



# Readiness Tracker, Vol. 1

## The Military's Limited Surge Capacity

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### KEY POINTS

- *The United States military faces low levels of readiness. All four branches can, on aggregate, perform their current missions, but they lack the surge capacity to respond to another major crisis.*
- *The US Navy and Marine Corps consume readiness as they generate their deployed forces, leaving themselves without fully trained or equipped forces at home.*
- *The US Army and Air Force have been forced to train their soldiers and airmen for the narrow set of missions they face today but not for their core capabilities of fighting and defeating large, modern adversaries.*

**T**estifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in January 2015, General Raymond T. Odierno, then chief of staff of the United States Army, submitted a sober assessment of the Army's readiness, saying it "has been degraded to its lowest level in 20 years."<sup>1</sup> The general's counterparts on the Joint Chiefs of Staff offered similar reviews of their own services; the military branches stood at the edge of their capacity to fully train, equip, and prepare soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Nearly a year hence—a year marked by continued budgetary uncertainty and global instability—America's military still faces dangerously low levels of readiness.

Chiefly, it lacks a robust surge capacity, the operational depth to respond to new crises or threats.

Roughly defined as the military's ability to carry out its assigned missions, readiness depends on a wide array of factors, including the quality and quantity of training and of maintenance to equipment and infrastructure. But ultimately, it is a measure of whether the military can fulfill its role in the broader national-security apparatus, as defined through the administration's official documents, such as the National Security Strategy or Defense Strategic Guidance. As such, the state of military readiness is a crucial

reflection of whether our armed services can defend America's interests both at home and abroad; the worse it gets, the more at risk our interests are.

If a ready military matters so much, then how did we find ourselves in such a precarious position? One could look back decades for the root causes, but we will begin where the Joint Chiefs did in January 2015: the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA) and, in particular, the cold hand of sequestration in 2013.<sup>2</sup>

Coming on the backs of more than a decade of constant war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the budget cuts mandated by the BCA and its budget-sequestration provision left a deep mark on the armed services. Indeed, each branch, already worn thin by those wars' high rate of deployments and strenuous operational tempo (op-tempo), had to cut its readiness.

### **Effects of Sequestration in 2013**

The US Army saw its readiness fall to 10 percent—meaning only 10 percent of its Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) were fully prepared to conduct the operations asked of them. It postponed maintenance of nearly 700 vehicles, 2,000 weapons, and 10,000 pieces of communications equipment, along with other maintenance, and deferred \$716 million of maintenance funds, creating a backlog of 172 aircraft. Manpower was equally hard hit, meaning units lacking sufficient personnel are particularly at risk.

Perhaps most alarming were the hits sustained to the numbers of small-unit leaders; for example review boards cut 30 percent of the captains from year groups

2006, 2007, and 2008. These captains entered the force as part of the Iraq surge and thus represent the core of the Army's hard-won counterinsurgency expertise. Additionally, base-sustainment funds, which pay for base and infrastructure maintenance and repairs, dropped 70 percent from their previous high.<sup>3</sup>

The US Navy extended ship deployments from the normal length of 6 months to 8–10 months—and sometimes even longer. It reduced facilities restoration and maintenance by 30 percent, to only 57 percent of the required level; reduced base operations by 8 percent, to 90 percent of the requirement; and induced maintenance backlogs from which the sea service has yet to recover.<sup>4</sup>

The US Air Force grounded 31 flying squadrons, including 13 combat squadrons, and cut flying hours, weapons and systems sustainment, and training and equipment funds. The result was a \$12 billion backlog in facility maintenance and deferred maintenance, repairs, and training upgrades, which yielded months of aircraft-maintenance backlogs as well. And these cuts hit those units most central to combat operations.<sup>5</sup>

The US Marine Corps, with its rotational approach to operations, is inherently vulnerable to perturbations in budgeting. Nondeployed units always feel the cost of deployments, but the funding gap left about half of home-station units at unacceptably low levels of readiness. Moreover, infrastructure-sustainment funding dropped well below the

Department of Defense standard, and home-station training decreased as well.<sup>6</sup>

### **Military Readiness Today**

In 2014 and 2015, the military received a semblance of relief with the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 (BBA) and robust Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding, which is not subject to BCA restrictions.<sup>7</sup> The BBA, in particular, afforded the armed forces two years of relative budget stability, during which they restored some of the losses, but by no means enough to deal with a significant, sustained conflict.

The US military is capable of fielding men and women for the demands of today's missions but incapable of maintaining a robust surge capacity. In other words, though the services have rapid response forces, such as the Army's Global Response Force brigade, the military does not have the operational depth to rapidly deploy a large-scale force in response to new global crises.<sup>8</sup>

When ISIS surged into Iraq, for example, the Army had to deploy a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, but that brigade, having recently turned over its Global Response Force duty to another BCT in its division, was supposed to remain at home as surge capacity. Instead, it found itself in the Middle East, advising and assisting Iraqi security forces, and the Army found itself in the familiar refrain of using up its ready units almost as soon as they were created.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the improvements of 2014, this past year saw each military branch fall short of its desired training regimen and

struggle to keep up with the pace of deployments.

### **The US Army**

The Army conducts large-unit training primarily through Combat Training Centers (CTCs). A brigade CTC rotation is seen within the force as a necessary training step, but under the Army's plans for 2015—the FY15 Contingency Force Model—only 24 of 60 BCTs were to receive CTC or home-station training. The remaining 36 BCTs—60 percent—were limited to individual-, crew-, or squad-level training, meaning they trained in units of usually no more than 10 soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

As bad as 2015 was, however, it marks an improvement over the prior year. In 2014, only 19 Army brigades completed CTC rotations. Of those, 6 were mission-specific rotations for brigades preparing to deploy, and 13 rotations provided conventional, large-unit training for 12 active-duty and 1 reserve BCT.<sup>11</sup> All told, 2014 produced 13 BCTs ready and trained for full-scale, combined arms operations—that is, conventional war, not just counterinsurgency. But 9 of those 13 deployed shortly thereafter for ongoing operations.<sup>12</sup> A year's worth of training yielded a force of only four brigades ready to respond to new or escalating conflicts—a dangerously *de minimis* surge capacity.

The Army's 2015 plans again funded 19 CTC rotations. However, 17 were Decisive Action rotations—15 for active-component and 2 for reserve-component BCTs—and only 2 were for deploying brigades.<sup>13</sup> Because of the 2014 and 2015 training schedules, as of last spring, 23 BCTs, out

of 66 at the time, had been trained in the Army's core capabilities of Decisive Action and Unified Land Operations.<sup>14</sup> In short, the Army was at 33 percent readiness when it should be near 70 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Training for high-skill soldiers also remains insufficient. The budget cuts sustained since 2013 reduced Specialized Skill Training by 65 percent, cutting 85,007 spots, and removed 47,659 seats from across the Army's training courses, a 23.9 percent reduction.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the force now offers 900 fewer graduate flight school positions than it did before the impact of sequestration.<sup>17</sup>

### **The US Navy**

The Navy is at its lowest point in terms of readiness in many years. Its ships continue to deploy for 8 to 10 months at a time and sometimes even longer.<sup>18</sup> The extended time abroad wears down the force, tiring both the sailors and their families and increasing maintenance needs once vessels are in port.

Notably, the Navy seeks to retain a cohort of three Carrier Strike Groups and three Amphibious Ready Groups capable of deploying within 30 days. Currently, it has only one of each ready for this mission because of both training shortages and larger maintenance and modernization issues. As Admiral Michelle J. Howard, vice chief of staff of naval operations, said "we're [the Navy] at our lowest surge capacity that we've been at in years. . . . We have literally consumed the readiness."<sup>19</sup>

Naval aviation units have suffered the brunt of the training cuts since 2013. Many squadrons receive a full complement of aircraft only shortly before deploying, meaning the crews have less time to train and prepare with a complete squadron. The result is less proficient air crews. Their training issues can be seen most clearly in the T-rating deficit.

The T-rating, calculated from how much time a pilot spends in the aircraft per month, reflects the pace of flight training. Counterintuitively, a lower rating means more time in the cockpit. The Navy's standard for all nondeployed Navy pilots is a constant readiness rating of T-2.5; home-station units currently sit at an average of T-2.8. Thankfully, all deploying squadrons still manage to reach the predeployment standard of T-2.0 just before shipping abroad, though their crews do have a deficit of experience working with a full-sized squadron.<sup>20</sup>

In short, all but a few available naval aviation units lack sufficient training to respond to new or deepening crises to the best of their abilities, and the few that have the necessary training are promptly consumed by the high rate of current commitments.

### **The US Air Force**

The Air Force suffers from low levels of combat readiness. Fewer than 50 percent of its combat units are ready for the full spectrum of combat operations they are tasked to conduct.<sup>21</sup> Because of the extensive demands placed on it over the past 15 years, the Air Force, similar to the Army, struggles to train for missions that

range beyond what it has faced recently. In the words of General Larry O. Spencer, vice chief of staff of the Air Force, airmen “are only proficient in the jobs they do when they deploy.”<sup>22</sup>

Training for missions in which they operate against a modern air force, for example, has largely gone by the wayside, because America’s pilots have rarely faced contested airspace in recent years. The Air Force has been unable to carry out the full range of training for its most advanced aircraft, such as the F-22 and F-35 fighters, and needs to upgrade the training ranges and simulations to accommodate these fifth-generation planes. These combat units, the hardest hit after sequestration in 2013, continue to struggle to return to sustainable levels of readiness and training.<sup>23</sup>

The intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) units, meanwhile, have been operating at a surge posture since before sequestration. Staffed to conduct 55 combat air patrols per day, the ISR force has, since 2007, been flying 65, straining the force to its limits and damaging retention to the point that only 30 percent of drone pilots say they want to stay.<sup>24</sup>

### **The US Marine Corps**

The Marine Corps consumes readiness as quickly as it is generated, as General John M. Paxton, assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, explained last spring.<sup>25</sup> The corps’ primary goal has been to simply train a sufficient number of marines to meet the corps’ basic day-to-day deployment requirements. This focus has

come at the expense of long-term sustainment and training, reducing the general availability of Marine Corps units beyond immediate requirements. In the words of then commandant, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., “there is no margin”; the corps could, if pushed further, fall below its capacity to serve as the nation’s “force-in-readiness.”<sup>26</sup>

Similar to its maritime counterpart, the Navy, the Marine Corps has faced a very high op-tempo for the better part of the century, which, alongside budget uncertainty, has taken a toll on its readiness. Roughly half the home-station units are at unacceptably low levels of readiness.

Because of the high op-tempo, marines now deploy for 7 months on average before returning home for 14 or fewer, resulting in a deployment-to-dwell (D2D) ratio of less than 1:2. Many specialized and aviation units, such as F/A-18 and MV-22 squadrons and combat engineers, suffer from an even worse ratio. By contrast, the corps aims to operate at a D2D ratio of 1:3, which it sees as sustainable.<sup>27</sup>

Again similar to the Navy, aviation units have been strained. Of 52 available active aviation squadrons, 33 percent are deployed and 17 percent are about to deploy. Those deployed manage a T-rating of T-2.17, but nondeployed units languish at an average of T-2.96.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

All four branches of the armed forces find themselves operating at the outer bounds of their capacity. They can, on aggregate, perform the current slate of missions

assigned to them today—which have been reduced as the Obama administration “ends” America’s commitments in the Middle East and Afghanistan—but they lack the surge capacity to respond to another major crisis.

The Army, only 33 percent ready, has not trained most of its soldiers for the critical mission of fighting and winning large wars. The Navy and Marine Corps, both worn by long deployments, consume readiness as it generates, leaving themselves without fully ready forces at home. Finally, the Air Force, challenged as much by its equipment’s age as anything, trains its combat units for the narrow set of missions they deploy for today but is not fully ready to face a modern adversary.

In the midst of what General Odierno called “the most uncertain” national security environment he has seen, the military finds itself at a readiness level that risks compromising the country’s strategic needs.<sup>29</sup>

## About the Author

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## Notes

1. General Raymond T. Odierno, “Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security,” Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 28, 2015, 11, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-04%20-%201-28-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-04%20-%201-28-15.pdf).
2. *Budget Control Act of 2011*, Public Law 112–25, 112th Cong., 1st sess. (August 2, 2011), [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-112publ25/html/PLAW-112publ25.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-112publ25/html/PLAW-112publ25.htm).
3. Odierno, “Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security.”
4. Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, “The Impact of Sequestration on National Defense,” Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 28, 2015, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-04%20-%201-28-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-04%20-%201-28-15.pdf).
5. General Mark A. Welsh III, “Impact of Sequestration on National Defense,” Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 28, 2015, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Welch\\_01-28-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Welch_01-28-15.pdf).
6. General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., “Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security,” Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 28, 2015, 4, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Dunford\\_01-28-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Dunford_01-28-15.pdf).
7. *Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013*, Public Law 113–67, 113th Cong., 1st sess. (December 26, 2013), [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ67/html/PLAW-113publ67.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ67/html/PLAW-113publ67.htm).
8. The Global Response Force brigade, comprised of roughly 5,000 soldiers, maintains a high-alert status and is able to deploy at short notice—ideally in a matter of days—in response to new events.
9. “The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program,” Hearing of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, March 25, 2015, 35, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/96067.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/96067.pdf).
10. The Honorable John M. McHugh and General Raymond T. Odierno, *2015 Army Posture Statement*, United States Army, March 2015, [www.army.mil/e2/rv5\\_downloads/aps/aps\\_2015.pdf](http://www.army.mil/e2/rv5_downloads/aps/aps_2015.pdf).
11. Decisive Action training prepares soldiers for conventional warfare against a variety of potential enemies. It expands the training regimen beyond mission-specific rotations, such as those conducted for units deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan.
12. Odierno, “Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security,” 6.

13. General Daniel B. Allyn, "The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, March 25, 2015, 3, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Allyn\\_03-25-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Allyn_03-25-15.pdf).
14. Only soldiers trained for these two core missions are considered ready to fight major wars against the most advanced of adversaries. Odierno, "Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security," 6.
15. Kathleen Curthoys, "Odierno: Readiness at Historically Low Levels," *Army Times*, April 2, 2015, [www.armytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/04/01/odierno-army-readiness-at-historically-low-levels/70805808/](http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/04/01/odierno-army-readiness-at-historically-low-levels/70805808/).
16. Odierno, "Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security," 6.
17. Allyn, "The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces," 5.
18. Greenert, "The Impact of Sequestration on National Defense," 18.
19. Admiral Michelle J. Howard, "On Navy Readiness," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, March 25, 2015, 4, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Howard\\_03-25-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Howard_03-25-15.pdf).
20. Ibid., 7.
21. "The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program," 36.
22. General Larry O. Spencer, "Current Readiness of the U.S. Air Force," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, March 25, 2015, 5, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Spencer\\_03-25-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Spencer_03-25-15.pdf).
23. Ibid., 6.
24. "The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program," 36–37.
25. Ibid., 36.
26. Dunford, "Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security," 4.
27. General John M. Paxton Jr., "The Current State of Readiness of U.S. Forces in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, March 25, 2015, 6, [www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Paxton\\_03-25-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Paxton_03-25-15.pdf).
28. Ibid., 7.
29. Odierno, "Impact of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Sequestration on National Security," 10.