but September 11, 2001, caused that law to be waived. Technological advances made transforming U.S. forces more combat effective against conventional forces, but could not substitute for manpower needed in the unconventional and asymmetric environments of “stability” operations. In contrast, some charged that the Army, in particular, was resisting such “constabulary” operations and therefore managed its personnel inefficiently.

The combat phase of the 2003 Iraq War was won quickly with fewer forces than many analysts expected. The occupation phase, however, soon involved some 220,000 troops. At the first anniversary of combat, DOD staged the “largest troop rotation since World War II.” All active Army divisions were involved. Indicators that forces were stretched thin included Reserve Component and Marine Corps units committed for over a year (shorter tours had been the norm); many personnel came under “stop-loss” orders that kept them from leaving service, were extended in their tours, or were ordered to multiple combat tours. Ceremonial companies from The Old Guard⁵ in Arlington, VA, were deployed to Djibouti, and no Army division was available as a strategic reserve (air and naval forces were shifted to cover key contingencies).⁶ A House bill

¹ CRS Report RL31349, *Defense Budget for FY2003: Data Summary*, by Stephen Daggett, for historical personnel levels and for force structure levels. End strength refers to the number of uniformed personnel at the end of a fiscal year and is a measure of the total size of the active forces. Force structure counts major combat elements, such as divisions or carrier battle groups, and does not directly reflect support elements.

² *Defense Science Board Task Force on Readiness: Final Report*, May, 1994.

³ House Committee on National Security, *Military Readiness 1997: Rhetoric and Reality*, April 9, 1997.

⁴ CRS Report 98-41, *Military Readiness, Operations Tempo (OPTEMPO) and Personnel Tempo (PERSTEMPO): Are U.S. Forces Doing Too Much?*, by Michael C. Ryan and, GAO/NSIAD-96-111BR, *Military Readiness: Data and Trends for January 1990 to March 1995*, March 1996.

⁵ One company of the regiment that provides ceremonial and contingency support for the National Capitol was deployed for the first time since the Vietnam War.

⁶ Robert Burns, “U.S. plans extra air power on Asia while ground forces focus on Iraq,” *Associated Press*, January 19,

was introduced to increase the Armed Forces by 83,700 personnel for five years.⁷ Various Senators proposed either adding one Army and one Marine division or permanently increasing the Army by 10,000 soldiers.⁸ No decreases to end strength have been proposed. Whether from internal or external pressure, in January 2004, DOD responded.

Administration End Strength Initiative

Before the House Armed Services Committee on January 28, 2004, Chief of Staff of the Army, General Peter Schoomaker, testified that he had been authorized by the Secretary of Defense to increase end strength of the Army by 30,000 personnel on a temporary, emergency basis.⁹ He argued that a permanent, legislated increase would be unwise and unnecessary. He asserted that a permanent increase would create a burden on planned defense budgets in the out years, citing \$1.2 billion annually for each increase of 10,000 troops. Some ongoing programs were presented as, over time, providing a more efficient and usable force structure within current Army end strength.

General Schoomaker began making organizational changes shortly after he became Chief of Staff in August 2003. He ordered divisions to create more combat “modules” by forming four new brigades from their existing three brigades and divisional support forces. Once implemented, this would provide 10 additional brigade-equivalent maneuver elements for the rotation base. Including planned Stryker brigades could eventually raise the number of brigades available from 33 to 48.¹⁰ He is pursuing a “unit manning” policy, rather than rotating individuals to deployed units. He would also shift from the “Cold-war” mix of combat capabilities to one geared to the less technologically-advanced enemies, joint operations, and stability-type operations now faced. Examples included reducing air defense, artillery, and ordnance unit strength and increasing military police, civil affairs, and transportation capabilities.

The Army and DOD also sought other ways to glean manpower efficiencies. General Schoomaker noted that 5,000 soldier positions were converted to civilian in 2003—making more soldiers available for deployment—and he anticipated finding 5,000 positions in 2004. This raised issues about the numbers of civilians and contractors needed by the Services. Another organizational initiative has been “re-balancing” the mix of Active Duty and Reserve Component forces to increase fairness and flexibility in deploying the total force and to allow initial deployments with fewer reserve forces. Other measures may have potential to reduce military manpower requirements over time, such as reposturing U.S. forces overseas and base closings and realignments mandated by the 2005 BRAC round.

Other than the above measures, Secretary Rumsfeld resisted any efforts to increase the overall size of U.S. military forces—even as the Iraq War lengthened beyond three years and sustainment of adequate forces there remained difficult. No other major war has been prosecuted by the United States without an increase in force size. Shortly after Secretary Rumsfeld’s resignation,

2004.

⁷ H.R. 3696. Note, an increase in one service might create demands in another, e.g., another Army division could require more Air Force tactical air control parties and training sorties.

⁸ Joseph C. Anselmo, “Pentagon Plans for Bigger, Better Army With ‘Spike,’” *CQ Weekly*, January 31, 2004, p. 270.

⁹ Federal News Service, “Operation Iraqi Freedom Force Rotation Plan,” HASC Hearing, January 28, 2004, p.9. “Emergency” refers to increased military requirements resulting from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “Temporary” was defined as the duration of the current emergency situation in Iraq or four years.

¹⁰ This includes several non-divisional, independent brigades and armored cavalry regiments. Costs may be \$9.9 billion from FY2004-FY2007. *Inside the Army*, February 9, 2004, p. 6.

however, President Bush said, “he plans to expand the overall size of the “stressed” U.S. armed forces to meet the challenges of a long-term global struggle against terrorists.”¹¹

Permanent End Strength Increase

On January 19, 2007, after having resisted previous congressional calls to permanently increase the end strengths of the Army and Marine Corps, the Department of Defense announced that it would seek approval to increase the permanent end strengths of the active Army by 65,000 and the active Marine Corps by 27,000.¹² This increase in troop strength is intended to eventually ease the significant strains that have been placed on the Army and Marine Corps that have been at war in Afghanistan since 2001 and in Iraq since 2003. The Army plans to create six additional brigade combat teams (BCTs) and two additional Patriot missile battalions, and the Marines plan to create an additional regimental combat team (RCT) from the increased end strength.¹³ These additional troops will also permit both services to fill shortages in existing organizations and create other smaller units that are in high demand. P.L. 110-181, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, authorizes this permanent end strength increase.

Force Size and Composition Considerations

Various considerations could influence the future debate. The “right” size and composition for the military addresses military requirements now and in the future. The Administration acknowledged stresses on the force, but long interpreted the situation as a “spike” in requirements that would return to a lower, more manageable “plateau.” Critics counter that the war on terrorism and occupation of Iraq could endure for many years and that the continuing potential for sudden, major crises, such as in Korea, requires a robust U.S. military force.¹⁴ One’s view of the future determines one’s idea of acceptable risk.

Other considerations may also influence the debate. Predicted federal deficits may create pressures to restrain the overall budget, and competition between sectors may call forth “guns versus butter” tensions. Within DOD, competition for funding will continue; many will argue that personnel costs must be constrained so that research and procurement for the transformational weapons of the future will be adequate.¹⁵ Some may be influenced by implications of the end strength debate for particular military installations and defense industry employers.

Another consideration is can we “grow the force” to create the additional Army and Marine units that the Administration has been authorized. While the Army and Marine Corps are currently meeting their recruitment goals, it has been reported that many young, promising Army officers are leaving at an increasing rate and that significant junior officer and non-commissioned officer (NCO) shortages are likely in the future.¹⁶ Without these junior officers and NCOs, the Army may

¹¹ Peter Baker, “U.S. Not Winning War in Iraq, Bush Says for First Time: President Plans to Expand Army, Marine Corps To Cope With Strain of Multiple Deployments,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2006, p. 14.

¹² Department of Defense (DOD) Press Transcripts, DOD News Briefing with Under Secretary of Defense David Chu, Lieutenant General Stephen Speakes, and Lieutenant General Emerson Gardner from the Pentagon, January 19, 2007.

¹³ Department of Defense (DOD) Press Transcripts, DOD News Briefing with Under Secretary of Defense David Chu, Lieutenant General Stephen Speakes, and Lieutenant General Emerson Gardner from the Pentagon, January 19, 2007.

¹⁴ Joseph C. Anselmo, “Pentagon Plans for Bigger, Better Army With “Spike”,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, January 31, 2004, p. 270. For a discussion of the Korean contingency, see CRS Report RS21582, *North Korean Crisis: Possible Military Options*, by Edward F. Bruner.

¹⁵ See CRS Report RL32238, *Defense Transformation: Background and Oversight Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

¹⁶ Andrew Tilghman, “The Army’s Other Crisis,” *Washington Monthly*, July 12, 2007.

not be able to stand up the six additional infantry BCTs and support units that it has been authorized to create.

What Kind of Forces Do We Need?

Specific types of forces needed will be defined by perceptions of future requirements, recent experiences, and response to current stresses. Congress influences the type of forces to be acquired by allocating end strength among the four Services. Further refinements occur as specific weapons systems and materiel are developed and procured, and through the oversight process.

Substantial ground combat forces will likely be needed, as efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq have no defined end point and other nations of concern, such as Iran, Syria, and North Korea, retain a potential for future armed confrontation. Combat campaigns in both Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated the value of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). SOF strength is being increased and is particularly important to the War on Terrorism, but that strength is accounted for within the Services that contribute their personnel to SOF units.¹⁷ In Iraq the ability of U.S. mechanized infantry and armored forces to survive and prevail against both regular and nonconventional enemy forces, even in urban areas, was striking. To reinforce success, some advocate maintaining and increasing units armed with Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles.¹⁸

Are Specialized Units Needed?¹⁹

There have been a number of recent proposals to create specialized units to meet the operational challenges of counterinsurgency, stabilization, and training/advisory operations, but the Army insists that its current force structure is adequate to meet these challenges, and that the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan precludes the effective use of these specialized units. The Marines have recently established a Marine Corps Training and Advisory Group (MCTAG) to “coordinate, form, train, and equip Marine Corps advisor and training teams for current and projected operations.”²⁰ Debate continues inside and outside of DOD if forces should continue to be responsible of a “full spectrum” of military operations or if specialist units should be created to address an increasingly complex global security environment?

Will the 2008 Review of Roles and Missions Result in a Larger or Different Force?

Section 941 of the Conference Report for H.R. 1585, the Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, (P.L. 110-181) establishes a requirement for DOD to conduct a quadrennial review of its roles and missions beginning in 2008.²¹ While this review is foremost a means to identify core mission areas and service capabilities, it may also examine force requirements,

¹⁷ Ann Scott Tyson, “Plan Seeks More Elite Forces to Fortify Military,” *Washington Post*, Jan 24, 2006, p. A1.

¹⁸ For more detail, see CRS Report RL31946, *Iraq War: Defense Program Implications for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

¹⁹ For more detail, see CRS Report RL34333, *Does the Army Need a Full-Spectrum Force or Specialized Units? Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert.

²⁰ Information in this section is from Cpl. Margaret Hughes, Marine Corps Forces Command, *Marine Corps News*, November 14, 2007.

²¹ Information in this section is taken from a House Armed Services Committee Press Release “Agreement Reached on H.R. 1585, The Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Conference Report,” December 6, 2007.

particularly forces applicable to counterinsurgency, stabilization, and training and advisory missions. The review might also recommend joint or service-specific actions to better address these potential core mission areas—to include the formation of units specifically designed to address these mission areas or change the current “mix” of forces that are needed for a current and potential future operations.

Author Information

Andrew Feickert
Specialist in Military Ground Forces

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.