

# The Daily Record

## Fixing Readiness

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A “readiness crisis” afflicts the U.S. military, according to congressional hawks eager to boost military spending. President Trump promises to reverse what he labeled the military’s “depletion.”

The military does have readiness problems, but they could be addressed without raising the total military budget.

In principle, U.S. military readiness refers to the force’s ability to perform its key missions. That means having units that are well-equipped, manned and trained. Two internal Pentagon tracking systems rate readiness on that score. That sounds simpler, but readiness’ definition makes it tough to assess.

The force’s ability to accomplish its missions depends partly on future enemy actions, which are uncertain.

And given limited resources, one cannot be fully prepared for everything all the time. Readiness should rise and fall as U.S. forces prepare for and exit conflicts.

These ambiguities mean that debates that appear to concern readiness are actually about other issues, like what to buy and what wars to expect. A telling example came last summer when former CIA Director David Petraeus and foreign policy scholar Michael O’Hanlon published two articles calling the “readiness crisis” a myth. They argued that while readiness is hardly perfect, vehicles are generally well-maintained and combat units well-trained and equipped for current wars.

Their argument produced a bevy of criticism from hawkish analysts. But these responses oddly accepted the basic point of contention — that readiness for current missions is hardly in crisis.

The U.S. military’s readiness problems are largely the fault of those that most loudly bemoan them. That includes Pentagon bosses and especially congressional leaders. They routinely reject three fixes that require no budget boost.

The first and best option is to ask less of the military. A defense strategy that prioritized among dangers, rather than trying to stabilize most corners of the earth, would leave the force less strained and allow cuts to force structure. The savings could fund the operational accounts that pay for the readiness of the force.

Second, even without a strategic shift, Congress could cancel complex platforms, like the Littoral Combat Ship or F-35, which suck up operational funding, and replace them with simpler alternatives — or do with less in some areas.

A third solution is to eventually free up funds for operational accounts by cutting spending on excess bases and by slowing the growth in personnel costs.

Congressional Republicans aren't especially motivated to fix the readiness crisis because they use it to pressure Democrats to increase defense spending.

In Washington, readiness now seems to mean whatever the speaker wants from the military. We should discard the term in recognition of the fact that military spending choices are mostly about what to be ready for, not how to be ready for everything.

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