CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

April 18, 2018

The State of Military Readiness: Is There a Crisis?

Mark F. Cancian and Seamus Daniels

Amid a recent *Military Times* investigation detailing a surge in military aviation accidents over the past five fiscal years—including six crashes in just the last three weeks that killed 16 pilots and crew and four surface fleet incidents between FY 2017 and FY 2018 that killed 17 sailors—calls for a solution to the military's "readiness crisis" continue to be heard despite recent budget increases. But what is readiness and how does it relate to the recent spell of deadly incidents?

Q1: What is readiness?

A1: There is no single definition of readiness; indeed, the Congressional Research Service notes a variety of definitions. In the context of the recent mishaps, readiness is perhaps best understood through the lens of "operational readiness," defined by the Department of Defense (DOD) as "The capability of a unit/formation, ship, weapon system, or equipment to perform the missions or functions for which it is organized or designed." That sounds complicated, but it just means that weapons and forces can do what they are intended to do. Readiness is therefore the result of training and maintenance, and for forces, the fill of personnel and equipment. This definition distinguishes readiness from modernization—the procurement of new equipment and capabilities—and force structure—the size and composition of forces. Together, readiness, modernization, and force structure define the basic trade-offs—the "iron triangle"—that the military services face in constructing a budget.

Some commentators equate readiness with "military capability," but this broad usage, though not wrong, obscures the critical elements of training/maintenance/equipment and personnel fill.

Q2: How is readiness measured?

A2: DOD measures readiness using a system called, appropriately, the Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS). Under this system, all military units report periodically in four categories: personnel, equipment on hand, supply/maintenance, and training. The categories produce an overall unit grade at levels one to four, with one being the highest and four being unready (with a fifth category for "out of service"). Unfortunately, the system is classified so little more can be said in a public forum. When, for example, the Army vice chief says that "only three brigade combat teams are ready to fight tonight," he is likely referring to these measures.

One shortcoming of the DRRS is that it measures inputs rather than the outputs. As our colleague Todd Harrison noted in his "Rethinking Readiness," a readiness reporting system would ideally

measure outputs, that is, the ability of forces to perform their wartime tasks—for example, measuring whether pilots can hit a target rather than measuring whether they have flown the prescribed training syllabus. However, this is very difficult to do in a way that is systematic, repeatable, broadly applicable, and fair to reporting units. DOD might instead consider an adjunct system, complementing DRRS, that measures outputs—even if imperfect and conducted at irregular intervals.

Behind all measurement systems is the fundamental question, asked pointedly by Columbia University professor Richard Betts, ready for what? Whatever readiness definition one uses, limits on training time prevent units from being ready for everything, even if other resources are unconstrained. One Army analysis showed that meeting all annual training requirements would take 20 months. Services must therefore make choices. Readiness to fight a counterinsurgency campaign is different from readiness to fight against a great power. A unit that has developed skills needed to interact with civilians in counterinsurgency will lack some of the skills needed to employ extensive firepower in a conventional war. Similarly, readiness for a short conventional conflict, where rapid deployment is critical, is different from readiness for a long counterinsurgency conflict, where long-term sustainability is key. DRRS, to its credit, links readiness judgments to specific war plans.

Q3: Why is readiness important?

A3: Readiness is important because it increases the chances that forces will be successful in conflicts. Although many factors determine success on the battlefield—leadership, tactics, sophistication of equipment, and numbers—history clearly shows that high readiness forces are more likely to be successful. A classic example of readiness risk is Task Force Smith, which was deployed from Japan to Korea in June 1950 to stem the North Korean invasion of the south. Occupation forces in Japan had been maintained at a very low level of readiness. The assumption had been that another conflict would be preceded by a long period of mobilization such as had occurred in World War II. Task Force Smith, poorly trained and hastily thrown together, was badly defeated. Its experience showed that future wars might be "come as you are" and that forces needed to be kept at higher readiness levels in peacetime than had been the case earlier in U.S. history.

There are secondary benefits that derive from high readiness. Troops that train extensively and have all the equipment they need will have higher morale and confidence. This benefits retention. No one joins the military to sit in the barracks. They join to go to the field, to fly aircraft, or to sail at sea.

Q4: Has readiness declined?

A4: In 2013, readiness took a hit as a result of sequestration. Because cuts had to be made late in the fiscal year, the services were forced to cut facility maintenance, international exercises, and most significantly, training activities. The services have been digging out of that hole ever since.

Some commentators have raised concerns about a "readiness crisis" while others, like retired Gen. David Petraeus and Michael O'Hanlon, have argued that readiness is essentially sound. Part of the difficulty in assessing the state of the military's readiness is the lack of publicly available data as measured by the DRRS. That problem is exacerbated by directives from the secretary of defense to limit public discussion of readiness shortfalls. Readiness discussions are further distorted by the opposing incentives to exaggerate shortfalls to defend budgets and to exaggerate capabilities to deter adversaries.

The Trump administration emphasized readiness in its FY 2017 and FY 2018 budgets. Nevertheless, readiness data are conflicting. Some metrics, like Army rotations to Combat Training Centers, service flying hours, and Navy ship steaming days, have recovered from post-2013 lows, but others, like Navy and Marine Corps aircraft availability, remain depressed. With overall DOD budgets rising, targeted readiness increases, such as aviation spare parts, may be better investments than across-the-board increases.

The services have worked hard to deploy forces at a high level of readiness because these forces are either going into conflicts (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria) or will be the first sent to a crisis or a new conflict (carrier battle groups and Marines afloat).

Low readiness levels, therefore, typically affect nondeployed forces at their home bases. These forces would deploy if an emergency erupts that the forward-deployed forces cannot handle. The risk is that they would need to deploy before they can be brought up to a high level of readiness.

Q5: Have low readiness levels caused an increase in accidents?

A5: There would seem to be a connection here: lower readiness, less training, fewer skills, more accidents. However, it is difficult to determine the direct connection between readiness and recent incidents. Accidents have continued to occur even as readiness funding has recovered. What is clear is that the high tempo of current operations (optempo) has taken a toll on the readiness of forces.

CSIS has looked at the Navy in detail. The size of the Navy's surface fleet has fallen by 11 percent since FY 2001. Yet despite that drop, the fleet's operational tempo has not declined, driven by a continuing heavy demand for forces—for conflicts, for engaging allies, and for crisis response. High optempo means that ships are not available for maintenance and crew training. Assessments following the recent mishaps make this point. The Government Accountability Office also found that surface fleet vessels and crews, particularly those based in Japan, are not receiving proper maintenance and training due to operational demands.

This lack of proper training and maintenance resulting from the high operational tempo may have played some role in the recent incidents involving the surface fleet. In the wake of the deadly collisions involving the USS *John S. McCain* and USS *Fitzgerald*, investigations found the incidents were "avoidable" and occurred as a result of poor decisionmaking and training. The subsequent comprehensive review led by Adm. Philip Davidson, the head of U.S. Fleet Forces Command recently tapped to lead U.S. Pacific Command, similarly found that ships were operating without the necessary training and certification.

A previous CSIS study showed that Navy readiness funding—specifically Operations and Maintenance (O&M) funding and Ship Operations funding for maintenance and training activities—is at a "relatively high level on a per ship basis by historical standards." This indicates that factors such as operational tempo may have a greater impact on readiness in some cases than a lack of funding.

High optempo is a policy choice, though often not in the Navy's hands. The United States could reduce deployments, and the new National Defense Strategy proposes doing that, but such reductions are often regarded as detrimental to alliances. DOD could build more forces, and the administration plans to do some of that, but such expansion is expensive, and DOD's current plan is to

1616 RHODE ISLAND AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
TEL. (202) 887.0200
FAX (202) 775.3199

emphasize modernization. The services sometimes argue that replacing "tired iron" with new equipment will help readiness. While such modernization may increase capability, it may not improve readiness. Flying hour costs for an existing F-18, for example, are about half that of a new F-35B/C.

Q6: How much readiness should DOD buy?

A6: As noted, high readiness is desirable in forces and equipment. However, readiness is also very expensive and highly perishable—it must be renewed constantly. Buying more means that DOD cannot buy something else, for example, modernization or force structure. At some point, the military services must draw a line.

One way to save on readiness is by using reserve forces, which are at low readiness by design. Reserves are much less expensive, retain expertise in the force, and can meet wartime requirements when timelines permit.

The military services also accept reduced readiness in some of their nondeployed active-duty forces. Units lose readiness when they return from deployments as equipment needs repair and personnel transfer in and out. Even in an emergency, units must queue up to deploy because of constraints in strategic mobility, so later deploying units can be at a lower level of readiness.

Mark F. Cancian is a senior adviser with the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Seamus Daniels is research assistance in the CSIS International Security Program.

1616 RHODE ISLAND AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
TEL. (202) 887.0200
FAX (202) 775.3199