



The Building Blocks of a Ready Military:

People, Funding, Tempo

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Prologue

BPC's Task Force on Defense Personnel, consisting of 25 defense and national security experts, will make recommendations to strengthen U.S. national security by improving and modernizing the way the Department of Defense recruits, manages, and retains its people. During this effort, BPC will publish a series of analytical papers examining the strengths and shortcomings of current personnel policies and practices. The first paper in the series analyzed the costs associated with maintaining a force of highly trained and highly professional individuals. This second paper will examine the effectiveness of today's all-volunteer force in the context of an increasingly complex and unpredictable security environment.

Executive Summary

As the global security environment becomes more complex and unpredictable, the U.S. military's state of preparedness has become a central focus for policymakers on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon. Military readiness is the metric commonly used to discuss whether the military is prepared to confront a multitude of threats. Top defense leaders have sounded the alarm over the current state of military readiness, especially when speaking about the military's ability to succeed in a conflict against a near-peer or high-end adversary.

Before the Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2016, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said, "Nothing is more important to us than readiness, which is why it was the highest priority we had in preparing the 2017 defense budget—partly to rebuild full-spectrum readiness after 15 years of counterinsurgency operations and partly to restore damage done over the last several years that was caused by the effects of sequestration cuts."¹ Discussions around readiness levels most often revolve around resources (whether the military is adequately funded) and operational tempo, or "OPTEMPO" (whether the pace of military operations is too high or too low). Often missing from this discussion is how readiness levels are impacted by the military personnel system.

People are the heart of a ready force. The Pentagon explicitly recognizes this truism by housing both personnel and readiness policy in the same office: the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. The two concepts are inextricably linked. Current military personnel policies exacerbate today's readiness challenges by amplifying the impact of low funding and high OPTEMPO to create a recruiting and retention death spiral. Low readiness leads to low morale and vice versa; which is why readiness, once lost, is so difficult to recover. Falling readiness levels negatively impact recruiting and retention, as service members lose confidence in their ability to succeed in their missions, which in turn increases the geostrategic risks facing the nation.

Despite this relationship between readiness and personnel, there is little attention paid to the system that manages the people who fight the nation's wars. The U.S. armed forces face constantly evolving missions, yet the personnel system that serves them is uniform and stagnant. The up-or-out nature of military careers force service members to miss out on key training activities, while the inflexibility of the system leaves service members and their families particularly vulnerable to budgetary instability. Meanwhile, as the military continues to shrink, current personnel procedure places ever-higher demand on the smaller number of troops who remain—particularly those small number of troops who operate at the "tip of the spear" of U.S. combat capability. As the Pentagon tries to mount a concerted readiness recovery, the system that manages service-member careers impedes progress. In an era where OPTEMPO demands are unlikely to fall and the defense budget is unlikely to significantly rise, Pentagon leaders should view personnel reform as the most important opportunity to improve long-term military-readiness levels.

If the brave men and women who work for the Defense Department are not fully prepared to face emerging threats, then no amount of money or other incentive will be enough to recruit and retain the highly talented workforce the military needs to succeed in the future. This paper will analyze readiness in the context of its impact on service members

and their families. In early 2017, BPC’s Task Force on Defense Personnel will make recommendations to boost readiness levels by increasing the flexibility of the personnel system and by making military service more attractive to the next generation of Americans.

Understanding Full-Spectrum Readiness

Readiness is an amorphous term. Former acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Brad Carson and his senior adviser Morgan Plummer have written that the lack of clarity on the topic “has left military ‘readiness’ a notion more mystical than scientific.”² Perhaps the most authoritative document on military readiness is the *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Guide to the Chairman’s Readiness System*, which says, “One of the major obstacles to ensuring a force is ready is understanding what readiness really means.”³ The *Guide* provides a useful answer to this obstacle by stipulating that readiness levels should be tracked against the military’s ability to execute *The National Military Strategy*.⁴ *The National Military Strategy* is a regularly updated document that describes the role of the military in advancing U.S. national interests and in supporting the goals of the president’s national security strategy.

The most recent *National Security Strategy of the United States*—a document regularly updated by the White House for Congress—requires the military be “ready to deter and defeat threats to the homeland, including against missile, cyber, and terrorist attacks, while mitigating the effects of potential attacks and natural disasters.”⁵ This short statement illustrates the variety of threats the military must be prepared to confront. No other military in the world is tasked with the volume of responsibilities, both at home and abroad, that the U.S. armed forces must be prepared for. Defense leaders characterize the variety of threats on a continuum, called the “spectrum of conflict,” which dictates a range of military options (see Figure 1).

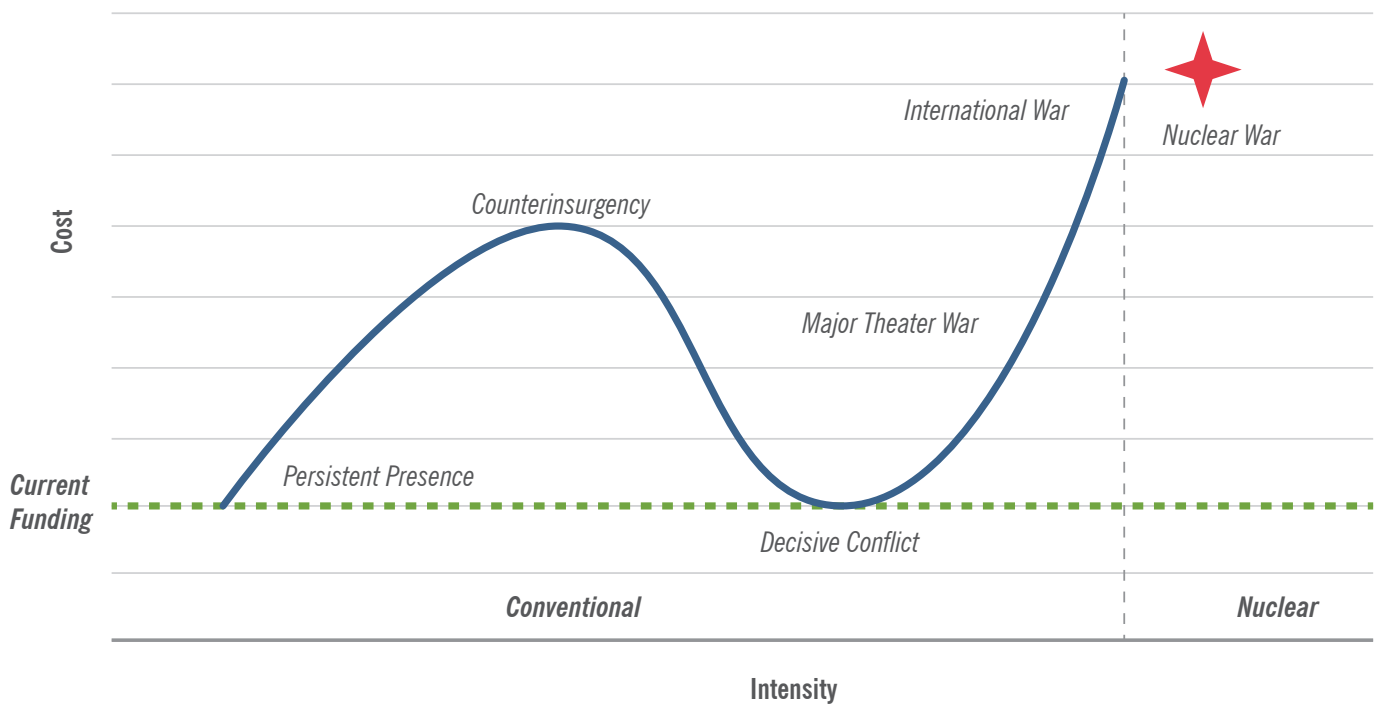
Figure 1. Legacy Spectrum-of-Conflict Model



Since the spectrum of conflict is so broad, a military prepared for one mission may not be ready for a different one. This unfortunate position is where the U.S. military finds itself today.

The legacy spectrum-of-conflict model is no longer accurate for today's threat environment. A more accurate depiction is illustrated in the "new normal" spectrum of conflict (see Figure 2). This model shows that even in times of relative peace, the U.S. military is called upon to provide a persistent global presence, which comes at a significant cost. Additionally, over the last 15 years, the military has realized that counterinsurgency campaigns, though lower in intensity, come at a high cost in terms of both lives and dollars. Based on recent testimony, the military is currently only adequately funded for a small number of the total missions it is responsible for. This is why the Pentagon's FY 2017 budget request is focused on restoring "full-spectrum readiness" after discovering readiness deficiencies resulting from "14 years of counterinsurgency-centric campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan."⁶

Figure 2. New Normal Spectrum-of-Conflict Model



Evidence of Readiness Shortfall

Objective evidence of a readiness shortfall is difficult to find, but that does not mean the shortfall is any less real. For national security reasons, the Defense Department is reluctant to publicly broadcast the precise state of U.S. military preparedness. Even organizations like the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) have a difficult time precisely measuring military-readiness levels. A 2013 GAO report concluded that the Pentagon “sometimes presents detailed readiness data without sufficient context on how this information relates to or affects the information it provides on . . . areas, such as equipment, personnel, and training.”⁷

Even reports designed to communicate readiness levels to policymakers are largely not sufficient to inform resourcing and other strategic decisions. The Defense Department is required to provide a Quarterly Readiness Report to Congress (QRRR). This classified report is intended to help lawmakers track military-readiness levels and determine if the military is properly funded to meet its mission. The QRRR primarily provides readiness insight by using two main systems: the Status of Resources and Training System (SORTS) and the Defense Readiness Report System (DRRS). Both systems rely on a combination of objective resource information (for example, personnel, equipment, supply, training) and subjective commander assessments of unit capability. However, despite the importance of these reports and the long-standing challenge of measuring the military’s overall readiness, SORTS and DRRS are still criticized for lacking insight. A 2013 CBO report found that these quarterly reports lack the information that could best assist Congress, saying, “The QRRR simply does not systematically address many readiness questions, such as the pace of operations and its effect on readiness or morale and psychological well-being.”⁸

Since detailed readiness metrics are either nonexistent or classified, and even reports to Congress are incomplete, outsiders must rely on a combination of analytical methods to develop an accurate assessment of military-readiness levels. Public testimony from defense leaders provides a first-hand, if sometimes biased, expert account of military capability. Budgetary inputs provide additional context and present an objective measurement of changes over time. Other metrics, like retention levels and survey data, can add additional background and help paint a more complete picture of overall military readiness.

Military Leaders Are Worried

Pentagon leaders have repeatedly made public statements plainly stating that the military is struggling with its overall, full-spectrum readiness levels. During recent testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford stated that the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps will not be able to address “their readiness challenges” until 2020, while the Air Force could take until 2028 to be sufficiently ready for their full-spectrum missions.⁹ These are worrying admissions and speak to the depth of the problem. The caps on the defense budget are set to expire in 2022, so for the Air Force at least, the readiness recovery seems to be affected by other factors in addition to the budget caps mandated by the Budget Control Act (BCA).

During posture hearings for the FY 2017 defense budget, service leaders have been nearly unanimous in their assessments of the military’s state of readiness. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, said the Army’s readiness is “not at a level that is

appropriate for what the American people expect to defend them.”¹⁰ Marine Commandant Gen. Robert Neller recently stated that the Marine Corps’ aviation units “are currently unable to meet our training and mission requirements primarily due to Ready Basic Aircraft shortfalls.”¹¹ While former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh ominously stated, “The average age of our aircraft is at an all-time high, and the size of our force and state of our full-spectrum readiness are at or near all-time lows.”¹² Lastly, Navy chief Adm. John Richardson painted the rosier picture, saying the Navy is “still digging out” from maintenance and readiness shortfalls.¹³

Gen. Milley has frequently sounded the alarm over the Army’s current state of overall readiness. Since 2001, the Army has dedicated most of its training and preparation to fighting terrorist networks and counterinsurgency conflicts. Indeed, according to Milley, the Army has “very good current capability and capacity to fight the counterterrorist and counterinsurgency fight.”¹⁴ However, on a recent trip to Africa, Milley said that against “higher-end threats, our skills have atrophied over the last 15 years.”¹⁵ Furthermore, at a recent Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Daniel Allyn testified, “Less than one-third of Army forces are at acceptable levels of readiness to conduct sustained ground combat in a full-spectrum environment.”¹⁶

“Less than one-third of Army forces are at acceptable levels of readiness to conduct sustained ground combat in a full-spectrum environment.” – Gen. Daniel Allyn

The Air Force is in a similar position when it comes to high-end readiness. Although the Army and Marine Corps boots-on-the-ground deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan have steeply declined over the last several years, that has done little to ease demand on an Air Force tasked with executing large-scale air campaigns over Libya and against ISIS, in addition to maintaining a continuous air presence over Afghanistan. These operations are mostly focused on close air support and tactical air-to-ground attacks. While these operations are inherently risky, today’s American pilots have enjoyed theater air dominance and have not had to confront enemy air defenses. In an extraordinary statement from a budget document, the FY 2017 Air Force budget request stated, “Though very proficient at current low-end operations, less than 50 percent of Combat Air Forces (CAF) are proficient in other required high-end mission sets.”¹⁷ These are worrying trends for a military that has global responsibilities and a full spectrum-of-conflict mission.

Troubling Budget Dynamics

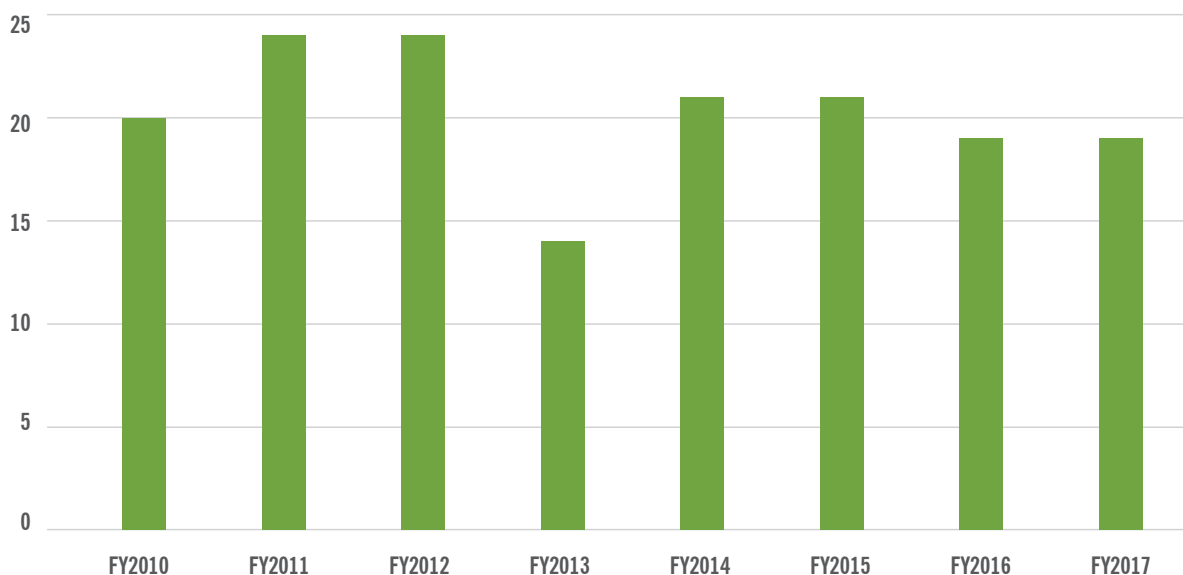
While the statements of top service commanders are certainly alarming, additional analysis is warranted. The annual defense budget provides a glimpse into internal DOD planning and provides a high-level view of the inputs that shape military readiness. It is important to highlight that the budget merely provides information on readiness inputs, such as funding for flying hours and training rotations, rather than readiness outputs, such as targeting accuracy and unit performance ratings.¹⁸ Outsiders can see trends and make inferences about the state of the military, but these inferences should be linked to other data to make accurate assessments of overall readiness levels.

The base defense budget is divided among five main appropriations: Military Personnel (MILPERS); Operations and Maintenance (O&M); Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (RDT&E); Procurement; and Military Construction (MILCON). As a general

rule, MILPERS and O&M make up roughly two-thirds of the annual budget, while RDT&E and Procurement make up most of the remainder. MILCON is usually only about 1 percent of the annual budget. Each appropriation has different governing rules, but all can be linked to building military readiness in some way.¹⁹

Though each defense appropriation is implicitly tied to readiness, the O&M budget request is explicitly justified to Congress in terms of its impact on readiness. The 2017 defense budget requested \$205.8 billion for the O&M account and justified this by saying, “O&M programs support the Services’ efforts to enhance readiness by focusing on recovering full-spectrum readiness to meet current demands and to ensure our Joint Force is ready for future contingencies.”²⁰ The O&M account provides funds for the most obvious “readiness-building” activities. For example, in order to prepare pilots for combat, pilots must fly an adequate number of training hours. For the Army, units are rotated through combat-training centers to train for potential future conflicts and upcoming deployments. The Navy builds readiness through ship-steaming days, depot maintenance, weapon sustainment, and other training activities. All of these activities are funded from the O&M account. From a funding perspective, one of the best ways to evaluate the military’s overall readiness level is to closely track the O&M budget.

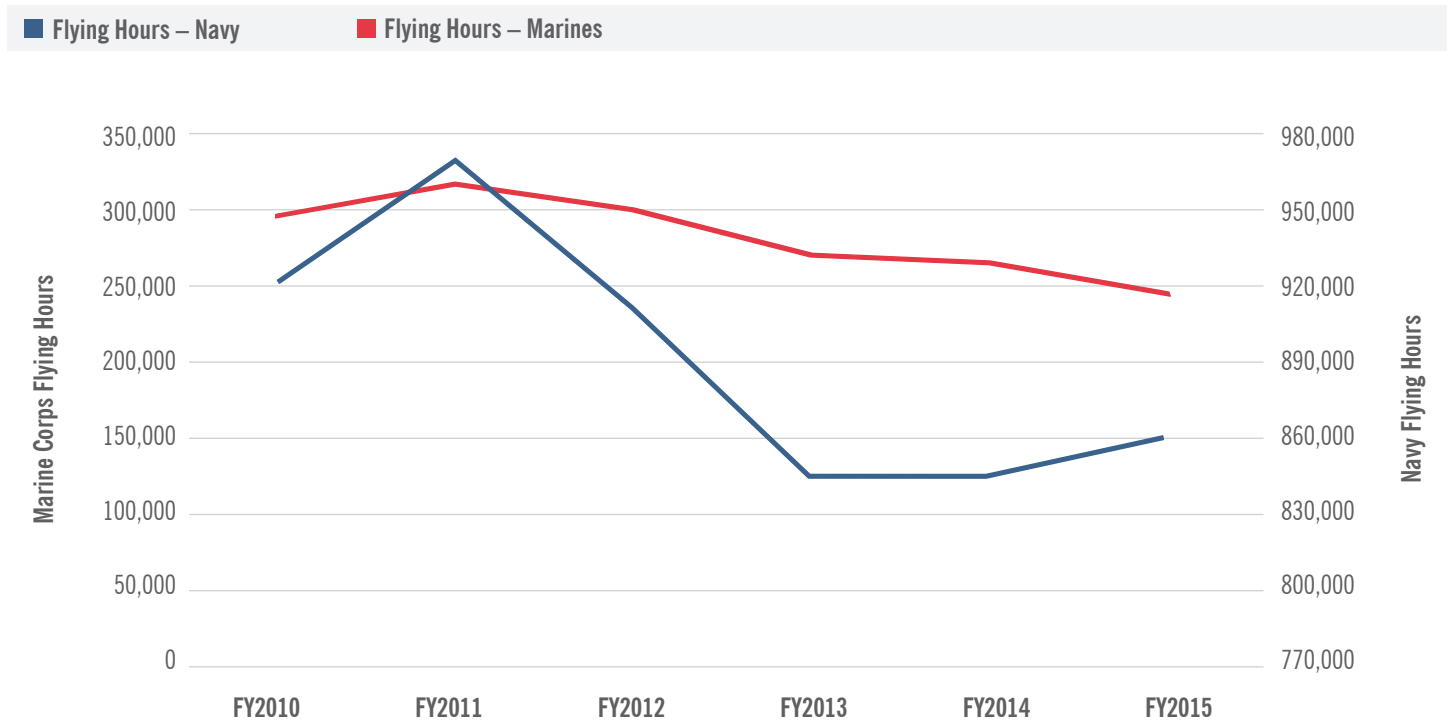
Figure 3. Funded Army Combat Training-Center Rotations



Source: BPC analysis of Defense Department budget data

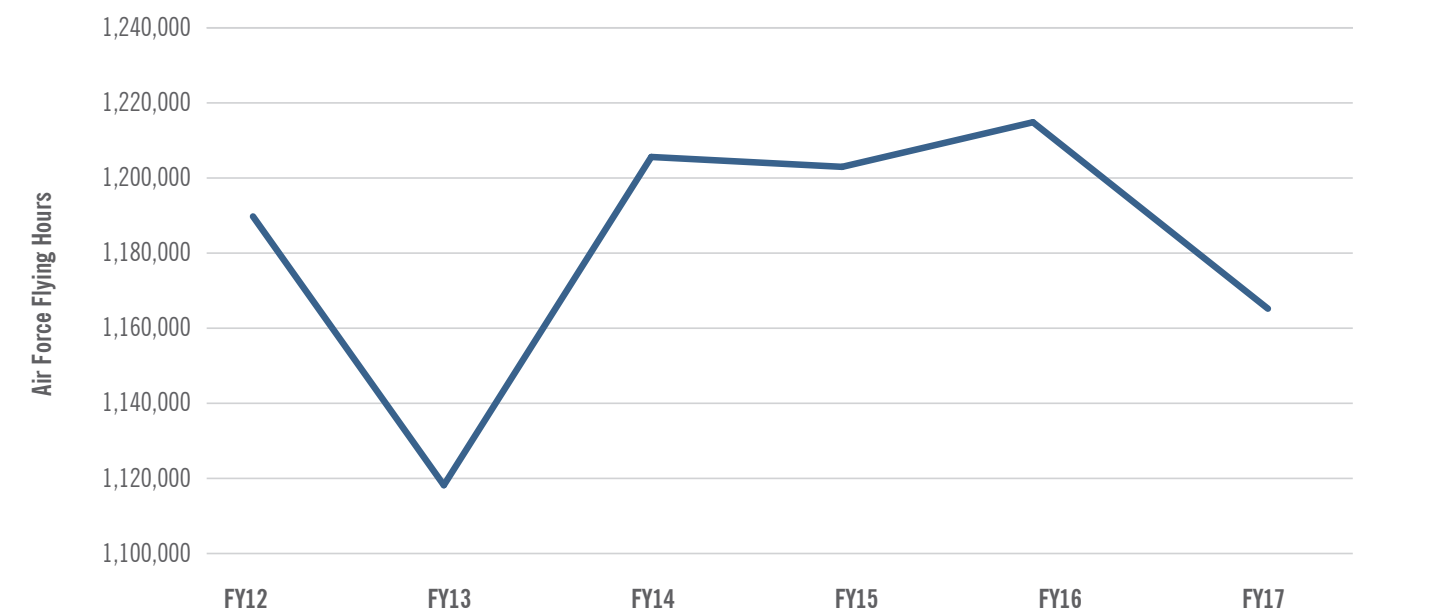
Over the last several years, the funding for each military service’s primary readiness-building activities has been inconsistent, at best, and heavily cut, at worst. For the Army, the number of funded combat training-center rotations was cut from 24 in FY 2012, to just 14 in FY 2013 (see Figure 3). These training-center rotations were described by former Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno as “the culminating event of readiness for brigade combat teams.”²¹ Since 2013, the Army has increased the number of funded training-center rotations but is still only projecting 19 rotations in FY 2017, which is 21 percent lower than in 2012. If one uses 2012 as a baseline, cumulatively the Army has canceled 28 training-center rotations over the last five years, or more than one full year of training.

Figure 4. Funded Navy and Marine Corps Flying Hours



Source: BPC analysis of Defense Department budget data

Figure 5. Funded Air Force Flying Hours



Source: BPC analysis of Defense Department budget data

For the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps, flying hours is one of the metrics used to measure readiness for aviation units. Unfortunately for all three branches, flying hours have declined since FY 2012 (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). The problem is particularly pronounced in the Navy and Marine Corps, which have seen a 6 and 19 percent reduction in flying hours, respectively, from FY 2012 to FY 2015. A Marine spokesperson summed up the situation: “We do not have enough ready basic aircraft. . . . That means we are not getting enough flight hours, and we aren’t up on our maintenance requirements for those specific aircraft.”²² The Marine Corps has requested an additional \$460 million for the next fiscal year to address “readiness shortfalls.”²³ While the Air Force has recently experienced a return to pre-FY-2013 flying-hour levels, it’s particularly notable that the Air Force experienced a 6 percent dip in flying hours from FY 2012 to FY 2013.

In 2013, the Air Force temporarily grounded 13 combat squadrons—nearly one-third of active-duty fighter and bomber units—due to a \$591 million cut to the flying-hours program.²⁴ The Army made a similar readiness-harming decision when it canceled major training events for 78 percent of its combat brigades—essentially every unit that was not tapped to deploy.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Navy delayed the planned deployment of the Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group due to sequestration-driven budget cuts.²⁶ These major decisions have long-lasting repercussions: Once individual readiness levels fall, it can take years for the military to recover.

Retention Levels and Survey Data

The budget realities of the last several years have forced the military to downsize overall. Since 2012, the total size of the active force has decreased by nearly 100,000 personnel. The reduction in force has, to some degree, masked any specific retention problems. Over the last year, however, some cracks in retention have begun to form, most obviously in the case of fighter pilots, who form a key combat capability for the U.S. military.

No American service member on the ground has been killed by an enemy aircraft attack since the Korean War in 1953.²⁷ This amazing streak of air dominance has been enabled by the readiness of American fighter pilots who have sufficient experience and are well-trained for their missions. This capability is in danger now as the result of numerous readiness-related challenges. In August 2016, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said, “in just a couple years” the Air Force could be short of approximately 1,000 fighter pilots. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein attributed the main reason for this shortage to readiness, stating, “Pilots who don’t fly, maintainers who don’t maintain, and controllers who don’t control are not going to stay.”²⁸

Recent Pentagon survey data backs up Goldfein’s assertion. The most recent Status of Forces survey of active-duty personnel states, “Overall, retention, stress in work life, and unit readiness [are] generally worse in 2014 than 2013.” Additionally, only 65 percent of those surveyed said that “their units were well prepared to perform their wartime mission.”²⁹ This is 3 to 7 percentage points lower than most of the survey results from the preceding ten years.

Causes of Readiness Shortfall

If measuring the readiness shortfall is a challenge, determining the cause of the shortfall is comparably easy. Today's readiness shortfall is primarily caused by a combination of three factors: (1) persistently high OPTEMPO, (2) stagnant or decreasing defense budgets, and (3) an inflexible personnel system. Two of these issues reside mostly outside of the Pentagon's purview. Global events largely dictate the military demands that drive OPTEMPO, while the defense budget is a product of the legislative branch and domestic political trends. Therefore, one of the few places where defense leaders can improve long-term readiness levels is through modernizing a personnel system that has not been renovated since the end of World War II.

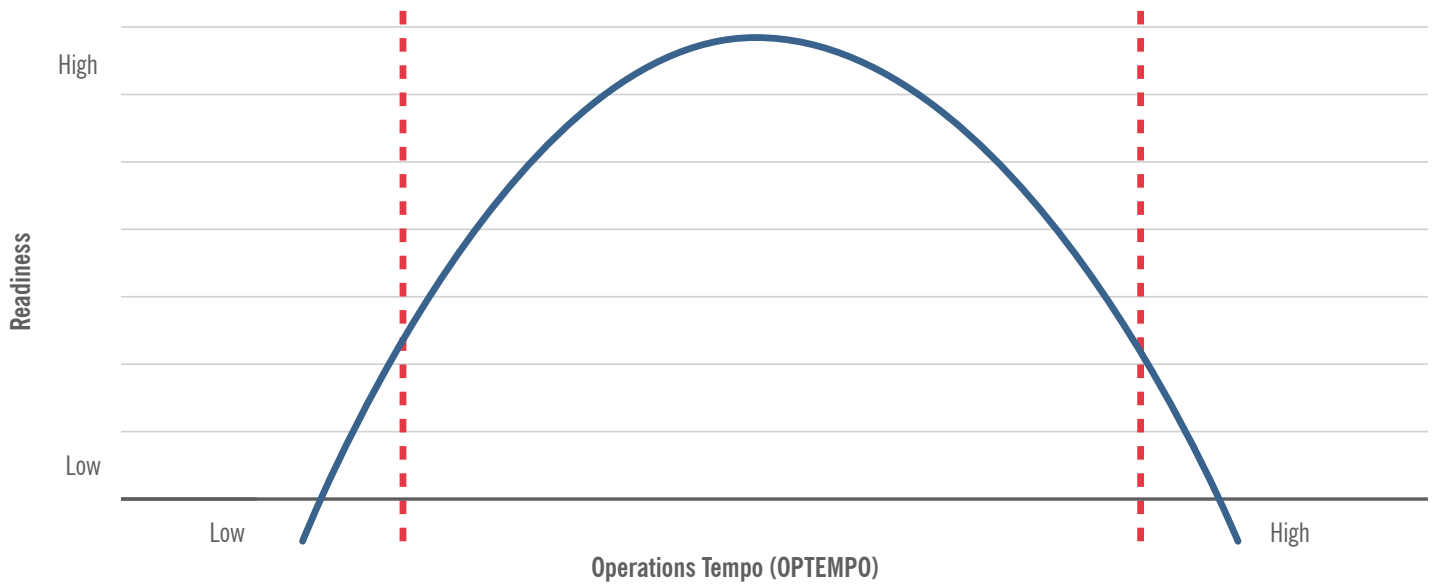
High OPTEMPO Drains Readiness

OPTEMPO, or the pace of military operations, is another factor that can impact military readiness. Though some level of deployment activity enhances individual and unit readiness by providing opportunities to utilize skills developed in training, excessively high OPTEMPO can actually negatively impact overall readiness by eliminating the opportunity to train for other kinds of missions (see Figure 6).³⁰ The Defense Science Board spoke to this dynamic, saying, "OPTEMPO intensity levels, if sustained beyond normal for extended periods, can actually reduce the ability of our forces to train for all assigned missions."³¹ For example, in 2007, at the peak of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military focused the majority of its energy on fighting and winning a counterinsurgency fight. This focus could have distracted the military from its nuclear-deterrent mission, leading to the accidental transportation of nuclear weapons across the country (see Box 1).

The wide array of missions that the U.S. military has engaged in since the sequester cuts in FY 2013 has further exacerbated the demand problem. The following is a condensed list of "major deployments" from the Congressional Research Service:

- The war in Afghanistan
- The continuing U.S. presence in Iraq
- The fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other terrorist groups
- Various movements and operations in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Liberia, Libya, Niger, Poland, Senegal, Somalia, South Korea, South Sudan, Ukraine, and Uganda
- The Ebola epidemic
- Various disaster-relief missions
- New force presence in Australia
- And this is only a list of "major deployments." The U.S. military has also engaged in numerous non-major deployments since FY 2013. In testimony to the House Subcommittee on Readiness relating to the pace of military operations, Rear Adm. Jeffrey A. Harley stated, "After years of operating above sustainable levels, we remain challenged to meet the necessary surge capacity in quantity and readiness across a wide array of forces."³²

Figure 6. Readiness vs. OPTEMPO Model



The 2007 Air Force Nuclear Weapons Incident

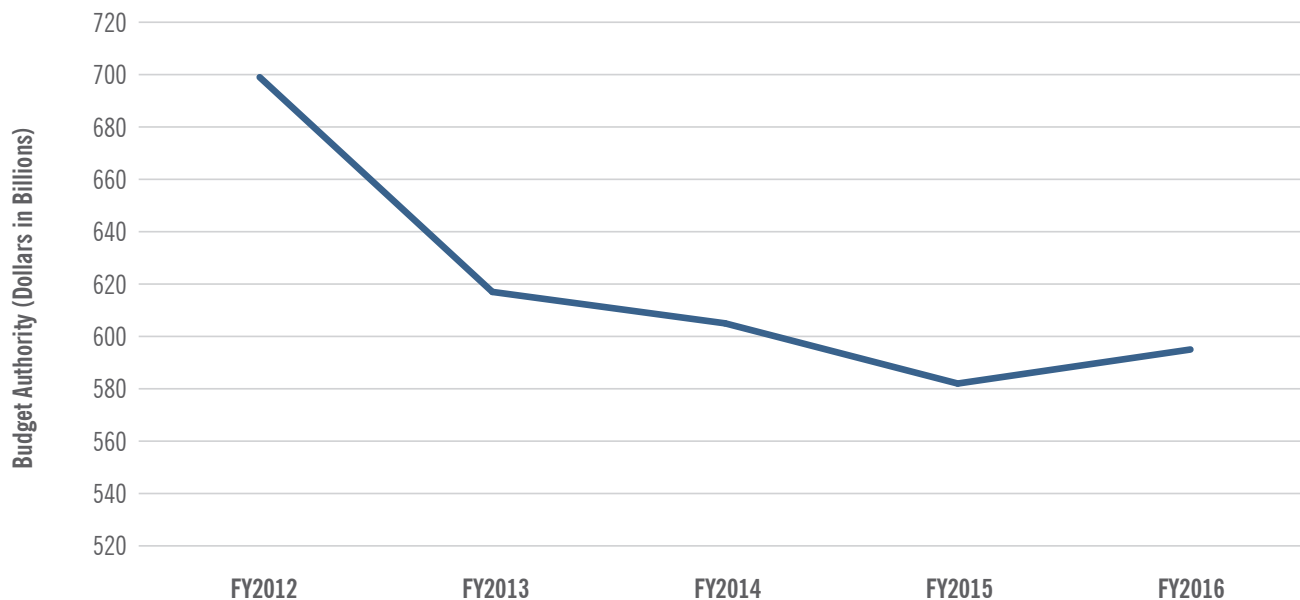
The risk of a force that is not ready to execute its assigned missions takes on added danger when it involves nuclear weapons. While the Air Force was consumed with the counterinsurgency fight in the Middle East, it lost focus on its nuclear responsibilities. This resulted in a highly unsafe event: On August 29, 2007, six nuclear-armed cruise missiles were accidentally loaded onto a B-52 bomber and flown from Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, to Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. The nuclear warheads on the missiles were supposed to have been removed prior to loading. The error was not discovered until 36 hours later, after the nuclear warheads had been left mostly unguarded while mounted to the aircraft. This incident led to a massive shakeup within the Air Force, with the resignation of the secretary of the Air Force and the chief of staff and with the eventual creation of the Air Force Global Strike Command to oversee all Air Force nuclear operations.

The Defense Science Board formed an independent task force to determine the cause of such a lapse in the performance of a “no-fail” mission. The board retraced the steps that led to the unauthorized relocation of nuclear weapons and determined several areas of lax oversight and failure to follow proper procedures. However, the deeper concern raised by the board was “the perception in the force that nuclear forces and the nuclear-deterrent mission are increasingly devalued.”³³ This perception arose from the frequent transfer of responsibility for nuclear forces following the end of the Cold War. As the nuclear mission became less prominent, the personnel assigned to the mission felt neglected by the Air Force chain of command, resulting in lower morale and, consequently, lower readiness. The task force highlighted an Air Force report identifying an “urgent need for attention to personnel matters for nuclear-experienced people.”²⁴

A Constrained Budget

The dynamics of the post-BCA defense budget have forced defense leaders to cut readiness funding in order to meet budget caps that have constrained overall military spending. The FY 2016 defense budget (including overseas-contingency-operation funding) is approximately \$104 billion smaller in real terms than in FY 2012, the last year before the BCA went into effect (see Figure 7). In FY 2013 alone, the Defense Department had to confront \$52 billion in near-instantaneous cuts resulting from sequestration triggered by the BCA.³⁵ Rapidly implemented budget cuts would be troublesome for most government agencies, but for an organization as complex as the Pentagon, sequestration and the follow-on budget caps present particularly difficult trade-offs that directly impact U.S. national security. Unfortunately, one of the repercussions of the BCA was a need to delay the training and maintenance that most directly impacts military personnel preparing to respond to future threats.

Figure 7. Defense Budget Cuts Since Sequestration (FY 2017 Constant Dollars)

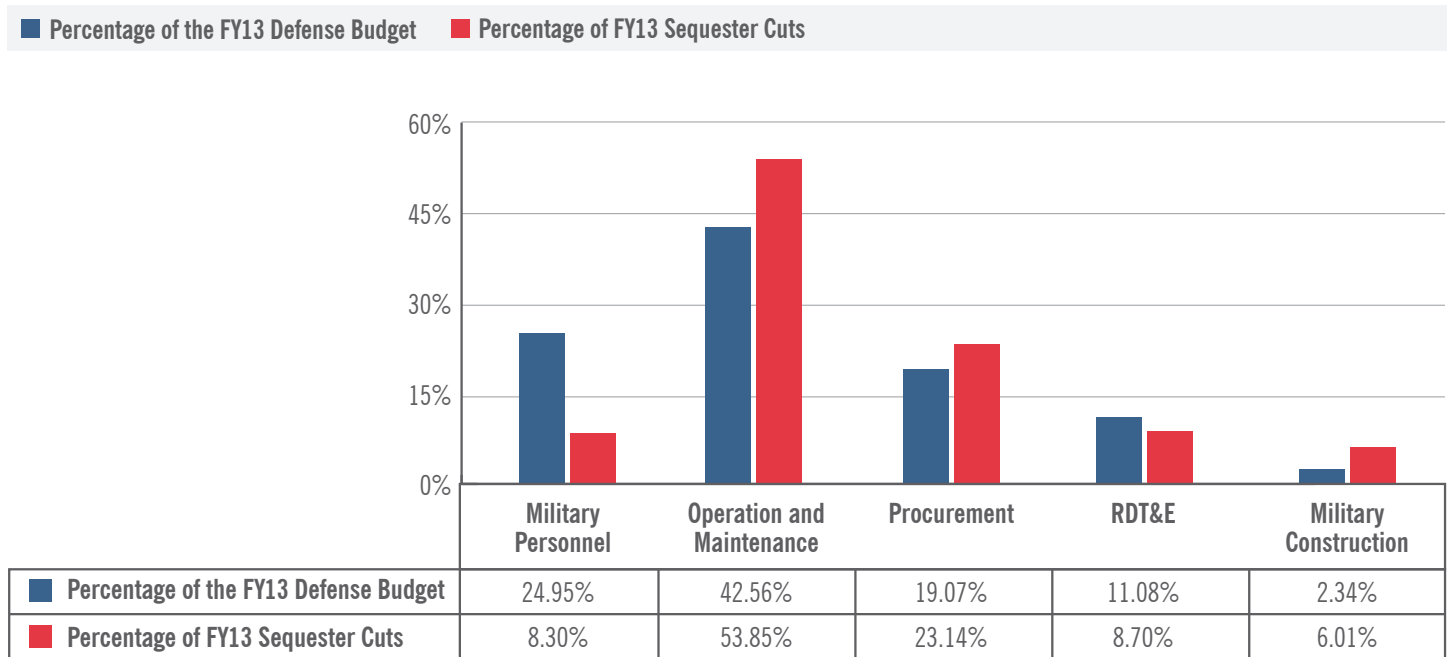


Source: National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2017

The year-on-year fluctuations of the various defense budget accounts show how budget dynamics have intensified the readiness struggle that has impacted the military since BCA-mandated budget caps came into effect. When sequestration struck the Pentagon in 2013, the department cut O&M outlays by approximately 9 percent from the prior year. Meanwhile, the Procurement, RDT&E, and MILPERS accounts were only cut by a combined average of 6 percent. Of the \$53 billion cut by the BCA in FY 2013, roughly 54 percent was taken from the O&M budget, despite O&M consuming only 43 percent of the total defense budget (see Figure 8). The department was forced to adversely cut O&M funding, even while facing a recognized readiness challenge due to the structure of the defense budget.

Pentagon planners had to go where the money was in order to meet the sequestration requirements. While it takes years to shrink the size of the force and it can actually increase costs to prematurely break acquisition contracts, O&M activities are easier to cut on a shorter time line.

Figure 8. FY 2013 Sequester Cuts Disproportionately Impacted Readiness



Note: Data is in FY 2017 constant dollar outlays

Source: National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2017

Personnel Systems Exacerbate Readiness Challenge

As dwindling defense dollars force Pentagon leaders to sacrifice readiness-building activities, the inflexibility of current personnel practices exacerbates the readiness struggle. Up-or-out and one-size-fits-all career tracks leave few options to mitigate the negative impact of readiness shortfalls created by canceled training events. If a service member misses out on a training activity or other critical experience, the current system does not allow for individuals to make up for that missed opportunity. For example, 78 percent of the Army captains who were combat-unit company commanders in 2013 were forced to miss major training events that are crucial for learning small-unit tactics and leadership.³⁶ Since the personnel system limits company command to only a two-year assignment, there is almost zero opportunity to reschedule the missed training.

The up-or-out promotion system forces the Army to rotate officers on an inflexible timetable in order to ensure that all officers receive comparable experience. Company command is one of the foundational leadership assignments for junior officers. Successful company commanders often go on to senior leadership roles within the Army, eventually commanding large troop formations when they are promoted to serve as battalion and even brigade commanders. Missed training events at the company level leave an experience gap that could last the length of an officer’s career. As former Army Deputy Chief of Staff Major Gen. Gary Cheek said, if during a two-year company-command assignment, a captain misses crucial training experiences, “it’s gone forever.”³⁷ The same can be said for crucial assignments in the Navy and Air Force. As Air Force Secretary James recently wrote, the military, “unlike many private-sector companies, which can fill vacancies by simply tapping

an experienced and flexible labor pool, ... the military has to grow its own set of skilled specialties, and that can take years.”³⁸ Today’s personnel systems artificially limit the military’s ability to adapt its forces to budgetary instability and readiness challenges. The experience and readiness gaps created during the initial years of the BCA will have long-lasting ripple effects.

Retention Harmed by Readiness Shortfall

Service members join and stay in the military for numerous reasons. While compensation and quality-of-life are important, the military’s main retention tool is its unique mission. Protecting the nation is a calling, and if the military is forced to shortchange that mission through cuts to readiness and training, many service members will decide to leave.

The current Air Force fighter-pilot shortage is in many ways a product of the consistent readiness struggles of the last several years.³⁹ Dollars spent on readiness-producing activities like flying hours serve a dual purpose: It allows service members to be better prepared for future conflict, but readiness also acts as an important retention tool. As current Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein recently said: “In my mind, readiness and morale are inextricably linked. Where we have high readiness, we have high morale. Where we have low readiness, we have our lowest morale.” As a result, in 2013, when the Air Force first started dealing with drastic flying-hour reductions and pilot shortages, then-acting Air Force Secretary Eric Fanning said the main reason pilots are leaving are “flying-hour issues” because “pilots want to fly.”⁴⁰

Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of the one-size-fits-all, up-or-out personnel system is the amount of time it takes to recover from unanticipated setbacks and adversity. The Air Force fighter-pilot shortage will take years to correct. In FY 2016, the Air Force projected a shortage of 723 fighter pilots. The pilot training system can produce approximately 200 new pilots every year at a cost of about \$2.6 million each. Even in the absolute best-case scenario, where no additional pilots leave the Air Force, it would take nearly four years to get back to full-strength. However, over the last two years, the service has lost an average of about 355 pilots per year.⁴¹ Unless major changes are made to how personnel are managed, the Air Force could be facing significant retention challenges for the foreseeable future.

The Readiness Death Spiral

While the conversation around readiness is often abstract or theoretical, it is important to remember that for individual service members, the consequence of low readiness is an increased risk of injury or death. Unless otherwise interrupted, low readiness levels create a death spiral that negatively impacts retention, recruiting, and puts more Americans in danger.

As decreased defense funding disproportionately impacts readiness accounts, service members have fewer opportunities to train and improve their skills. When critical combat skills atrophy, military personnel lose confidence in their ability to successfully perform their missions, which erodes unit cohesion and morale. Eventually low morale has a negative impact on military retention levels. As the most experienced and skilled service members decide to hang up their uniforms, those left behind must carry more of the burden, which places further stress upon an already stressed force and makes recruiting the next generation even more difficult. Ultimately, adversaries of the United States will take notice of this readiness death spiral and the level of national security risk will rise, while at the same time, the military's ability to respond continues to fall.

The precursors to the readiness death spiral described above are already evident. In January 2016, two Marine Corps CH-53 Super Stallions were conducting a nighttime training mission off the coast of Hawaii. The two aircraft collided and all 12 Marines onboard both helicopters were killed.⁴² The official investigation ruled that the accident was caused by pilot error, but the cause of the error could easily be attributed to low readiness levels. According to the investigation report, "By late 2015, Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 pilots became increasingly concerned that they were not logging enough flight hours to maintain proficiency." And at the time of the accident, many of the squadron's pilots "believed they were not ready for combat, as they felt they would not be able to safely execute certain tasks, like safely landing the helicopter at night."⁴³

Further illustrating the readiness death spiral, some of the Marine pilots not involved in the crash, who taxpayers had spent millions to train, were "looking forward to follow-on ground tours because of the lack of flight time." Unless readiness conditions change, many of these same pilots might seek future employment outside of the military, which would be an additional loss on top of those who were killed in this accident.

While this incident is tragic, it should serve as a loud warning for the military as a whole. Twelve lives were needlessly lost due in large part to low readiness levels. This accident occurred in training. The consequences of low readiness in a conflict against an adversary would result in many more American service members injured or killed.

Geostrategic Risks of Low Readiness

A military that is incapable of preparing for the full spectrum of conflict is forced to choose what it will prepare for. History shows that in these cases, military leaders often get it wrong. When a military is unprepared for a fight, the results can be devastating. More American service members are hurt or killed and morale plummets. The national security impact of degraded readiness can be categorized in two ways: (1) the military is less prepared for unanticipated conflict, and (2) the risk of conflict rises. Unfortunately, the readiness challenges currently facing the force are in some ways a repetition of a pattern that has sporadically affected the U.S. military over its history.

Unprepared for the Unanticipated

Following the end of the Vietnam War, in the early days of the all-volunteer force, the U.S. military was widely regarded as a “hollow force.”⁴⁴ Due to a combination of factors, in 1979, six out of ten U.S.-based Army divisions were classified as “not combat-ready.” Of the four divisions forward-stationed in Europe, which should have had the highest levels of readiness to deter Soviet aggression, one division was classified as not ready.⁴⁵ These low readiness levels were brought about by difficulties associated with the post-Vietnam transition to a volunteer military, eroding value of military pay, lack of funding for key training activities, and equipment in disrepair. In short, the post-Vietnam military was ill-prepared to face a variety of threats and essentially incapable of responding to unforeseen security challenges.

The lack of readiness in the late-1970s led to disastrous operations in the early 1980s. Operation Eagle Claw was launched in April 1980 to rescue American hostages held in Iran. The mission failed due to a combination of factors related to military readiness. For example, the Army lacked helicopter pilots who were sufficiently trained for low-level night flying while the military’s mission planners did not have enough experience with joint special operations to execute the mission successfully. One assessment of Operation Eagle Claw claimed, “The disaster immediately raised doubts about U.S. military capabilities and the state of readiness of the armed forces.”⁴⁶ Ultimately, the unsuccessful rescue attempt resulted in eight dead service members and the continued captivity of 52 Americans at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

In more recent times, the U.S. military was again caught off guard by the counterinsurgency fight that developed in Iraq in 2004. The Pentagon was clearly well-prepared to defeat the Iraqi military and topple Saddam Hussein’s regime; it took only a few short months to accomplish both. But the military was not sufficiently ready in terms of both capacity and capability to quell the instability that ensued following the rapid overthrow of the long-standing Iraqi government. Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, describes the U.S. military’s inability to cope with insurgent operations in the early years in Iraq and Afghanistan, asserting: “The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq in the [early 2000s] were the most consequential demonstrations of U.S. military weakness in these areas of all [counterinsurgency]. Through 2006, both operations were essentially failing, despite initial impressive successes that seemed to square with visions of a military revolution held by Secretary of Defense [Donald] Rumsfeld and others.”⁴⁷ As Iraq descended into a sectarian civil war, the Army and Marine Corps troops on the ground did not have the strategy or skill sets needed to counter the violence. It took nearly three years of deadly fighting before U.S. forces finally adapted to the unique demands of a counterinsurgency campaign. From 2003 to the start of

the surge in 2007, 3,309 American service members were killed before the military was able to turn the tide of the conflict. The “surge,” as Gen. David Petraeus has said, was not just a surge of capacity (boots on the ground) but also a surge of ideas, or military capability.⁴⁸ This blend of capacity and capability perfectly aligns with the desired goal of military readiness.

Adversaries Taking Advantage

As defense and military leaders continue to harp about the armed forces’ current lack of readiness and as BCA-induced budget caps continue to limit the Defense Department’s institutional flexibility, the rest of the world has clearly taken notice. The U.S. armed forces are the world’s only military with a global presence and responsibility. This means that the global community pays attention when they see signals of U.S. military instability or unpreparedness. Since the BCA became law in 2011 and caps began to impact the defense budget in 2013, policymakers on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon, and in the White House have stated that the U.S. military is harmed by the budget cuts. Indeed, President Barack Obama has requested more money than the BCA allowed in every single year since the budget caps took effect. Even the two bipartisan budget agreements that marginally increased defense spending did not provide all the funds that the White House requested. Based on global events over the last few years, this self-inflicted harm to U.S. military readiness has been noticed around the world, and U.S. adversaries have taken advantage.

In August 2014, roughly one year after the BCA cut defense spending by 8 percent, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. Russia’s actions followed a period of U.S. military withdrawal from the European theater. In May 2013, the last permanently assigned Air Force A-10 attack aircraft was withdrawn from Europe.⁴⁹ Less than a year later, the Air Force announced it was seeking to retire the entire fleet of A-10s due to budget constraints. Similarly, in April 2013, the Army removed its last tank brigades from Europe.⁵⁰ Russia took notice of these major force redistributions, and these cuts likely played a factor in the timing of the Crimean annexation. Since 2014, the Air Force has redeployed A-10s to the European continent on a rotational basis, while the Army has been “forced to rely on weapons shipped back temporarily or hardware borrowed from allies in the expanding effort to deter the latest threats from Russia.”⁵¹

In the Asia-Pacific region, another U.S. competitor has taken an increasingly active position in staking out new territorial claims in international waters. In November 2013, eight months after the defense-budget sequester, China declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea over the disputed Senkaku Islands.⁵² An ADIZ is a requirement that, in the interest of national security, all air traffic entering a certain geographic area identify themselves to government controllers. The declaration of a Chinese ADIZ over disputed territory served to raise the level of tension in the Asian theater. Chinese leaders took this action despite the Obama administration’s announced diplomatic and military “pivot to Asia.” After the ADIZ announcement, the Chinese military has taken to building artificial islands in the international waters of the South China Sea to further China’s territorial claims and provide forward-based airfields for military and other purposes.

Conclusion

The strategic landscape facing U.S. forces has changed dramatically in the past ten years. It is likely to change just as dramatically in the next decade. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey described the global security environment as “the most unpredictable I have seen in 40 years.” This complex geostrategic landscape should focus defense leaders’ attention on ensuring that the U.S. military is ready for the full spectrum of threats it could be called upon to respond to.

Full-spectrum readiness cannot be achieved solely through budgetary means, and the global security environment is unlikely to result in substantially reduced personnel OPTEMPO. To break out of the readiness death spiral, fundamental reforms to the personnel systems must be pursued. Service members must have the ability to structure a career that meets both the needs of the military and the needs of their personal development. Both outcomes can and should be valued by senior military leaders and policymakers.

BPC’s Task Force on Defense Personnel recognizes that the strengths and talents of the American people are the foundation of the U.S. military’s advantage. As long as the systems that recruit, train, retain, and manage the force can compete for the nation’s best and brightest, there is no reason to think that America’s military advantage cannot endure. However, if the military continues on its current path, no amount of money or high-tech weaponry will be enough to maintain the U.S. military advantage for the long term. The task force will make innovative recommendation to improve these systems and to ensure the U.S. military remains the world’s finest.

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Notes



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