Order Code RS21754
Updated January 24, 2006

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

Edward F. Bruner
Specialist in National Defense
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

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 statutory end strengths in the FY2005 authorization bill (P.L. 108-375) and again for FY2006 (P.L. 109-163). This report describes the background of these actions, current Administration planning, and assesses significant issues for the 109th Congress. This report will be updated.

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 experience of *Operation Iraqi Freedom* suggests that U.S. ground forces, in particular, 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

[1] CRS Report RL31349, *Defense Budget for FY2003: Data Summary*, by Stephen Daggett and Amy Belasco. See p. 16 for historical personnel levels and p. 17 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.

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 anticipating multiple combat tours. Ceremonial companies from The Old Guard[5] 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 was introduced to increase the Armed Forces by 83,700 personnel for five years.[7] Various Senators have 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.

---

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

[3] House Committee on National Security, *Military Readiness 1997: Rhetoric and Reality*, Apr. 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*, Jan. 19, 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*, Jan. 31, 2004, p. 270.

Administration End Strength Initiative

Before the House Armed Services Committee on January 28, 2004, the 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 include reducing air defense, artillery, and ordnance unit strength and increasing military police, civil affairs, and transportation capabilities.

The Army and DOD have also been seeking 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 raises 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 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.

Congressional Actions and Considerations

Congress debated the Administration's end strength initiative in the FY2005 defense authorization bill. The Senate version, S. 2400, endorsed the Administration's proposal to increase the Army by 30,000 temporarily over three years. The House version, H.R. 4200, boosted the Army by 30,000, added 9,000 Marines, and designated $1.2 billion of Iraq War funding towards associated costs. The result (P.L. 108-375) was to increase the Army by 20,000 and the Marine Corps by 6,000 in FY2005, allowing for a further

---

[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.

increase in FY2006. For FY2006, Congress further increased the Army by 10,000 and the Marines Corps by 1,000, but also decreased the Navy and Air Force for a net decrease of 4,500 in the total Armed Services (P.L. 109-163)[11]. Various considerations could influence the future debate. The "right" size for the military addresses military requirements now and in the future. The Administration acknowledges stresses on the force, but has long interpreted the situation as a "spike" in requirements that will 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.[12] 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.[13] Some may be influenced by implications of the end strength debate for particular military installations and defense industry employers.

Should End Strength Be Increased, and by How Much? Many voices in Congress and the military community publicly support an increase, and few argue against it unconditionally.[14] Proposals have ranged in magnitude from 10,000 permanent Army positions to the Administration's 30,000 temporary positions to 83,700 for five years (introduced and supported by Democratic Members).[15] Some proposals are couched in force structure terms rather than manpower figures. Adding two combat divisions, for example, could easily exceed 30,000 spaces when large numbers of necessary combat and institutional support troops are provided.[16] S. 11, before the 109th Congress, would raise the Army to 532,400 and the Marine Corps to 188,000 on October 1, 2006.

---

[11] Resulting Active Duty end strengths for FY2005 are: Army, 502,400; Navy, 365,900; Marine Corps, 178,000; and, Air Force, 359,700. For FY2006: Army, 512,400; Navy 352,700; Marine Corps, 179,000; and, Air Force, 357,400.

[12] 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.

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

[14] On November 5, 2003, Representatives Heather Wilson and Jim Cooper wrote a letter to President Bush urging that the FY2005 budget request include funding for two additional active duty Army divisions in order to relieve stress on reserve component personnel. It was signed by 128 House Members, to include 54 of 61 HASC members.

[15] H.R. 3696 would have increased the Army from 482,400 to 522,400; the Air Force from 359,300 to 388,000; the Marine Corps from 175,000 to 190,000; and, left the Navy at 373,800.

[16] Anselmo, op. cit., "Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., chairman of the HASC, is pushing for the permanent addition of two Army divisions made up of a combination of heavy forces and special operations troops," p. 271. CBO estimates up front costs of $18 million to stand up two divisions and $6 million annual costs. HASC testimony, November 5, 2003.

Critics of the Administration proposal deemed it inadequate and largely based on accounting for current troop numbers rather than on an injection of fresh troops. The increase of Army end strength to 510,000 was already less than the 30,000 advertised, given that Congress authorized 482,400 in FY2004 (P.L. 108-136). Further, the Army then regularly exceeded its authorized end strength as it concentrated on meeting wartime requirements — 493,000 was even reported.[17] Since then, however, the Army did not achieve its increased FY2005 end strength.[18] Should the new FY2006 increase also not be met, the feasibility of greater increases would be in doubt.

A formal mechanism for framing the size of the U.S. military is the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), mandated by Congress in P.L. 103-62. A new QDR should reach Congress early in 2006, but may provide little more guidance for the force level debate than the 2001 QDR (normal focus is on force structure rather than end strength). QDR goals will likely remain ambitious, requiring U.S. forces to meet a wide range of wartime, peacetime, and transformation requirements. The last QDR did not predict the stress of trying to meet all these requirements at the same time. Many observers believe that U.S. troops, active and reserve, have been bearing the load of that stress for some time and that an increase in end strength — failing an unexpected, sudden victory in the War on Terror — is justified to help relieve that stress.

Should Any End Strength Increase Be "Permanent" or "Temporary"? The Administration proposal to increase the Army's size would only be in effect for four years. This is based on the premises that, in the interim, manpower requirements might decrease, initiatives to find greater efficiencies within the current force might bear fruit, or both. If so, the Army will have avoided some near term and longer term cost differentials between permanent and temporary solutions. A permanent increase would require additional resources for recruiting, retention, and training activities. Also, any change upwards in permanent force structure could possibly negate some anticipated savings from base closures mandated by the 2005 BRAC process.

Critics assert that DOD premises may be faulty; a sudden reduction in military requirements bucks the tide of recent history, and, finding more manpower through internal efficiencies has probably been a goal not well-realized by this and preceding Administrations. Whether or not one accepts DOD premises, the method by which it plans to implement a temporary increase is subject to criticism. Rather than recruiting all new personnel, current personnel are being retained, many through the imposition of "stop loss" orders to extend tours of duty. Some question the fairness of making those currently serving sacrifice further to avoid recruiting additional personnel for the future.[19] Some argue that paying the costs for a permanent increase now would avoid the risk of discovering a few years from now that the forces are inadequate. Congress could revisit

---

[17] See Anselmo, op. cit., p. 272. On December 31, 2003, DOD reported the size of the Active Duty Army to be 490,174. See [http://web1.whs.osd.mil/mmid/military/miltop.htm] for current Service statistics.

[18] The Defense Manpower Data Center showed the Army at 492,728 on September 30, 2005 when the authorized end strength was 502,400.

[19] Military Officers Association of America. "Stop-Loss: The New Draft," *MOAA Legislative Update*, February 13, 2004.

and correct end strength in each annual authorization bill.[20] Others, however, believing the situation will ease, would argue that taking such a step is premature.

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. Whether or not to create dedicated "constabulary" forces remains an issue.

Substantial ground combat forces will likely be needed, as "stabilization" efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq have no defined end point[21] 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.[22] 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.[23]

For some time, the Services have denoted various specialized units as being Low Density/High Demand (LD/HD). Examples from the Army are civil affairs, military police, and transportation units. Examples from the Air Force are SOF air crews, air controllers, and crews for airborne warning and control system (AWACS) and electronic warfare (EW) aircraft. LD/HD assets are, as are infantrymen, needed both in combat and stability operations.[24] Some analysts have recommended that DOD organize one or more division-level headquarters to specialize in stability operations.[25] This supposes that such a capability will continue to be needed and that specialized units could improve the planning, effectiveness, and efficiency of U.S. participation in stability operations. This new unit, although it might include some existing combat elements, likely would not reduce current pressures for an increase in end strength.

---

[20] Congress has usually avoided annual end strength fluctuations as a stable end strength provides management efficiencies for the Services.

[21] Alex Keto, "Rumsfeld Says 'No Timetable' To Pull Troops Out Of Iraq," *Dow Jones Newswires*, February 12, 2004.

[22] Ann Scott Tyson, "Plan Seeks More Elite Forces to Fortify Military," *Washington Post*, Jan 24, 2006, p. A1.

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

[24] For a more detailed discussion of using U.S. forces for peacekeeping and stability operations, see CRS Issue Brief IB94040, *Peacekeeping and Related Stability Operations: Issues of U.S. Military Involvement*, by Nina Serafino.

[25] Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, *Transforming for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations*, November 12, 2003.