GAO Highlights

MILITARY READINESS

Improvement in Some Areas, but Sustainment and Other Challenges Persist

Why GAO Did This Study

Nearly 2 decades of conflict has degraded military readiness. To maintain the U.S. military's advantage across all domains in a new security environment characterized by great-power competition, DOD is working to rebuild and restore readiness while also modernizing its forces. DOD's readiness rebuilding efforts are occurring in a challenging context that requires the department to make difficult decisions regarding how best to address continuing operational demands while preparing for future challenges.

This statement (1) describes how readiness has changed from fiscal year 2017 through fiscal year 2021 in the ground, sea, air, and space warfighting domains and (2) provides information on readiness challenges in the ground, sea, air, and space domains.

This statement is based on published work primarily since 2020 that examined military readiness, operations, and sustainment, among others, in the ground, sea, air, and space domains. To perform this prior work, GAO analyzed Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Space Force readiness, maintenance, personnel, and training data and interviewed cognizant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made dozens of recommendations in its prior reports to help improve readiness in each of the domains. Some of the recommendations remain unimplemented, as discussed in the testimony.

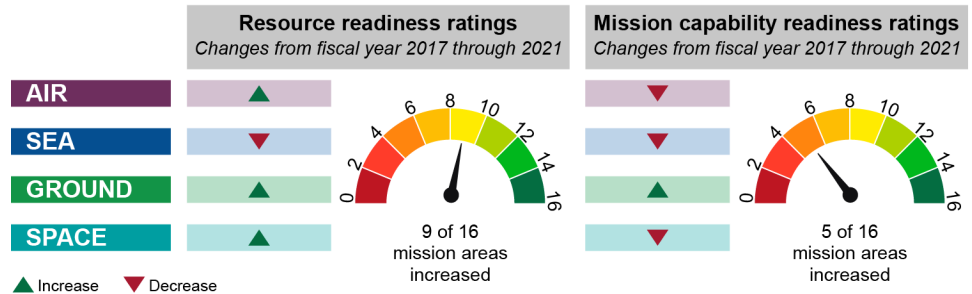View GAO-23-106673. For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Readiness ratings increased in the ground domain and declined in the sea domain from fiscal year 2017 through fiscal year 2021—the most recent data at the time of GAO's analysis—with mixed changes in the air and space domains.

Change in Domain Resource and Mission Capability Readiness Ratings from Fiscal Years 2017-2021

	Resource readiness ratings (Changes from fiscal year 2017 through 2021)	Mission capability readiness ratings (Changes from fiscal year 2017 through 2021)
AIR	▲	▼
SEA	▼	▼
GROUND	▲	▲
SPACE	▲	▼

9 of 16 mission areas increased

5 of 16 mission areas increased

▲ Increase   ▼ Decrease

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense readiness data. | GAO-23-106673

Note: The ratings are based on GAO's analysis of Department of Defense readiness data for selected mission areas—groups of similar capabilities from across the services, such as fighter jets—and force elements—subsets of units within each mission area, such as F-35s—within each of the domains. Resource readiness ratings measure the status of personnel, equipment, supplies, and training. Mission capability readiness ratings measure whether a unit can accomplish its designed missions.

GAO's prior work has identified a wide range of persistent challenges in each domain as the Department of Defense (DOD) seeks to improve readiness.

Readiness Challenges Identified by GAO in Air, Sea, Ground, and Space Domains

AIR
▶ Maintenance and supply challenges limit availability of aging aircraft
▶ F-35 aircraft face sustainment and operational challenges

SEA
▶ Ship sustainment challenges have worsened, with maintenance backlog estimated at $1.8 billion
▶ Poor condition of infrastructure at the Navy's public shipyards
▶ Fatigue and crewing shortfalls affecting Navy surface fleet

GROUND
▶ Shortfalls in Army rail support and training for operating in contested mobility environments
▶ Army and Marine Corps need to take action to prevent tactical vehicle accidents

SPACE
▶ Space readiness goals and threat standards are unclear

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; U.S. Air Force/ Senior Airman T. Gordnier; U.S. Navy; U.S. Marine Corps/Master Sgt. C. Matt; NASA (photos). | GAO-23-106673

Looking to the future, DOD will have to balance rebuilding the readiness of its existing force with its desire to modernize. DOD is developing and deploying new weapon systems and considering new approaches for how its units organize and operate. However, DOD will depend on much of today's force for decades to come, requiring continued focus on the readiness of its existing forces.

United States Government Accountability Office