

Explaining the Readiness Crisis

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In October 2013, former Chief of Staff of the United States Army General Raymond Odierno made a startling public admission: only two Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) were trained and ready to deploy. At the time, the Army stood at an active duty end strength of some 540,000 Soldiers, with a total of 43 BCTs in the active component inventory. How could only two, or less than five percent, be ready for combat?

General Odierno's 2013 statement clearly demonstrates a severe readiness problem, and Army assessments made since then reveal an inability to generate sufficient readiness in its deployable formations. In a March 2015 Senate hearing, Army Vice Chief of Staff General Dan Allyn testified that only 33 percent of the Army's brigades could be assessed as ready. The current readiness crisis is not unique to the Army. At the same hearing, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Larry Spencer testified that "less than 50 percent" of combat air forces were "fully spectrum ready." Similarly, U.S. Marine Corps Assistant Commandant General John Paxton assessed the Corps' home-station force readiness as below the level "needed to execute wartime missions, respond to unexpected crises, and surge for major contingencies."

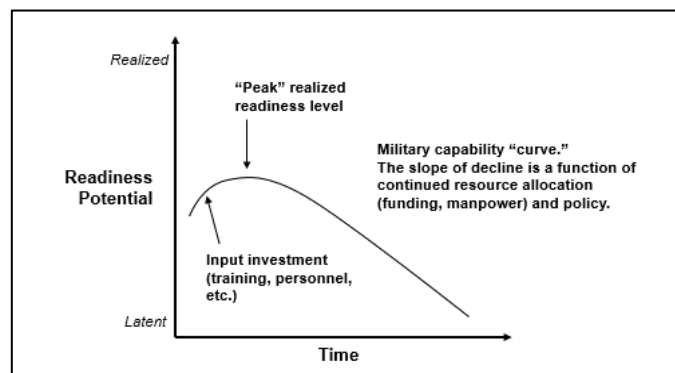
What is Readiness?

Declining resources and consistent demand exert

significant downward pressure on the Army's ability to generate readiness, defined simply as military capability measured against the expectations of strategy. However, readiness is not simply a product of resource supply measured against demand for ground forces. The ability to balance the level of military capability that can be achieved with the ability to maintain it over time ultimately determines the actual readiness of the force.

In *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences*, Richard Betts defines operational readiness as the "gap between the combat potential of existing units and their actual capability." In practice, this gap is a spectrum of military capability that extends from fully latent to realized combat readiness. Once achieved, realized readiness naturally begins to deteriorate at a rate determined by resources, policy, and consumption or use of the capability. This relationship can be depicted as a military capability "curve" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Military Capability Curve





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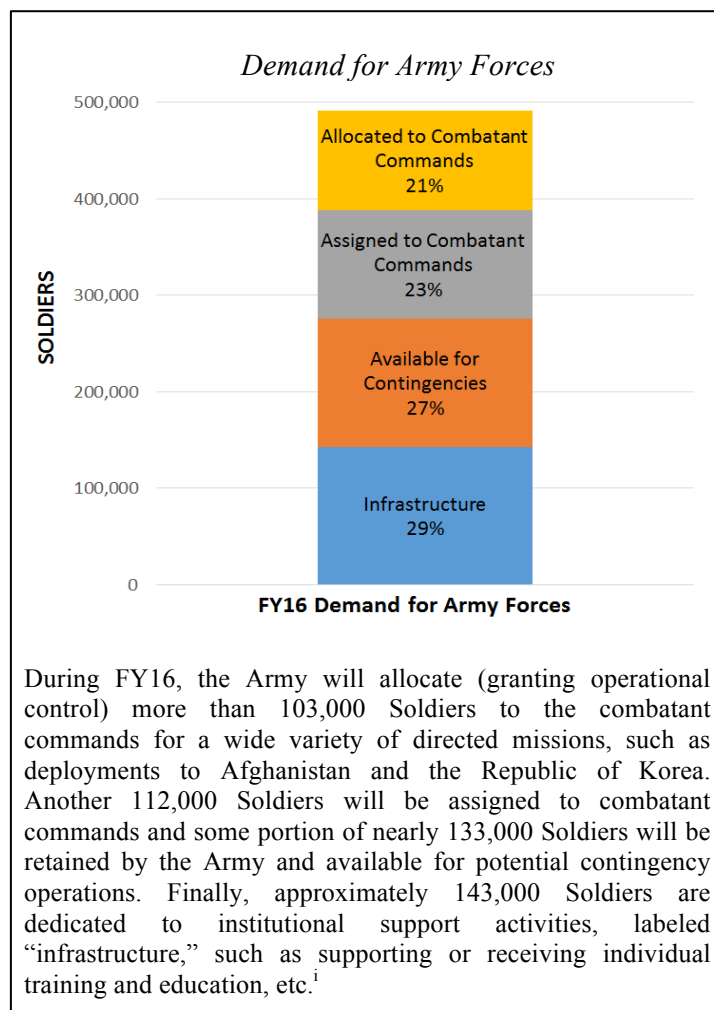
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External Factors: The Role of Supply and Demand

The Army strikes a balance between two imperatives derived from strategic guidance: the need to maintain forces that can win the low probability case of high intensity, state-on-state conflict; and the need to maintain a continuous, stabilizing, and deterrent presence around the globe. At any given time, almost half of the active Army is committed to the latter mission set, while some amount of remaining available forces must be ready for low probability scenarios (see *Demand for Army Forces*). The scale of Army commitments, when considering different types of missions, has exposed tensions in the way the Army trains and prepares its forces. The Army does not have enough force structure, or money, to invest significant resources in the preparation of a unit for a contingency that would require conventional combat only to commit it to a mission that requires a much lower readiness level. This is the fastest way to squander readiness gains.

At the same time, both the overall size of the force and available funding has declined, exacerbating the effect of volatile demand. Army leaders have routinely cited budget uncertainty and funding reductions, particularly in Operations and Maintenance (O&M) accounts, as chief among the causes of readiness failure. However, efforts to clearly identify the relationship between O&M funding and military readiness have proven inconclusive. For the two decades that spanned 1980 to 2001, total defense O&M per active duty Service Member rose an average of \$1,700 per year. Yet the U.S. Congressional Budget Office was unable to determine the overall effect on readiness, which appeared to slightly decline or, at best, remain relatively stable over the twenty-year period. The data proves equally difficult to analyze beginning in 2001.



Army “base” O&M spending has remained relatively constant since FY01, while supplemental, or Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), funding dedicated to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan ballooned and subsequently declined (see *Manpower and Funding*). The Army hoped that accelerating the drawdown of some 120,000 Soldiers would generate savings that could be reinvested in readiness. These savings have failed to materialize, as greater spending on a smaller



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force has not necessarily led to observable, proportional increases in readiness.

scenarios, in which readiness must be completely rebuilt with considerable time and investment.

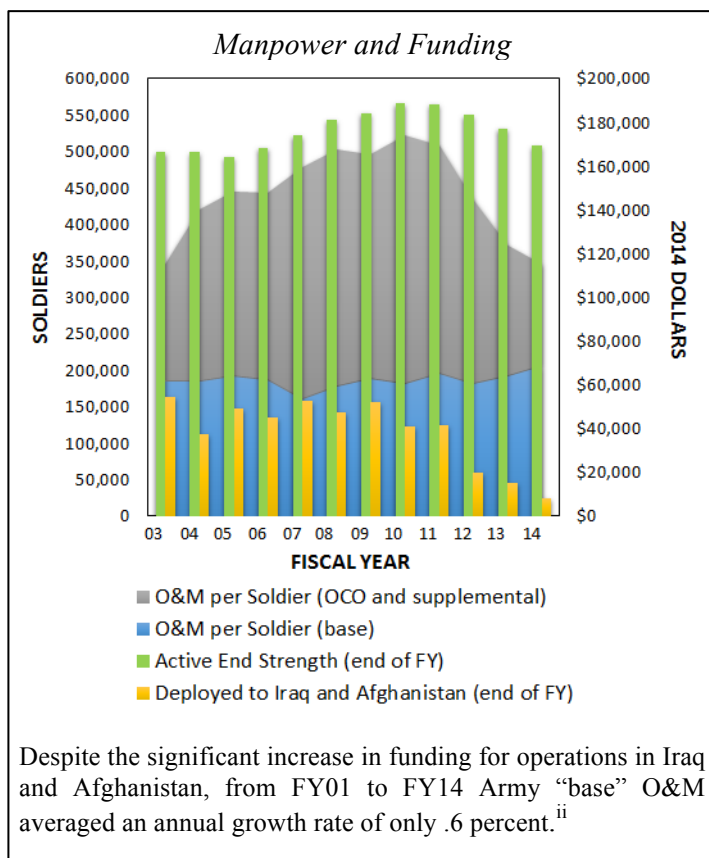
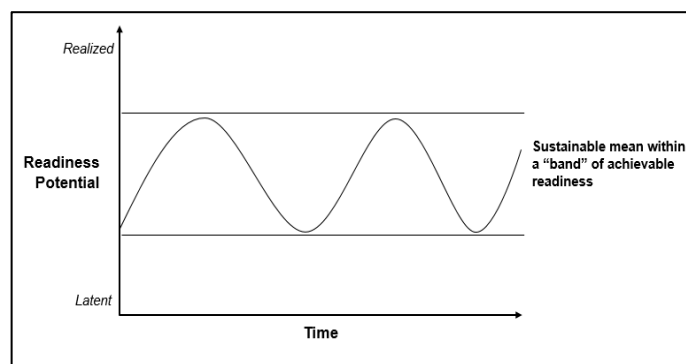


Figure 2. Achievable Readiness



Lower realized readiness should be sustainable for a longer duration than higher levels of readiness; in other words, the slope of readiness decline, or “valleys,” can be made gradual with incremental investments vice complete “reset” of units. However, a smaller pool of available forces and reduced resources heightens the give and take nature of the “fight to win” and “manage the peace” imperatives. The demand for Army forces may ultimately reach levels that far outpace the Army’s ability to generate an acceptable level of achievable readiness. When that occurs, either the resources must be increased, or, more likely, the strategy will have to change.

Is Readiness Achievable?

Balancing supply and demand pressures requires institutional responsiveness and flexibility, attributes that are lacking in the Army’s current supply-based force generation model that is designed to meet the needs of a large force pool rotating on a cycle of predictable requirements. Managing achievable readiness ultimately leads to an aggregated, sustainable “mean” of readiness across the force that extends over time (Figure 2). This approach avoids costly cliff

ⁱ Data from Headquarters, Department of the Army, and Timothy M. Bonds, Michael Johnson, and Paul S. Steinberg, *Limiting Regret: Building the Army We Will Need* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Annual Army spending data at Assistant Secretary of the Army for Financial Management & Comptroller, <http://asafm.army.mil>. End of FY end strength at Defense Manpower and Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Region/Country*, https://www.dmhc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp.