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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-09-568, a report to congressional committees

MILITARY TRAINING

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

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.
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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.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**