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Defense Primer: The Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DOD) was established after World War II through the 1947 National Security Act. At the time, some, including President Truman, took the view that the different components of the U.S. military had been insufficiently integrated to wage World War II effectively. The intention of the 1947 Act was therefore to create, for the first time, an integrated institution that combined the Departments of War and Navy, and to establish a policy architecture for overseeing the newly reorganized military apparatus. Over time, DOD has grown into one of the largest bureaucracies in the world, currently comprising over 2.9 million service members and civilians stationed in 4,800 sites across the United States and around the globe. Congress, in its constitutional role, legislates both authorization and appropriations bills, as well as conducting oversight on all of DOD. The Senate confirms multiple military officers and certain DOD civilian officials.

“One of the lessons which have most clearly come from the costly and dangerous experience of this war is that there must be unified direction of land, sea and air forces at home as well as in other parts of the world where our Armed Forces are serving. We did not have that kind of direction when we were attacked four years ago—and we certainly paid a high price for not having it.”

President Harry S. Truman, “Message to Congress,”
December 19, 1945.

DOD’s purpose today is to provide the President with the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of the country. It does so through five primary sets of institutions, each representing thousands of people and often hundreds of specific offices:

- The Office of the Secretary of Defense;
- The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Staff;
- The Military Departments;
- The Unified Combatant Commands; and
- The Defense Agencies.

These institutions are described below.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)

Title 10 *U.S. Code* Section 113 specifies that the Secretary of Defense exercises “authority, direction and control” over DOD. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) assists the Secretary of Defense in exercising such authority over DOD. They do in a variety of areas, including policy development, planning, resource management, fiscal management, and program evaluation. OSD also helps

provide civilian oversight of the military services and combatant commands to ensure that the Secretary’s and the President’s defense objectives are met.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)

The Joint Chiefs of Staff is the preeminent military advisory body in U.S. national security establishment. Its membership consists of the six military service chiefs (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard Bureau, and Space Force), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (VCJCS). The JCS regularly convenes to formulate and provide its best military advice to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. According to Title 10, U.S.C., §151, the Chairman is the principal military advisor to the President. The CJCS therefore has statutory responsibility to present his or her counsel—as well as any dissenting views from other members of the JCS—to senior leaders in the U.S. national security establishment. Of note, although the CJCS plans, coordinates, and oversees military operations involving U.S. forces, neither the CJCS nor the JCS has a formal role in the execution of military operations—a role instead assigned to the unified combatant commanders.

The CJCS is supported by the Joint Staff, which assists in developing the unified strategic direction of the combatant forces, their operation under unified command, and their integration into an efficient team of land, naval, and air forces. The Joint Staff is composed of approximately equal numbers of officers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, as well as Department of Defense civilians. In practice, the Marines make up about 20% of the number allocated to the Navy.

The Military Departments

There are three military departments: the Army, Navy and Air Force. The Marine Corps, mainly an amphibious force, is part of the Department of the Navy. The Space Force is part of the Department of the Air Force. These departments are responsible for training and equipping the military forces utilized by the combatant commands; departments therefore produce DOD’s “supply” of military forces and equipment. Each department is led by a civilian service secretary and supported by a service chief, both confirmed by the Senate. A service chief is a senior military officer designated as the principal military advisor to a departmental secretary for matters relating to a specific armed service.

In terms of overall roles and responsibilities, The Army trains and equips forces to provide ready, prompt, and sustained land dominance across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force. The Navy maintains, trains, and equips combat-ready maritime forces capable of

winning wars, deterring aggression, and maintaining freedom of the seas. The U.S. Marine Corps maintains ready expeditionary forces, sea-based and integrated air-ground units for contingency and combat operations, and the means to stabilize or contain international disturbance. The Air Force provides a rapid, flexible, and, when necessary, lethal air capability that can deliver forces anywhere in the world in less than 48 hours. The Space Force organizes, trains, and equips its forces for global space operations.

Unified Combatant Commands

The Unified Combatant Commands, or “COCOMs,” are the principal mechanism through which DOD conducts its global operations. The COCOMs represent the “demand” side of DOD, as it is primarily the COCOMs’ operational needs that drive the development of military requirements across the department.

There are seven regionally focused COCOMs:

- U.S. Africa Command, responsible for sub-Saharan Africa;
- U.S. European Command, responsible for all of Europe, large portions of Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, and the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans;
- U.S. Central Command, responsible for most of the Middle East, parts of Northern Africa and west Asia, and part of the Indian Ocean;
- U.S. Northern Command, responsible for defense of the continental United States and coordination of security and military relationships with Canada and Mexico;
- U.S. Southern Command, responsible for Central America, South America, and the Caribbean; and
- U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, responsible for the Pacific Ocean, Southwest Asia, Australia, South Asia, and parts of the Indian Ocean. It shares responsibility for Alaska with U.S. Northern Command.
- U.S. Space Command provides space combat power for the Joint/Combined force and develops joint warfighters in, from, and through the space domain.

There are also four “functional” COCOMs:

- U.S. Strategic Command, responsible for deterring attacks on the United States and its allies and directing the use of U.S. strategic forces.
- U.S. Special Operations Command develops and employs fully capable Special Operations Forces to conduct global special operations and activities as part

of the Joint Force to support persistent, networked and distributed Combatant Command operations and campaigns against state and non-state actors.

- U.S. Transportation Command provides air, land, and sea transportation to different components of DOD; and
- U.S. Cyber Command directs, synchronizes, and coordinates cyberspace planning and operations to defend and advance national interests in collaboration with domestic and international partners.

Defense Agencies

Title 10, U.S.C., §191 grants the Secretary of Defense authority to establish agencies that provide for the performance of a supply or service activity that is common to more than one military department, in instances where doing so is deemed more effective, economical, or efficient than existing structures. DOD refers to organizations established under this authority as either Defense Agencies or a DOD Field Activity. According to DOD’s FY2022 Agency Financial Report, there are 19 Defense Agencies (7 of which are also designated Combat Support Agencies pursuant to Title 10, U.S.C., §193, meaning that they are jointly overseen by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and 8 DOD Field Activities. These include the Defense Security and Cooperation Agency, the Defense Logistics Agency, and the Defense Commissary Agency, among others.

DOD Reform

Managing an organization as large and complex as DOD presents a unique challenge to its senior leaders. Concerns about the department’s efficiency, effectiveness, or both have driven reform initiatives since the establishment of DOD itself. In the early 1980s, congressional concerns that the services had undue—and unhelpful—influence in the conduct of military operations led to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act. Thirty years later, the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328) also sought to reform the way DOD is organized, with the overall aim of improving the department’s agility and strategic integration of its global assets.

CRS Products

CRS Report R44474, *Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defense Reform and Issues for Congress*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

Kathleen J. McInnis was the original author of this product.

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