

June 2009

MILITARY TRAINING

DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency



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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. REPORT DATE JUN 2009 | | 2. REPORT TYPE | | 3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009 | |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Military Training. DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency | | | | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5b. GRANT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER | |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) | | | | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5e. TASK NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER | |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Washington, DC, 20548 | | | | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER | |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) | | | | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) | |
| | | | | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) | |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited | | | | | |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES | | | | | |
| 14. ABSTRACT | | | | | |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS | | | | | |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR) | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES 30 | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT unclassified | b. ABSTRACT unclassified | c. THIS PAGE unclassified | | | |



Highlights of [GAO-09-568](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Violent extremist movements and ongoing military operations have prompted the Department of Defense (DOD) to place greater emphasis on improving language and regional proficiency, which includes cultural awareness. GAO was asked to assess the extent to which DOD has (1) developed a strategic plan to guide its language and regional proficiency transformation efforts and (2) obtained the information it needs to identify potential language and regional proficiency gaps and assess risk. To conduct this assessment, GAO analyzed DOD's Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, reviewed the military services' strategies for transforming language and regional proficiency capabilities, and assessed the range of efforts intended to help identify potential gaps.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD (1) develop a comprehensive strategic plan for its language and regional proficiency transformation, (2) establish a mechanism to assess the regional proficiency skills of its military and civilian personnel, and (3) develop a methodology to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendations and stated it is taking related actions.

View [GAO-09-568](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Sharon Pickup at (202) 512-9619 or pickups@gao.gov.

MILITARY TRAINING

DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency

What GAO Found

DOD has made progress in transforming its language and regional proficiency capabilities over the last 5 years but continues to lack a comprehensive strategic plan to guide this transformation effort. Prior work has shown that implementing significant organizational change—as DOD is attempting to do with language and regional proficiency transformation—requires a comprehensive, integrated strategic plan that sets a clear direction for transformation efforts and includes measurable performance goals and objectives as well as funding priorities that are linked to goals. In February 2005, DOD published the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, which it has used as its key document to guide language and regional proficiency transformation. While DOD has goals, objectives, and a governance structure, GAO found that not all objectives are measurable, linkages between these goals and DOD's funding priorities remain unclear, and DOD has not identified the total cost of its planned transformation efforts. DOD officials acknowledge they are at a point in their efforts where a strategic plan is needed and are in the process of developing one; however, the issue date has not been determined. In the absence of an approved plan, it will be difficult for DOD to guide the military services as they develop their approaches to language and regional proficiency transformation. Furthermore, it will be difficult for DOD and Congress to assess progress toward a successful transformation.

DOD lacks the comprehensive regional proficiency inventory and validated language and regional proficiency requirements that it would need to identify gaps and assess risk to its ability to conduct military operations. Risk assessment helps decision makers identify and evaluate potential risks so that alternatives can be designed and implemented to mitigate risk. DOD is in the process of developing a management tool designed to match its inventory of language and regional proficiency skills to requirements for these skills so that DOD can identify potential gaps. While DOD has developed an inventory of its language capabilities, it does not yet have an inventory of its regional proficiency capabilities because DOD lacks an agreed upon way to assess and validate these skills. Also, although DOD has a process to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements, it lacks a transparent, validated methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying these requirements. In the absence of a validated methodology, estimates of requirements have differed. For example, as of February 2008, U.S. Pacific Command's requirements outnumbered the requirements of all other combatant commands combined. DOD has two assessments under way, which DOD officials expect may assist them in developing a validated methodology for determining their requirements. These efforts are in the early stages of planning and, while they have a scope, it may not take into account the full range of requirements, such as non-warfighting activities. Overall, without a complete inventory and a validated methodology, DOD cannot effectively assess risk and make informed investment decisions in its language and regional proficiency capabilities.

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

June 19, 2009

Congressional Committees

Today and in the foreseeable future, military operations—including counterinsurgency and stability operations—require the Department of Defense (DOD) to work alongside multinational partners and interact with local populations in a variety of regions and contexts. Violent extremist movements, such as al Qaeda, and recent military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted DOD to place greater emphasis on improving the foreign language and regional proficiency of U.S. forces.¹ Additionally, DOD is placing increasing importance on non-warfighting activities, as demonstrated by DOD’s establishment of U.S. Africa Command in 2008. As early as 2004, a DOD-sponsored study noted that DOD needs to treat developing language skills and regional proficiency as seriously as it treats combat skills.² In February 2005, DOD issued the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap to guide language and regional proficiency transformation efforts. Moreover, in 2006, the Secretary of Defense, through the Quadrennial Defense Review, called on organizations across DOD to increase investments focused on developing and maintaining language and cultural skills. The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)), as well as the military services, combatant commands, and other DOD organizations, have various responsibilities regarding the development, maintenance, and use of foreign language and regional proficiency capabilities.

Congress has emphasized the need for operational forces to have improved language and cultural awareness capabilities. The Senate Report³ that accompanied the Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense

¹ DOD uses various terms such as “regional proficiency”, “regional expertise”, “cultural awareness”, and “cultural expertise” to refer to regional proficiency-related skills. DOD Instruction 5160.70 *Management of DOD Language and Regional Proficiency Capabilities* issued on June 12, 2007, establishes regional proficiency skill level guidelines, which, according to DOD officials, currently include the concept of cultural awareness. For the purposes of this report, we are using the term “regional proficiency” to encompass all terms referring to regional proficiency-related skills, including cultural awareness.

² Defense Science Board, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, *2004 Summer Study on Transition to and from Hostilities* (Washington, D.C.: December 2004).

³ S. Rpt. No. 110-77, at 400-401 (2007).

Authorization Act⁴ directed us to review various aspects of DOD's plans for developing language and cultural awareness capabilities. In response to this mandate, we issued an initial report in November 2008 with our preliminary observations on the extent to which DOD had developed plans to guide its language and regional proficiency transformation efforts, inventoried existing capabilities, identified requirements, developed training programs, and developed acquisition programs for language and cultural awareness capabilities.⁵

This report provides additional information on DOD's progress in developing plans and assessing its current capabilities and needs. Specifically, we assessed the extent to which DOD has (1) developed a strategic plan to guide its language and regional proficiency transformation efforts and (2) obtained the inventory and requirements data it needs to identify potential gaps and assess risk.

To address our first objective, we assessed DOD's goals and objectives, funding, and governance structures for language and regional proficiency transformation. We also analyzed DOD's Defense Language Transformation Roadmap and the military services' strategies for transforming language and regional proficiency capabilities. For our second objective, we analyzed information about the range of DOD's past, current, and planned efforts to identify DOD's language and regional proficiency capabilities and related requirements, and to identify capability gaps and assess risk. For these objectives, we compared DOD's efforts to best practices for strategic planning and risk assessment. We also interviewed officials from the Office of the USD(P&R), the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Defense Language Office, the Joint Staff, Special Operations Command, and the military services. For the purposes of this review, we focused on general purpose forces, conducted only limited work at Special Operations Command regarding language and regional proficiency for special operations forces, and did not conduct audit work with the DOD intelligence community. Therefore, our findings and recommendations primarily address DOD's general purpose forces. More detailed information on our scope and methodology is provided in appendix I.

⁴ Pub. L. No. 110-181 (2008).

⁵ GAO, *Defense Management: Preliminary Observations on DOD's Language and Cultural Awareness Capabilities*, [GAO-09-176R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 25, 2008).

We conducted this performance audit from November 2008 to June 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Traditionally, DOD has focused on its professional communities to ensure that it has the language and regional proficiency capabilities it needs, but in recent years—prompted by the events of September 11, 2001, and military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—DOD has grown increasingly aware of the need for these capabilities among the general purpose forces in addition to the professional communities. DOD's professional communities of linguists and regional experts generally include personnel—such as human intelligence collectors, signal intelligence analysts, and Foreign Area Officers—who require language and regional proficiency to perform their primary functions.⁶ DOD has also explicitly identified language and regional proficiency as critical warfighting skills to be integrated into future operations to ensure that combat forces deploy with the essential ability to understand and effectively communicate with native populations, local and government officials, and coalition partners while in theater.

The responsibility for developing and maintaining language and regional proficiency capabilities is shared among several DOD components, including the military services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Each military service is responsible for staffing, training, and equipping both general purpose forces and personnel whose professions require language or regional proficiency to ensure they have the language and regional proficiency capabilities necessary to support the needs of

⁶ DOD Directive 5160.41E defines a language professional as a person who possesses a foreign language capability, as defined in Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions, in one or more foreign languages and requires a foreign language to perform his or her primary function. DOD policy does not define a regional proficiency professional but does define regional expertise as graduate level education or 40 semester hours of study focusing on but not limited to the political, cultural, sociological, economic, and geographic factors of a foreign country or specific global region through an accredited educational institution or equivalent regional expertise gained through documented previous experience as determined by the USD(P&R) or the Secretary of the Army, Navy, or Air Force—as relevant.

combatant commanders. As of April 2009, the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have developed strategy documents intended to guide efforts to develop language and cultural awareness skills within their respective forces. Additionally, the military services provide predeployment training—the amount of which depends on the unit’s mission and the amount of time available for such language and culture training, as articulated by the commander of the unit—to general purpose forces, and each of the services has established a center to assist in coordinating, developing, distributing, and providing basic language and regional proficiency training. The military services have also taken steps to incorporate language and regional proficiency into their professional military education for general purpose forces.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense has taken a number of steps over the past 5 years to transform language and regional proficiency capabilities, including developing a governance structure, updating policies, and—in February 2005— publishing the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (Roadmap), the primary document DOD has used to guide efforts. For example, DOD established (1) the DOD Senior Language Authority, (2) the Defense Language Steering Committee, (3) the Defense Language Action Panel, and (4) the Defense Language Office. The Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans, under the USD(P&R), has been designated as the DOD Senior Language Authority, and serves as the DOD-wide sponsor for language and regional proficiency. As such, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans oversees efforts—in coordination with other DOD components—to align DOD’s policies and doctrine in order to support the strategic relevance of language and regional proficiency capabilities, oversees and maintains responsibility for DOD’s official system for testing service members’ language proficiency, and ensures the integration of language and regional proficiency into training policy. The Defense Language Steering Committee, which is comprised of Senior Language Authorities from DOD organizations other than the Office of the USD(P&R) and chaired by the DOD Senior Language Authority, provides senior-level guidance regarding the language transformation effort and the development of DOD’s language

capabilities.⁷ The Defense Language Action Panel, which is comprised of less-senior representatives from the same entities represented on the Defense Language Steering Committee, supports the activities, functions, and responsibilities of the Defense Language Steering Committee. The Defense Language Office supports the DOD Senior Language Authority in carrying out their assigned responsibilities. Additionally, the Defense Language Office is responsible—according to Defense Language Office officials—for day-to-day oversight of tasks contained in the Roadmap.

DOD also updated long-standing policies—as called for by the Deputy Secretary of Defense in a May 2004 memorandum—and published implementing guidance that sets forth responsibilities for the management of its efforts to transform language and regional proficiency capabilities. Specifically, in October 2005, USD(P&R) updated its 1988 policy on DOD’s Language Program. The updated policy calls for DOD to consider foreign language and regional proficiency critical competencies that are essential to DOD’s mission and to manage these capabilities so as to maximize the accession, development, maintenance, enhancement, and employment of these critical skills appropriate to the DOD’s mission needs.⁸ Additionally, in June 2007, USD(P&R) published implementing guidance to accompany the updated policy.⁹ This implementing guidance assigns responsibilities for managing DOD’s foreign language and regional proficiency capabilities, establishes the DOD language proficiency goal for language professionals, identifies foreign language and regional proficiency as a mission-critical skill, and publishes DOD’s regional proficiency skill level guidelines.

⁷ The Defense Language Steering Committee includes representatives from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence; the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller); Office of the Under Secretary for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics; the Office of the Director, Program Analysis and Evaluation; the Combatant Commands; the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps; the Defense Intelligence Agency; the Defense Security Cooperation Agency; the Defense Threat Reduction Agency; the National Security Agency; and the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency.

⁸ DOD Directive 5160.41E, *Defense Language Program* (Oct. 21, 2005).

⁹ DOD Instruction 5160.70, *Management of DOD Language and Regional Proficiency Capabilities* (June 12, 2007).

DOD Lacks a Comprehensive Strategic Plan for Guiding Transformation of Language and Regional Proficiency Capabilities

Prior work shows that implementing significant organizational change—as DOD is attempting to do with language and regional proficiency transformation—requires a strategic plan or set of linked plans that sets a clear direction for transformation efforts. DOD has made progress in transforming its language and regional proficiency capabilities, but continues to lack a comprehensive strategic plan.

Significant Organizational Change Requires a Sound Strategic Plan

Our prior work and the work of others has shown that implementing significant organizational change—as DOD is attempting to do with language and regional proficiency transformation—requires a comprehensive, integrated strategic plan that sets a clear direction for transformation efforts and includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities that are linked to goals.¹⁰ Table 1 describes these elements in greater detail, which are based on our prior work.¹¹ Collectively, these elements form a framework that can help decision makers more effectively guide and assess progress, and to do so in a clear and transparent manner.

¹⁰ GAO, *Status of Department of Defense Efforts to Develop a Management Approach to Guide Business Transformations*, [GAO-09-272R](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2009).

¹¹ GAO, *Defense Business Transformation: Status of Department of Defense Efforts to Develop a Management Approach to Guide Business Transformation*, [GAO-09-272R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2009), *Defense Business Transformation: A Full-time Chief Management Officer with a Term Appointment Is Needed at DOD to Maintain Continuity of Effort and Achieve Sustainable Success*, [GAO-08-132T](#) (Washington, DC.: Oct. 16, 2007), *Defense Business Transformation: Achieving Success Requires a Chief Management Officer to Provide Focus and Sustained Leadership*, [GAO-07-1072](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2007), *Defense Business Transformation: A Comprehensive Plan, Integrated Efforts, and Sustained Leadership Are Needed to Assure Success*, [GAO-07-229T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2006).

Table 1: Key Strategic Planning Elements for Language and Regional Proficiency Transformation

| Planning element | Description |
|---|--|
| Measurable performance goals and objectives | Establish long-term goals that identify expected results and when to expect such results. Set forth specific, measurable, and time-bound objectives linked to long-term goals to measure progress toward achieving these goals. |
| Funding priorities linked to goals | Identify funding priorities and link to goals to assist with organizational, congressional, and executive branch funding decisions. |

Source: GAO.

DOD Has Some Elements of a Strategic Plan, but Lacks Others

In February 2005, DOD published the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap— which officials consider to be the key document DOD has used to guide language and regional proficiency transformation. While DOD officials said that the Roadmap was not intended to be a strategic plan, the Roadmap establishes goals and desired outcomes, which DOD officials told us are the same as objectives. Table 2 lists these goals and the objectives for each. Each goal in the Roadmap is supported by several tasks, for a total of 43 tasks. In response to the Roadmap tasks, organizations across DOD have undertaken specific initiatives. For example, DOD has centralized and standardized contract language support, and published a Strategic Language List that identifies prioritized languages for which DOD has current and projected requirements and for which training and testing will be provided, incentives applied, and other resources allocated. Moreover, each military service has developed a strategy for language and regional proficiency transformation, using the Roadmap either as guidance or as a complementary document.

Table 2: DOD Goals and Objectives for Language and Regional Proficiency Capabilities Transformation

| Goals | Objectives ^a |
|---|---|
| Create foundational language and regional proficiency in the civilian, officer, and enlisted ranks for both Active and Reserve Components | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOD has personnel with language skills capable of responding as needed for peacetime and wartime operations with the correct levels of proficiency. • The total force understands and values the tactical, operational, and strategic asset inherent in regional proficiency and language. • Regional area education is incorporated into Professional Military Education and Development. |
| Create capacity to surge language and regional proficiency resources beyond these foundational and in-house capabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOD has the ability to provide language and regional proficiency support to operational units when needed. |
| Establish a cadre of language specialists possessing general professional proficiency ^b for reading, listening, and speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOD understands the numbers of personnel and levels of proficiency and performance required for tasks involving general professional proficiency level and below language skills, and the DOD Components have established career paths and training plans to get the right people to the correct proficiency level. • Programs are in place to train personnel to achieve a general professional proficiency level or higher, along with specialized professional skills, where required to support DOD specified tasks. • Programs are in place to train personnel to achieve a general professional proficiency level or below to support DOD language specified tasks. |
| Establish a process to track the accession, separation, and promotion rates of language professionals and Foreign Area Officers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military personnel with language skills and Foreign Area Officers are developed and managed as critical strategic assets. • All services have established professional career tracks for Foreign Area Officers and promote Foreign Area Officers competitively. • DOD oversight ensures the effective tracking and management of these strategic assets. |

Source: DOD, Defense Language Transformation Roadmap.

^aAdditionally, the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap contains five objectives specifically for the transformation of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center.

^bGeneral professional proficiency for reading is the ability to read with almost complete comprehension, for listening is the ability to understand a standard dialect, and for speaking is the ability to speak with sufficient vocabulary for most formal and informal conversations.

While DOD has goals and objectives, some of DOD’s objectives are not measurable or time-bound. For example, one of DOD’s objectives is for the total force to understand and value the tactical, operational, and strategic asset inherent in regional expertise and language. However, DOD does not

define how it intends to measure the total force's understanding of language and regional expertise or provide a time frame for achieving the objective. In the absence of such measurable objectives, DOD officials assess progress toward goals and objectives by tracking the number of associated Roadmap tasks that they consider to be fully operational, meaning the DOD Senior Language Authority has determined the intent of the task has been met. According to DOD officials, 93 percent of the tasks in the Roadmap were fully operational as of April 2009. However, this approach focuses solely on the achievement of specific tasks rather than the extent to which these tasks support progress toward language and regional proficiency transformation goals. In addition, we found that DOD may consider a task fully operational before the task is complete, further complicating DOD's ability to measure progress toward goals and objectives. For example, DOD considers the Roadmap task that assigned responsibility to the Secretary of the Army to create courses for emerging language needs to be fully operational because a plan to build these courses has been developed. Still, work remains to be done to complete this task—specifically, the creation of the courses themselves. DOD does not continue to formally track these fully operational but uncompleted tasks.

DOD officials state that they identify funding priorities for language and regional proficiency in their budget requests, but linkages between these funding priorities and the goals in the Roadmap are unclear and DOD lacks information about the total cost of language and regional proficiency transformation. According to DOD officials, the 22 major language and regional proficiency programs contained in the Defense Language Program of Record—DOD's term for its projected language and regional proficiency budget—are its funding priorities. DOD estimates that they will receive a half-billion dollars in fiscal year 2009 for these programs. In addition, DOD estimates that they will receive about one billion dollars in the fiscal year 2009 supplemental funding for the Army contract for linguist services. However, our analysis shows that there is not a clear linkage between the Defense Language Program of Record and the Roadmap goals. For example, 1 of the 22 programs is the Service Academies' language training program, which redirects the Service Academies' language programs' focus to strategic languages and immersion programs. While this program may provide needed capabilities, DOD does not identify the goals or tasks which this program supports. Further, because the Roadmap does not have information about funding and DOD has not identified funding necessary to implement the tasks in the Roadmap and other language and regional proficiency transformation efforts, DOD lacks information about the total cost of this transformation.

DOD officials acknowledge that they are at a point in their language and regional proficiency transformation efforts where a strategic plan is needed. Building on the foundation of the Roadmap, DOD officials are in the process of developing a strategic plan to guide transformation efforts for fiscal years 2010-2015. DOD officials expect to complete this plan in September 2009; however, the issue date has not yet been determined. Until DOD has an approved and comprehensive strategic plan or set of linked plans that sets a direction for transformation efforts and includes measurable performance goals and objectives, it will be difficult for DOD to provide direction to the military services as they develop their approaches to language and regional proficiency transformation. Also, in the absence of funding priorities that are linked to goals, DOD, as well as Congress, will face challenges in assessing overall progress toward a successful transformation.

DOD Has Not Fully Identified Gaps in Language and Regional Proficiency to Effectively Assess Risks

In response to the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, DOD is in the process of developing a strategic management tool, called the Language Readiness Index, so that it can determine potential gaps and assess risk by matching its inventory of skills to its requirements for these skills. However, DOD does not have a comprehensive inventory of its regional proficiency capabilities and lacks a transparent, validated methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying language and regional proficiency requirements.

DOD Lacks a Comprehensive Inventory to Support the Identification of Potential Capability Gaps

DOD is in the process of developing a strategic management tool, called the Language Readiness Index, to match DOD's inventory of language skills and regional proficiency to its requirements for these skills. This will enable DOD to determine potential gaps and assess risk to its ability to conduct current military operations, as well as risk to its ability to conduct potential future military operations. The Language Readiness Index is intended to provide DOD decision makers with information related to DOD's language and regional proficiency needs; however, it is not intended to be used to source—or fill—these needs with individuals that possess the appropriate skill sets. Filling the language and regional proficiency requirements of combatant commanders by providing trained personnel remains the responsibility of the military services.

As of April 2009, DOD had developed an inventory of its language capabilities but did not yet have the inventory of its regional proficiency capabilities necessary to support the identification of capability gaps using

the Language Readiness Index. For language, DOD has information about the skills of (1) service members who have taken the Defense Language Proficiency Test and (2) service members who have self-reported language skills. Service members who have taken the Defense Language Proficiency Test are given an Interagency Language Roundtable score; this score shows listening, reading, and speaking proficiency in foreign languages, as measured on a scale from 0 (no proficiency) to 5 (educated native proficiency), using DOD's agreed-upon method to determine proficiency. Service members who have self-reported language proficiency skills have done so as a result of a task in the Roadmap that called on the military services to collect data on current service members' language skills through a one-time screening. The military services may also test the language skills of service members who self-report to determine these service members' Interagency Language Roundtable scores. DOD officials said they also have information on the language skills of DOD civilians and contract linguists; however, unlike the information about service members' language skills, information about DOD civilians and contract linguists is not currently incorporated into DOD's Language Readiness Index. DOD plans to incorporate this information through the third and final phase of the Language Readiness Index's development.

For regional proficiency, DOD does not have an inventory of the skills of service members or DOD civilians because it lacks a mechanism to assess and validate these skills. DOD is only able to identify and track those military members serving in specific occupations requiring a high level of regional proficiency, such as Foreign Area Officers. While DOD policy provides regional proficiency skill level guidelines intended to be benchmarks for assessing regional proficiency, these guidelines do not provide measurable definitions and DOD does not have a way to test or otherwise evaluate the skills of service members or DOD civilians in accordance with these guidelines, which it would need to develop an inventory of its regional proficiency skills. Furthermore, DOD has not established milestones for developing the ability to evaluate regional proficiency skills.

DOD Lacks Validated Methodologies to Determine Language and Regional Proficiency Requirements

While DOD has a process to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements, DOD lacks a transparent, validated methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying those language and regional proficiency requirements that DOD then uses to identify potential capability gaps through its strategic management tool. In 2006, DOD developed a new process to enable combatant commanders and the military services to submit their language

and regional proficiency requirements.¹² This process called for the services, defense agencies, and combatant commands to submit requirements that contained information such as the level of language proficiency needed, level of the regional proficiency needed, the occupational specialty needed, the desired number, and the desired source (such as a service member, federal civilian, or contractor) for filling the need. Accordingly, the services, defense agencies, and combatant commands have submitted requirements. However, in the absence of a validated methodology, estimates of requirements have differed widely by combatant command. For example, as of February 2008, U.S. Pacific Command's requirements outnumbered the requirements of all other combatant commands combined. A particular reason for this variance is that U.S. Pacific Command has included low-level language and regional proficiency requirements associated with general purpose forces while others have not. Furthermore, the requirements data that DOD uses to identify potential capabilities gaps have not been updated since March 2008 because DOD acknowledges the need to develop a validated methodology for determining requirements.

DOD has two assessments under way that DOD officials expect may assist them in developing a validated methodology for determining their language and regional proficiency requirements, but neither of these efforts has yet resulted in a validated methodology. In December 2008, the USD(P&R) requested that the Joint Staff conduct two capabilities-based assessments to identify (1) DOD's foreign language requirements and (2) DOD's regional proficiency requirements.¹³ USD(P&R) requested that the assessments identify requirements both in terms of the number of personnel needed and the needed proficiency level.¹⁴ Additionally, the Joint Staff, which is coordinating these two requested assessments, has

¹² Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3126.01, *Language and Regional Expertise Planning* (Jan. 23, 2006) provides the procedures for this process.

¹³ The genesis of the request was a recommendation contained in an earlier study completed by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) that resulted in a methodology for DOD to use to develop its Strategic Language List—one of the factors that determines which languages make speakers eligible for bonus pay.

¹⁴ A capabilities-based assessment is a type of analysis process. It is also the first part of DOD's requirements generation system, called the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System—or JCIDS. According to Joint Staff policy that governs JCIDS, a capabilities-based assessment identifies the capabilities required to successfully execute missions, the shortfalls in existing systems to deliver those capabilities, and the possible solutions for the capability shortfalls.

stated that these capabilities-based assessments need not only to identify language and regional proficiency requirements—as requested by the USD(P&R)— but also to develop a validated methodology for generating language and regional proficiency requirements, identify emerging requirements, study current reliance on contractors, measure risks and gaps, and recommend solutions to potential problems found. The Joint Staff has identified sponsors for both the language capabilities-based assessment and the regional proficiency capabilities-based assessment. These sponsors will be responsible for developing the scope of each capabilities-based assessment, as well as developing the assessments themselves.¹⁵ The Army is sponsoring the language-focused assessment and the Navy is sponsoring the regional proficiency-focused assessment. DOD expects to complete these capabilities-based assessments by November 2009.

As of April 2009, both of these capabilities-based assessments remain in the very early planning stages and, while the Joint Staff has developed a scope and objectives for each, they may not take into account the full range of requirements. For example, DOD expects the scope of the language capabilities-based assessment to include the capabilities required to support three different scenarios including conventional war, irregular war, and a contingency operation; however, the scope does not include non-warfighting activities. The scope and study plans of these assessments are critical to determining whether the assessments will result in a validated methodology that will aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in the identification of language and regional proficiency requirements. For example, the scope and study plan for each assessment will need to include a review of the language and regional expertise requirements associated with a number of communities, such as general purpose forces, human intelligence collectors, signal intelligence analysts, Foreign Area Officers, and DOD civilians, in addition to reviewing current reliance on contractors. Furthermore, the assessments will need to examine the full range of requirements—from the lowest levels to the highest levels of language and regional proficiency.

While DOD designed its strategic management tool to identify gaps and assess risk, and officials at the Defense Language Office told us that they

¹⁵ According to JCIDS policy, a sponsor is the organization responsible for all common documentation, periodic reporting, and funding actions required to support the capabilities development and acquisition process for a specific capability proposal.

may run different scenarios to determine if there is an unacceptable capability gap, DOD does not have the information it needs to assess risk sufficiently. The risk assessment process, as discussed in our prior work, helps decision makers identify and evaluate potential risks so that alternatives can be designed and implemented to mitigate the effects of the risk.¹⁶ For example, alternatives for mitigating risk associated with language and regional proficiency could include hiring contractors with these skills or building these skills within the force. Risk assessment also involves the prioritization of needs that can be based on such factors as strategic, financial, and operational consequences. For example, the advantages and disadvantages of hiring contractors to fill gaps differ from the advantages and disadvantages of building these skills within the force. Without (1) establishing a mechanism to assess the full range of regional proficiency capabilities within the military force and civilian workforce and incorporating it into the strategic management tool and (2) developing a transparent, validated methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying language and regional proficiency requirements for all communities and at all proficiency levels, DOD cannot determine capability gaps, assess risk effectively, and inform its strategic planning for language and regional proficiency transformation. Moreover, DOD lacks a complete understanding of the extent to which its current language and regional capabilities meet the requirements of current and potential future military operations. Without such an understanding, DOD officials may be limited in their ability to make informed, data-driven decisions about investments in current and future language and regional proficiency efforts.

Conclusions

DOD plays a critical role in conducting and supporting a range of missions that includes irregular warfare, counterinsurgency, stability operations, and non-warfighting activities. Ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as the newly begun efforts of U.S. Africa Command—provide daily reminders of how complex and difficult these missions are. DOD has acknowledged the need to build and maintain certain fundamental capabilities, such as language and regional proficiency capabilities, which are critical to success in these operations; accordingly, DOD has undertaken various initiatives aimed at transforming its language and

¹⁶ GAO, *Risk Management: Further Refinements Needed to Assess Risks and Prioritize Protective Measures at Ports and Other Critical Infrastructure*, [GAO-06-91](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2005).

regional proficiency capabilities, including developing a governance structure and a Roadmap to lead and guide these efforts. However, without a comprehensive strategic plan to guide this complex transformation that includes measurable performance goals and objectives, funding priorities linked to goals, and accountability for achieving results, DOD will not have a sound basis for measuring progress and making investment decisions, and cannot be assured that it is developing and maintaining the optimal set of language and regional proficiency capabilities to achieve its transformational goals. Moreover, in the absence of a complete inventory and consistently identified requirements for the type and number of language and regional proficiency skills it needs, DOD is not in a position to properly assess gaps in its capabilities and appropriately assess risk so that it can make informed decisions about the future direction, scope, and nature of its efforts and investments in support of transforming its language and regional proficiency capabilities. Furthermore, the identification of requirements and assessments of gaps and risk are critical to informing DOD's strategic planning on language and regional proficiency transformation. Such efforts to identify requirements are challenging, but they are especially critical given the increasing importance of language and regional proficiency skills to mission success, as well as the time and expense of developing and maintaining these skills. Without an understanding of gaps in its capabilities, DOD will not be in a position to effectively identify solutions to fill those gaps, conduct risk assessments to monitor and mitigate risk when faced with competing demands, and develop and adapt strategic plans for language and regional proficiency transformation.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of language and regional proficiency capabilities transformation efforts already under way, as well as future efforts, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense take the following three actions:

- Direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to include in a strategic plan or set of linked plans the following specific elements for both language and regional proficiency: (1) measurable performance goals and objectives and (2) investment priorities that are linked to goals.
- Direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, in consultation with the Secretaries of the military services and Heads of DOD's defense agencies, to establish a mechanism to assess and validate

the full range of regional proficiency capabilities of service members and DOD civilians, including the development of measurable definitions and milestones to achieve an assessment, and incorporate the information into its strategic management tool to allow DOD to determine capability gaps and assess risk effectively.

- Direct the Joint Staff, in coordination with the military services and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, to develop a transparent, validated methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying language and regional proficiency requirements for all communities and at all proficiency levels in order for DOD to be able to determine capability gaps, assess risk effectively, and inform strategic planning for language and regional proficiency transformation.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In commenting on a draft of our report, DOD concurred with our three recommendations and identified planned actions. For example, DOD stated it planned to complete the development of a strategic plan by September 2009 and provide definitive guidance and definitions for regional proficiency that would enable the services and defense agencies to measure and determine appropriate proficiency levels. With regard to its plans to develop a methodology to aid combatant commanders, DOD components, and defense agencies in identifying requirements, DOD concurred with our recommendation and noted that it was currently planning to complete two assessments by November 2009. Given the 90-day window to conduct these assessments, DOD stated that the scope would be narrower than what our report called for, which was that the assessments would need to (1) address language and regional expertise requirements associated with a number of communities, such as general purpose forces, human intelligence collectors, signal intelligence analysts, Foreign Area Officers, and DOD civilians, and (2) address the full range of requirements—from the lowest levels to the highest levels of language and regional proficiency. In the absence of a requirements methodology that addresses the full range of populations and proficiency levels, DOD officials may be limited in their ability to make informed, data-driven decisions about investments in current and future language and regional proficiency efforts, especially given the critical role DOD plays in conducting and supporting a range of missions that includes irregular warfare, counterinsurgency, stability operations, and non-warfighting activities. As such, we believe that DOD would need to undertake additional efforts to ensure that, ultimately, the methodology it develops does address the full range of requirements.

DOD also provided additional comments suggesting we (1) clarify the mission of the Defense Language Office, (2) replace the word “assess” with “certify” to more accurately describe DOD’s lack of an approach to inventory its regional proficiency capabilities, (3) clarify that the report focused primarily on the needs and roles of general purpose forces, and (4) modify text pertaining to the identification of language and regional proficiency requirements so that it includes the DOD components and defense agencies. We have incorporated these comments into the report as appropriate. DOD’s official comments are reprinted in their entirety in appendix II.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees; the Secretary of Defense; the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force; and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO Web site at www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-9619 or pickups@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely,



Sharon Pickup
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

List of Congressional Committees

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Chairman
The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Daniel Inouye
Chairman
The Honorable Thad Cochran
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Ike Skelton
Chairman
The Honorable Howard McKeon
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable John P. Murtha
Chairman
The Honorable C.W. Bill Young
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To determine the extent to which the Department of Defense (DOD) has established a strategic plan to guide efforts to transform its language and regional proficiency capabilities, we analyzed DOD's Defense Language Transformation Roadmap as the department's key document for guiding the transformation of language and regional proficiency capabilities. Specifically, we compared the Roadmap to key elements of a strategic plan to determine whether the Roadmap met these key elements. We identified these key elements by reviewing prior GAO work on strategic planning best practices¹ and the Government Performance and Results Act.² We then developed a data collection instrument based on these key elements and used this instrument to perform a document review of the Roadmap. In conducting this document review, we considered whether the Roadmap showed evidence of the following elements: (1) measurable performance goals and objectives and (2) funding priorities linked to goals. Our specific methodology for this analysis was as follows:

- To determine whether there were measurable performance goals and objectives, we determined whether: (a) the Roadmap identified goals, (b) its goals flowed from the purpose or mission statement, (c) its goals were results-oriented, (d) its goals were expressed in a manner that allowed the department to assess whether the goals were being achieved, and (e) its goals were identified in order of importance, or otherwise prioritized.
- To determine whether the Roadmap delineated funding priorities linked to goals, we determined whether the Roadmap addresses: (a) funding required to meet the goals and (b) funding priorities among the goals. In addition, we obtained and reviewed a copy of the draft Defense Language and Regional Program Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 in order to determine whether it contained key elements of a strategic plan; however, because this draft document was incomplete, we were unable to conduct such an assessment. Additionally, we obtained copies of the military services' strategic documents, or draft strategic documents, related to language and regional proficiency transformation, specifically, the Air Force Culture,

¹ GAO, *Defense Business Transformation: Status of Department of Defense Efforts to Develop a Management Approach to Guide Business Transformation*, [GAO-09-272R](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2009), GAO, *Force Structure: Improved Strategic Planning Can Enhance DOD's Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Efforts*, [GAO-04-342](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 17, 2004), GAO, *Defense Management: Fully Developed Management Framework Needed to Guide Air Force Future Total Force Efforts*, [GAO-06-232](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2006).

² Pub. L. No. 103-62 (1993).

Region, and Language Flight Plan (draft), the Army Culture and Foreign Language Strategy (draft), the U.S. Navy Language Skills, Regional Expertise and Cultural Awareness Strategy, and the Marine Corps Regional, Cultural, and Language Strategy (draft). We reviewed these documents to determine the extent to which they also addressed language and regional proficiency and the extent of the alignment between the services' strategies and the Roadmap. Finally, we conducted interviews on the development and status of the Roadmap, the Defense Language and Regional Program Strategic Plan for 2010-2015, and the services' strategic documents with knowledgeable officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)), the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Defense Language Office, the Joint Staff, the Air Force, the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps.

To determine the extent to which DOD has obtained the inventory and requirements data it needs to determine potential gaps and assess risk, we obtained and reviewed information about the range of past, current, and planned efforts intended to create an inventory, determine requirements, and identify gaps in DOD's language and regional proficiency capabilities. We then evaluated these efforts to determine whether they allowed DOD decision makers to effectively assess risk in accordance with risk assessment best practices, as identified in prior GAO work.³ Specifically, with regard to efforts to create an inventory of DOD's language and regional proficiency capabilities, we reviewed and evaluated the status of the services' efforts to conduct a one-time self-assessment of personnel with language capabilities, as called for by the Roadmap, and to screen accessions and all personnel periodically thereafter for language and regional proficiency skills, as required by DOD Directive 5160.41E, Defense Language Program, (Oct. 21, 2005). We also reviewed preliminary data gathered by the services for a report that is required by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 on the foreign language proficiency of DOD personnel.⁴ With regard to efforts to determine requirements for DOD's language and regional proficiency capabilities, we reviewed strategic and Joint Staff guidance that identifies the need for foreign language skills among U.S. forces and requires commanders to identify and prioritize personnel language and regional proficiency

³ [GAO-06-13](#).

⁴ Pub. L. No. 110-181, § 958 (2008).

requirements.⁵ In particular, we reviewed and evaluated DOD's quarterly process for reporting language and regional proficiency requirements, such as the initial submission of requirements for the second quarter of fiscal year 2008 via spreadsheet and the subsequent institution of the Consolidated Language and Regional Expertise database for electronic reporting of requirements. We also reviewed the results of DOD's Capabilities-Based Review. With regard to efforts to identify capability gaps for DOD's language and regional proficiency capabilities, we obtained information on and assessed DOD's development of a Language Readiness Index that is intended to compare the inventory of personnel with language and regional proficiency capabilities with the requirements for these personnel. Moreover, we discussed all of the aforementioned efforts with a variety of knowledgeable defense officials, in particular with officials from the Office of the USD(P&R), the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Defense Language Office, the Joint Staff, the Air Force, the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Pacific Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command. For the purposes of our overall review, we focused on general purposes forces, conducted only limited work at Special Operations Command regarding language and regional proficiency for special operations forces, and did not conduct audit work with the DOD intelligence community. Therefore, our findings and recommendations primarily address DOD's general purpose forces.

⁵ DOD, *Guidance for the Employment of the Force*, (June 2008); Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3110.01G, *Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan*, (Mar. 1, 2008); Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3126.01, *Language and Regional Expertise Planning*, (Jan. 23, 2006, current as of Feb. 11, 2008); and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3150.16D, *Joint Operation Planning and Execution System Reporting Structure*, (Dec. 1, 2008).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-4000

JUN 5 2009

Ms. Sharon L. Pickup
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Pickup,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO draft report, GAO-09-568, "MILITARY TRAINING: DoD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency," dated May 5, 2009 (GAO Code 351198).

DoD concurs with the recommendations made in the draft report. Detailed responses to those recommendations are contained in the enclosure. In addition, we would like to offer the following comments on the report.

The mission of the Defense Language Office (DLO) is not limited to day-to-day oversight of tasks contained in the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (page 5). The DLO provides strategic direction and programmatic oversight to the Military Departments, Defense field activities, and the Combatant Commands on present and future requirements related to language as well as regional and cultural proficiency. The DLO also assists the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans in: overseeing efforts to ensure strategic relevance of DoD language and regional proficiency capabilities through the alignment of doctrine, policies, and planning guidance; overseeing implementation of DoD policy regarding the development, maintenance, and utilization of language and regional proficiency capabilities; monitoring trends in the recruitment, accession, hiring, promotion, pay, training, and retention of individuals with these critical skills; and exploring and developing innovative concepts to expand and track capabilities.

Regarding the accomplishment of Capabilities-Based Assessments (CBA), the report (page 13) states: "Furthermore, the assessments will need to examine the full range of requirements—from the lowest levels to the highest levels of language and regional proficiency." This level of detail is outside of the scope of the planned objectives of the CBAs. Given the ninety-day windows permitted to conduct these "quick look" CBAs, the scope of each will necessarily be narrower than what the report implies.

Several references are made in the draft report to DoD lacking a way to assess regional proficiency skills and capabilities (pages 11, 15, and Highlights). Replacement of the word "assess" with "certify" is recommended as a more accurate representation.



**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

Finally, it should be clarified in the report that the study focused primarily on the needs and roles of the General Purpose Forces (GPF). The programs of the non-GPF functional communities, such as the intelligence and special operations communities, may be different from those of the GPF.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. We look forward to receiving the final report, when available.

Sincerely,



Nancy E. Weaver
Director, Defense Language Office

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT – DATED MAY 5, 2009
GAO CODE 351198/GAO-09-568

"MILITARY TRAINING: DoD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and
Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional
Proficiency"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness to include in a strategic plan or set of linked plans the following specific elements for both language and regional proficiency: (1) measurable performance goals and objectives and (2) investment priorities that are linked to goals.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. The Defense Language and Regional Program Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 is currently under development by the Defense Language Office. The target date for its completion is September 2009.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness in consultation with the Secretaries of the military Services and Heads of DoD's Defense Agencies, to establish a mechanism to assess the full range of regional proficiency capabilities of Service members and DoD civilians, including the development of measurable definitions and milestones to achieve an assessment, and incorporate the information into its strategic management tool to allow DoD to determine capability gaps and assess risk effectively.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. The Defense Language Office, using the criteria in the Regional Proficiency Guidelines in DoD Instruction 5160.70, *Management of DoD Language and Regional Proficiency Capabilities*, will provide definitive guidance and definitions for the criteria in the proficiency levels that will enable the Services and Agencies to measure and determine the appropriate proficiency level for their personnel. The project planning will begin in late fiscal year 2009 with execution in March 2010. Implementation date for assessment of individual member proficiency levels will not be before September 2010.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the Joint Staff, in coordination with the military Services and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, to develop a transparent, validated methodology to aid Combatant Commanders in identifying language and regional proficiency requirements for all communities and at all proficiency levels in order for DoD to be able to determine capability gaps, assess risk effectively, and inform strategic planning for language and regional proficiency transformation.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. However, the text pertaining to the identification of language and regional proficiency requirements by “combatant commanders” for all communities at all proficiency levels should be revised to read “combatant commanders, the components, and defense agencies.” Similar text in the draft report (pages 9, 13, and 14) should also be modified accordingly. For example, the Director of the National Security Agency, working with the Services, determines language and regional requirements and proficiency levels for the cryptologic community. In addition to responding to combatant commands’ requirements, the Services respond to the defense agencies’ operational needs as well.

As referred to in the draft report, the Joint Staff is currently managing the accomplishment of two Capabilities-Based Assessments (CBA), one for Language and another for Regional Expertise and Culture. The results of these assessments will be intellectually defensible and will produce the following: (1) a standardized methodology to aid combatant commanders in identifying language, regional expertise and associated culture (LREC) requirements based on mission and workload; (2) a method to enable Services and combatant commands to determine the LREC capabilities needed for personnel in the Total Force; (3) a process to transform a reported need for LREC capability into a prioritized, validated, actionable requirement delivered to force providers; (4) a methodology to measure the level of risk of current gaps; and (5) doctrine, organization, training, manpower, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities recommendations to mitigate gaps. The target date for completion of these CBAs is November 2009.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Sharon Pickup, 202-512-9619 or pickups@gao.gov

Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, key contributors to this report were Patricia Lentini, Assistant Director; Catherine H. Brown; John Bumgarner; Gabrielle A. Carrington; MacKenzie Cooper; Joanne Landesman; Gregory Marchand; Chad Reed; Jay Smale; Kathryn Smith; and Traye Smith.

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