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Defense Primer: The Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DOD) was established after World War II through the 1947 National Security Act. At the time, some, including President Truman, took the view that the different components of the U.S. military had been insufficiently integrated to wage World War II effectively. The intention of the 1947 Act was therefore to create, for the first time, an integrated institution that combined the Departments of War and Navy, and to establish a policy architecture for overseeing the newly reorganized military apparatus. Over time, DOD has grown into one of the largest bureaucracies in the world, comprising over 3 million employees stationed across the United States and around the globe.

“One of the lessons which have most clearly come from the costly and dangerous experience of this war is that there must be unified direction of land, sea and air forces at home as well as in other parts of the world where our Armed Forces are serving. We did not have that kind of direction when we were attacked four years ago—and we certainly paid a high price for not having it.”

President Harry S. Truman, “Message to Congress,” December 19, 1945.

DOD’s purpose today is to provide the President with the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of the country. It does so through five primary sets of institutions, each representing thousands of people and often hundreds of specific offices:

- **The Office of the Secretary of Defense**, which helps the Secretary plan, advise, and carry out the nation’s security policies as directed by both the Secretary of Defense and the President.
- **The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Staff**, which collectively, through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provides advice to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense on military matters.
- **The Military Departments**, which train and equip their personnel to perform warfighting, peacekeeping and humanitarian/disaster assistance tasks.
- **The Unified Combatant Commands**, which deploy troops and exercise military power on behalf of the President and the Secretary of Defense with the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

- **The Defense Agencies**, sometimes called “DOD’s fourth estate,” which provide or manage specific capabilities for the department, such as logistics or security cooperation.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) assists the Secretary of Defense in exercising civilian authority, direction, and control over the armed forces. They do so in a variety of areas, including policy development, planning, resource management, fiscal management, and program evaluation. OSD also provides civilian oversight of the military services and combatant commands to ensure that the Secretary and the President’s defense objectives are met.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)

The Joint Chiefs of Staff is the preeminent military advisory body in U.S. national security establishment. Its membership consists of the five military service chiefs (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and National Guard Bureau), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (VCJCS). The JCS regularly convenes to formulate and provide its best military advice to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. According to Title 10, U.S. Code, §151, the Chairman is the principal military advisor to the President. Chairmen therefore have statutory responsibility to present their counsel—as well as any dissenting views from other members of the JCS—to senior leaders in the U.S. national security establishment. Of note, although the Chairman plans, coordinates, and oversees military operations involving U.S. forces, neither the Chairman nor the JCS has a formal role in the execution of military operations—a role instead assigned to the unified combatant commanders.

The CJCS is supported by the Joint Staff, which assist in developing the unified strategic direction of the combatant forces, their operation under unified command, and for their integration into an efficient team of land, naval, and air forces. The “Joint Staff” is composed of approximately equal numbers of officers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. In practice, the Marines make up about 20% of the number allocated to the Navy (<http://www.jcs.mil/About/>).

The Military Departments

There are three military departments: the Army, Navy and Air Force. The Marine Corps, mainly an amphibious force, is part of the Department of the Navy. The Space Force is part of the Air Force. These departments are tasked with training and equipping military forces to be utilized by the combatant commands; departments are therefore

responsible for DOD’s “supply” of military forces and equipment. Each department is led by a civilian service secretary and supported by a service chief. A service chief is a senior military officer designated as the principal military advisor to a departmental secretary for matters relating to a specific armed service.

In terms of overall roles and responsibilities, The Army defends the land mass of the United States, its territories, commonwealths, and possessions; it operates in more than 50 countries. The Navy maintains, trains, and equips combat-ready maritime forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression, and maintaining freedom of the seas. The U.S. Marine Corps maintains ready expeditionary forces, sea-based and integrated air-ground units for contingency and combat operations, and the means to stabilize or contain international disturbance. The Air Force provides a rapid, flexible, and, when necessary, lethal air and space capability that can deliver forces anywhere in the world in less than 48 hours.

Unified Combatant Commands

The Unified Combatant Commands, or “COCOMs,” are the principal mechanism through which the Department of Defense conducts its global operations. The COCOMs represent the “demand” side of DOD, as it is primarily the COCOM’s operational needs that drive the development of military requirements across the department.

There are seven regionally focused COCOMs:

- U.S. Africa Command, responsible for sub-Saharan Africa;
- U.S. European Command, responsible for all of Europe, large portions of Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, and the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans;
- U.S. Central Command, responsible for most of the Middle East, parts of Northern Africa and west Asia, and part of the Indian Ocean;
- U.S. Northern Command, responsible for defense of the continental United States and coordination of security and military relationships with Canada and Mexico;
- U.S. Southern Command, responsible for Central America, South America, and the Caribbean; and
- U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, responsible for the Pacific Ocean, Southwest Asia, Australia, South Asia, and parts of the Indian Ocean. It shares responsibility for Alaska with U.S. Northern Command.
- U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM), established in 2019, which deters aggression and conflict, defends U.S. and allied freedom of action, delivers space combat power for the Joint/Combined force, and develops joint warfighters to advance U.S. and allied interests in, from, and through the space domain.

There are also four “functional” COCOMs:

- U.S. Strategic Command, which is responsible for controlling space, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies, launching and operating satellite systems, and directing the use of U.S. strategic forces;
- U.S. Special Operations Command, which provides counter-paramilitary, counter-narcotics, guerilla, psychological warfare, civil education, and insurgency capabilities; and
- U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), which provides air, land, and sea transportation to different components of the Department of Defense.
- U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) directs, synchronizes, and coordinates cyberspace planning and operations to defend and advance national interests in collaboration with domestic and international partners.

Defense Agencies

Title 10, U.S.C., §191 grants the Secretary of Defense authority to establish agencies that provide for the performance of a supply or service activity that is common to more than one military department, in instances where doing so is deemed more effective, economical, or efficient than existing structures. Organizations established under this authority are referred to as either Defense Agencies or a Department of Defense Field Activity. According to DOD’s Chief Management Officer, there are 20 Defense Agencies (9 of which are also designated Combat Support Agencies pursuant to Title 10, U.S.C., §193, meaning that they are jointly overseen by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and 8 DOD Field Activities.

DOD Reform

Managing an organization as large and complex as DOD presents a unique challenge to its senior leaders. Concerns about the department’s efficiency, effectiveness, or both have driven reform initiatives since the establishment of DOD itself. One particular tension that was built into Truman’s initial DOD design is that between the military services on the one hand, which strive to protect and advance their institutional ethos and capabilities, and joint or defense-wide institutions on the other, which seek to advance a greater degree of integration between DOD’s constituent parts. In the early 1980s, congressional concerns that the services had undue—and unhelpful—influence in the conduct of military operations led to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act. Thirty years later, the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 2943) also sought to reform the way DOD is organized, with the overall aim of improving the department’s agility and strategic integration of its global assets.

CRS Products

CRS Report R44474, *Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defense Reform and Issues for Congress*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

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