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NATIONAL SECURITY

Key Challenges and
Solutions to Strengthen
Interagency Collaboration

Statement of John H. Pendleton, Director, Defense
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Highlights of [GAO-10-822T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent terrorist events such as the attempted bomb attacks in New York's Times Square and aboard an airliner on Christmas Day 2009 are reminders that national security challenges have expanded beyond the traditional threats of the Cold War Era to include unconventional threats from nonstate actors. Today's threats are diffuse and ambiguous, making it difficult—if not impossible—for any single federal agency to address them alone. Effective collaboration among multiple agencies and across federal, state, and local governments is critical.

This testimony highlights opportunities to strengthen interagency collaboration by focusing on four key areas: (1) developing overarching strategies, (2) creating collaborative organizations, (3) developing a well-trained workforce, and (4) improving information sharing. It is based on GAO's body of work on interagency collaboration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has recommended that federal agencies incorporate desirable characteristics of national strategies; take actions to create collaborative organizations; address human capital issues such as staffing shortages, training, and strategic planning; and establish or clarify guidelines for sharing national security information. Agencies have generally concurred with GAO's recommendations and have taken some actions to enhance interagency collaboration, but much work remains.

[View GAO-10-822T or key components.](#)
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NATIONAL SECURITY

Key Challenges and Solutions to Strengthen Interagency Collaboration

What GAO Found

Federal agencies have an opportunity to enhance collaboration by addressing long-standing problems and better positioning the U.S. government to respond to changing conditions and future uncertainties. Progress has been made in enhancing interagency collaboration, but success will require leadership commitment, sound plans that set clear priorities, and measurable goals. The agencies involved in national security will need to make concerted efforts to forge strong and collaborative partnerships, and seek coordinated solutions that leverage expertise and capabilities across communities. Today, challenges exist in four key areas:

- *Developing and implementing overarching strategies.* Although some agencies have developed or updated overarching strategies on national security-related issues, GAO's work has identified cases where U.S. efforts have been hindered by the lack of information on roles and responsibilities of organizations involved or coordination mechanisms.
- *Creating collaborative organizations.* Organizational differences—including differences in agencies' structures, planning processes, and funding sources—can hinder interagency collaboration. Agencies lack adequate coordination mechanisms to facilitate this collaboration during planning and execution of programs and activities.
- *Developing a well-trained workforce.* Agencies do not always have the right people with the right skills in the right jobs at the right time to meet the challenges they face—including having a workforce that is able to quickly address crises. Moreover, agency performance management systems often do not recognize or reward interagency collaboration, and training is needed to understand other agencies' processes or cultures.
- *Sharing and integrating national security information across agencies.* U.S. government agencies do not always share relevant information with their national security partners due to a lack of clear guidelines for sharing information and security clearance issues. Additionally, incorporating information drawn from multiple sources poses challenges to managing and integrating that information.

Strengthening interagency collaboration—with leadership as the foundation—can help transform U.S. government agencies and create a more unified, comprehensive approach to national security issues at home and abroad.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss some of the key challenges for interagency collaboration on national security matters and to share with you ways U.S. government agencies could implement actions to enhance collaboration. Recent terrorist events such as the attempted bomb attacks in New York's Times Square and on board an airliner on Christmas Day 2009 are reminders that national security challenges have expanded beyond the traditional threats of the Cold War era to include unconventional threats from nonstate actors. Today's threats are diffuse and ambiguous. They include terrorist threats from extremist groups, cyber attacks, drug trafficking, infectious diseases, and energy threats. Moreover, they arise from multiple sources and are interrelated, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for any single agency to effectively address alone. Effective collaboration among multiple agencies and across federal, state, and local governments is critical. The May 2010 National Security Strategy highlighted the need to take a whole of government approach to strengthening national capacity.¹

Congress and other organizations are becoming increasingly focused on this topic and have recently taken steps to improve interagency collaboration. For example, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008² directed the Secretary of Defense to submit a plan to improve and reform the Department of Defense's (DOD) participation in and contribution to the interagency coordination process on national security issues. In the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009,³ Congress gave authority to the Secretaries of Defense and State and the Administrator of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to jointly establish an advisory panel to advise, review, and make recommendations on ways to improve coordination among those agencies on national security issues, including reviewing their respective roles and responsibilities. Most recently, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010⁴ required the President to designate an executive agency to commission a study on a system for the career development and management of interagency national security

¹National Security Strategy, (Washington, D.C.: May 2010).

²Pub. L. No. 110-181, § 952(a) (2008).

³Pub. L. No. 110-417, § 1054 (2008).

⁴Pub. L. No. 111-84, § 1054 (2009).

professionals. A number of commissions, research institutions, and congressionally mandated studies have also put forth proposals to reform part or all of the national security system. These proposals range from far-reaching restructuring of the system to smaller-scale proposals such as increasing resources for civilian agencies. A recurring theme of many of these proposals is the need for change to improve interagency collaboration on national security matters.

Last September, we issued a report discussing key issues and actions necessary to enhance interagency collaboration on national security for Congress and the administration to consider in their oversight and management agendas.⁵ For that report, we reviewed GAO's body of work on interagency collaboration related to national security, which includes reports and testimonies on a variety of issues, including stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, DOD's establishment of U.S. Africa Command to build partner capacity, planning and coordination for an influenza pandemic, information sharing, critical infrastructure protection, disaster recovery, acquisitions and contracting, strategic planning, human capital, and foreign aid reform. We also examined studies from U.S. government agencies and research institutions. Since that time, we have continued to conduct work on various aspects of interagency collaboration. We are conducting ongoing reviews of U.S. Africa Command's activity planning with interagency partners, U.S. Southern Command's efforts to enhance and sustain collaboration with interagency partners, interagency collaboration on counterpiracy efforts, and professional development activities intended to improve the federal workforce's ability to collaborate on national security issues. We plan to report on these issues later this year. My statement today will highlight opportunities to strengthen interagency collaboration by focusing on four key areas: (1) developing overarching strategies, (2) creating collaborative organizations, (3) developing a well-trained workforce, and (4) improving information sharing. I will also discuss the importance of sustained leadership in addressing these areas. This statement is based on completed GAO work, which was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

⁵GAO, *Interagency Collaboration: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight of National Security Strategies, Organizations, Workforce, and Information Sharing*, [GAO-09-904SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2009).

Summary

Federal agencies have an opportunity to enhance interagency collaboration by addressing long-standing problems and achieving meaningful results that better position the U.S. government to respond to changing conditions and future uncertainties. Progress has been made in enhancing interagency collaboration, but success will require leadership commitment, sound plans that set clear priorities, and measurable goals—as well as results-oriented performance measures that can be used to gauge progress and make adjustments. The federal agencies involved in national security will need to make concerted efforts to forge strong and collaborative partnerships, and seek coordinated solutions that leverage the expertise and capabilities across the community. Sustained and inspired attention is needed to overcome the many barriers to working across agency boundaries. Strengthening interagency collaboration—with leadership as the foundation—can help transform our U.S. government agencies and create a more unified, comprehensive approach to national security issues at home and abroad.

Opportunities for Strengthening Interagency Collaboration

National security threats have evolved and require involvement beyond the traditional agencies of DOD, the Department of State, and USAID. The Departments of Homeland Security, Energy, Justice, the Treasury, Agriculture, Commerce, and Health and Human Services are now a bigger part of the equation. What has not yet evolved are the mechanisms that agencies use to coordinate national security activities such as developing overarching strategies to guide planning and execution of missions, or sharing and integrating national security information across agencies. The absence of effective mechanisms can be a hindrance to achieving national security objectives. Within the following key areas, a number of challenges exist that limit the ability of U.S. government agencies to work collaboratively in responding to national security issues. Our work has also identified actions that agencies can take to enhance collaboration.⁶

⁶[GAO-09-904SP](#).

Developing and Implementing Overarching, Integrated Strategies to Achieve National Security Objectives

Although some agencies have developed or updated overarching strategies on national security-related issues, our work has identified cases where U.S. efforts have been hindered by the lack of information on roles and responsibilities of organizations involved or the lack of mechanisms to coordinate their efforts. National security challenges covering a broad array of areas, ranging from preparedness for an influenza pandemic to Iraqi governance and reconstruction, have necessitated using all elements of national power—including diplomatic, military, intelligence, development assistance, economic, and law enforcement support. These elements fall under the authority of numerous U.S. government agencies, requiring overarching strategies and plans to enhance agencies' abilities to collaborate with each other. Strategies can help agencies develop mutually reinforcing plans and determine activities, resources, processes, and performance measures for implementing those strategies. The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) provides a strategic planning and reporting framework intended to improve federal agencies' performance and hold them accountable for achieving results. Effective implementation of GPRA's results-oriented framework requires, among other things, that agencies clearly establish performance goals for which they will be held accountable, measure progress towards those goals, and determine strategies and resources to effectively accomplish the goals. Furthermore, defining organizational roles and responsibilities and mechanisms for coordination in these strategies can help agencies clarify who will lead or participate in which activities and how decisions will be made. It can also help them organize their individual and joint efforts, and address how conflicts would be resolved.⁷

Our prior work, as well as that by national security experts, has found that strategic direction is required as a foundation for collaboration toward national security goals.⁸ We have found that, for example, in the past, multiple agencies, including the State Department, USAID, and DOD, led separate efforts to improve the capacity of Iraq's ministries to govern, without overarching direction from a lead entity to integrate their efforts.

⁷GAO, *Combating Terrorism: Evaluation of Selected Characteristics in National Strategies Related to Terrorism*, [GAO-04-408T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 3, 2004).

⁸See, for example, GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005); *Combating Terrorism: The United States Lacks Comprehensive Plan to Destroy the Terrorist Threat and Close the Safe Haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas*, [GAO-08-622](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2008); and Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield* (Arlington, Va.: Nov. 26, 2008).

Since 2007, we have testified and reported⁹ that the lack of an overarching strategy contributed to U.S. efforts not meeting the goal for key Iraqi ministries to develop the capacity to effectively govern and assume increasing responsibility for operating, maintaining, and further investing in reconstruction projects.¹⁰ We recommended that the Department of State, in consultation with the Iraqi government, complete an overall strategy for U.S. efforts to develop the capacity of the Iraqi government. State recognized the value of such a strategy but expressed concern about conditioning further capacity development investment on completion of such a strategy. Moreover, our work on the federal government's pandemic influenza preparedness efforts found that the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services share most federal leadership roles in implementing the pandemic influenza strategy and supporting plans; however, we reported that it was not clear how this would work in practice because their roles are unclear. The *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* and its supporting implementation plan describes the Secretary of Health and Human Services as being responsible for leading the medical response in a pandemic, while the Secretary of Homeland Security would be responsible for overall domestic incident management and federal coordination. However, since a pandemic extends well beyond health and medical boundaries—to include sustaining critical infrastructure, private-sector activities, the movement of goods and services across the nation and the globe, and economic and security considerations—it is not clear when, in a pandemic, the Secretary of Health and Human Services would be in the lead and when the Secretary of Homeland Security would lead. This lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities could lead to confusion or disagreements among implementing agencies that could hinder interagency collaboration.

⁹GAO, *Iraq and Afghanistan: Security, Economic, and Governance Challenges to Rebuilding Efforts Should Be Addressed in U.S. Strategies*, [GAO-09-476T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 25, 2009); *Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq: Actions Needed to Address Inadequate Accountability over U.S. Efforts and Investments*, [GAO-08-568T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 11, 2008); *Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq: U.S. Ministry Capacity Development Efforts Need an Overall Integrated Strategy to Guide Efforts and Manage Risk*, [GAO-08-117](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 1, 2007).

¹⁰The State Department hired a contractor in 2008 to develop a strategic planning document for ministry capacity development in Iraq. Additionally, the United States shifted its emphasis to helping Iraqi ministries execute their capital investment budgets based on the update to the U.S. strategy in Iraq in 2007.

Furthermore, a federal response could be slowed as agencies resolve their roles and responsibilities following the onset of a significant outbreak.¹¹

We have also issued reports recommending that U.S. government agencies, including DOD, the State Department, and others, develop or revise strategies to incorporate desirable characteristics for strategies for a range of programs and activities. These include humanitarian and development efforts in Somalia, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership,¹² foreign assistance strategy, law enforcement agencies' role in assisting foreign nations in combating terrorism, and meeting U.S. national security goals in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. In commenting on drafts of those reports, agencies generally concurred with our recommendations. Officials from one organization—the National Counterterrorism Center—noted that at the time of our May 2007 report on law enforcement agencies' role in assisting foreign nations in combating terrorism, it had already begun to implement our recommendations.¹³

Creating Collaborative Organizations That Facilitate Integrated National Security Approaches

Organizational differences—including differences in agencies' structures, planning processes, and funding sources—can hinder interagency collaboration. Agencies lack adequate coordination mechanisms to facilitate this collaboration during planning and execution of programs and activities. U.S. government agencies, such as the Department of State, USAID, and DOD, among others, spend billions of dollars annually on various diplomatic, development, and defense missions in support of national security. Achieving meaningful results in many national security-related interagency efforts requires coordinated efforts among various

¹¹GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Continued Focus on the Nation's Planning and Preparedness Efforts Remains Essential*, [GAO-09-760T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009); *Influenza Pandemic: Sustaining Focus on the Nation's Planning and Preparedness Efforts*, [GAO-09-334](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 26, 2009); and *Influenza Pandemic: Further Efforts Are Needed to Ensure Clearer Federal Leadership Roles and an Effective National Strategy*, [GAO-07-781](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 14, 2007).

¹²The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership initiative is a multiyear, multiagency effort to support diplomacy, development assistance, and military activities aimed at strengthening country and regional counterterrorism capabilities and inhibiting the spread of extremist ideology.

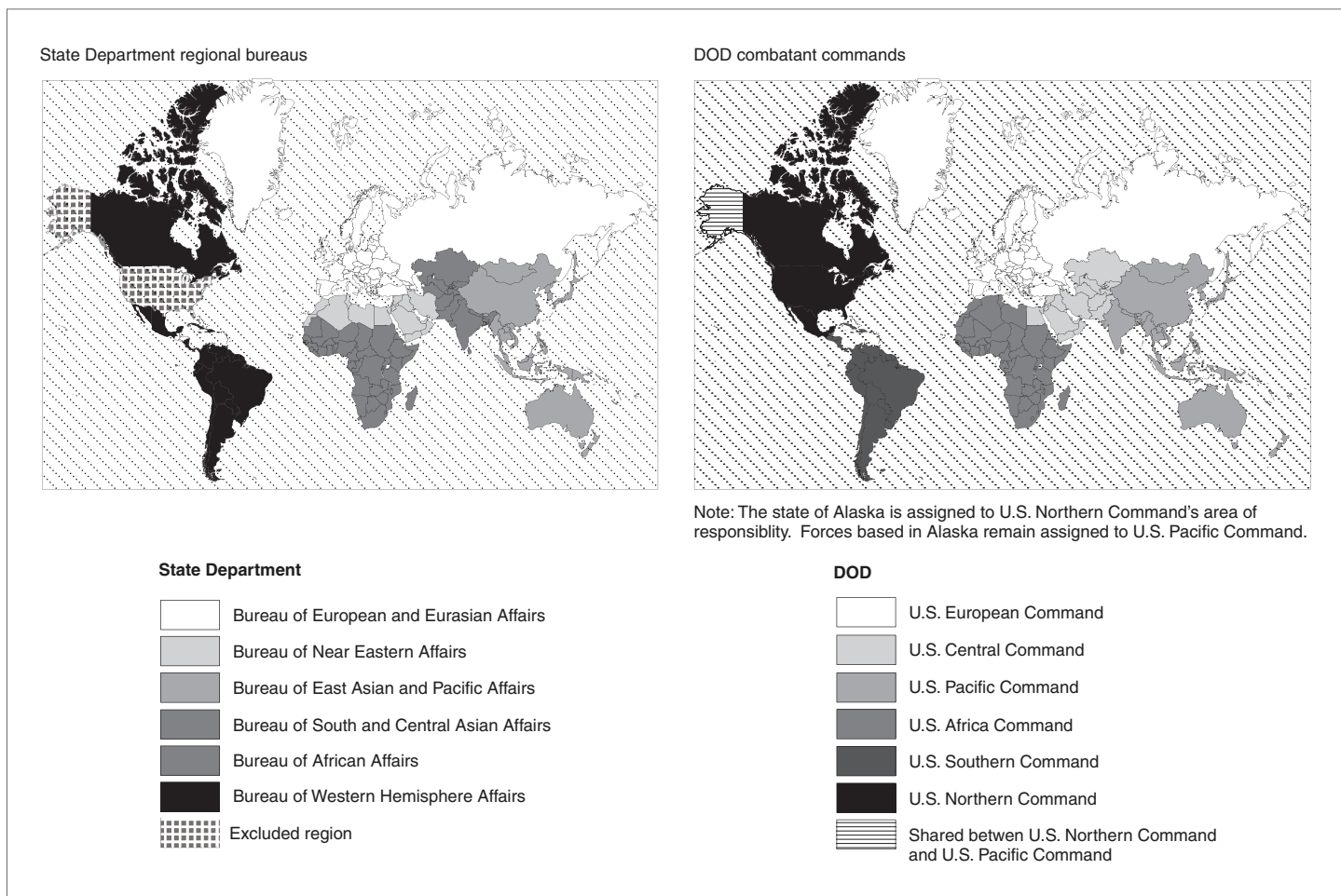
¹³GAO, *Combating Terrorism: Law Enforcement Agencies Lack Directives to Assist Foreign Nations to Identify, Disrupt, and Prosecute Terrorists*, [GAO-07-697](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2007).

actors across federal agencies; foreign, state, and local governments; nongovernment organizations; and the private sector. Given the number of agencies involved in U.S. government national security efforts, it is important that there be mechanisms to coordinate across agencies. Without such mechanisms, the results can be a patchwork of activities that waste scarce funds and limit the overall effectiveness of federal efforts.¹⁴

A good example of where agencies involved in national security activities define and organize their regions differently involves DOD's regional combatant commands and the State Department's regional bureaus. Both are aligned differently in terms of the geographic areas they cover, as shown in figure 1. As a result of differing structures and areas of coverage, coordination becomes more challenging and the potential for gaps and overlaps in policy implementation is greater. Moreover, funding for national security activities is budgeted for and appropriated by agency, rather than by functional area (such as national security), resulting in budget requests and congressional appropriations that tend to reflect individual agency concerns. Given these differences, it is important that there be mechanisms to coordinate across agencies.

¹⁴[GAO-06-15](#) and *Managing for Results: Barriers to Interagency Coordination*, [GAO/GGD-00-106](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2000).

Figure 1: Comparison of the State Department's Regional Bureaus and DOD's Combatant Command Areas of Responsibility



Source: DOD and State Department.

In addition to regional bureaus, the State Department is organized to interact through U.S. embassies located within other countries. As a result of these differing structures, our prior work and that of national security experts has found that agencies must coordinate with a large number of organizations in their regional planning efforts, potentially creating gaps

and overlaps in policy implementation and leading to challenges in coordinating efforts among agencies.¹⁵

Given the differences among U.S. government agencies, developing adequate coordination mechanisms is critical to achieving integrated approaches. In some cases, agencies have established effective mechanisms. For example, DOD's U.S. Africa Command had undertaken efforts to integrate personnel from other U.S. government agencies into its command structure because the command is primarily focused on strengthening security cooperation with African nations and creating opportunities to bolster the capabilities of African partners, which are activities that traditionally require coordination with other agencies.¹⁶ However, in other cases, challenges remain. For example, we reported in May 2007 that DOD had not established adequate mechanisms to facilitate and encourage interagency participation in the development of military plans developed by the combatant commanders. Furthermore, we noted that inviting interagency participation only after plans have been formulated is a significant obstacle to achieving a unified government approach in the planning effort. In that report, we suggested that Congress require DOD to develop an action plan and report annually on steps being taken to achieve greater interagency participation in the development of military plans.¹⁷

Moreover, we reported in March 2010 that DOD has many strategy, policy, and guidance documents on interagency coordination of its homeland defense and civil support mission; however, DOD entities do not have fully or clearly defined roles and responsibilities because key documents are outdated, are not integrated, or are not comprehensive.¹⁸ More specifically,

¹⁵See, for example, GAO, *Military Operations: Actions Needed to Improve DOD's Stability Operations Approach and Enhance Interagency Planning*, [GAO-07-549](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2007); Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield* (Arlington, Va.: Nov. 26, 2008); and Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Era, Phase 2 Report* (Washington, D.C.: July 2005).

¹⁶GAO, *Defense Management: Actions Needed to Address Stakeholder Concerns, Improve Interagency Collaboration, and Determine Full Costs Associated with the U.S. Africa Command*, [GAO-09-181](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 20, 2009).

¹⁷GAO, *Military Operations: Actions Needed to Improve Stability Operations Approach and Enhance Interagency Planning*, [GAO-07-549](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2007).

¹⁸GAO, *Homeland Defense: DOD Needs to Take Actions to Enhance Interagency Coordination for Its Homeland Defense and Civil Support Missions*, [GAO-10-364](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 2010).

conflicting directives assigned overlapping law enforcement support responsibilities to three different DOD entities, creating confusion as to which DOD office is actually responsible for coordinating with law enforcement agencies. DOD's approach to identifying roles and responsibilities and day-to-day coordination processes could also be improved by providing relevant information in a single, readily-accessible source. This source could be accomplished through a variety of formats such as a handbook or a Web-based tool and could provide both DOD and other agencies a better understanding of each other as federal partners and enable a unified and institutionalized approach to interagency coordination. We recommended, and DOD agreed, that the department update and integrate its strategy, policy, and guidance; develop a partner guide; and implement key practices for management of homeland defense and civil support liaisons.

We have reported other instances in which mechanisms are not formalized or fully utilized. For example, we found that collaboration between DOD's Northern Command and an interagency planning team on the development of the command's homeland defense plan was largely based on the dedicated personalities involved and informal meetings.^{19,20} Without formalizing and institutionalizing the interagency planning structure, we concluded efforts to coordinate may not continue when personnel move on to their next assignments. We made several recommendations, and DOD generally concurred, that the department take several actions to address the challenges it faces in its planning and interagency coordination efforts.

In recent years we have issued reports recommending that the Secretaries of Defense, State, and Homeland Security and the Attorney General take a variety of actions to address creating collaborative organizations, including taking actions to

¹⁹The Incident Management Planning Team is an interagency team created by the Department of Homeland Security to provide contingency and crisis action incident management planning based on 15 national planning scenarios. Participating organizations include DOD; the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, Energy, Transportation, and Health and Human Services; the Environmental Protection Agency; and the American Red Cross.

²⁰GAO, *Homeland Defense: U.S. Northern Command Has Made Progress but Needs to Address Force Allocation, Readiness Tracking Gaps, and Other Issues*, [GAO-08-251](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2008).

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- provide implementation guidance to facilitate interagency participation and develop clear guidance and procedures for interagency efforts,
 - develop an approach to overcome differences in planning processes,
 - create coordinating mechanisms, and
 - clarify roles and responsibilities.

In commenting on drafts of those reports, agencies generally concurred with our recommendations. In some cases, agencies identified planned actions to address the recommendations. For example, in our April 2008 report on U.S. Northern Command's plans, we recommended that clear guidance be developed for interagency planning efforts, and DOD stated that it had begun to incorporate such direction in its major planning documents and would continue to expand on this guidance in the future.²¹

Developing a Well-Trained Workforce

Federal agencies do not always have the right people with the right skills in the right jobs at the right time to meet the challenges they face, to include having a workforce that is able to quickly address crises. As the threats to national security have evolved over the past decades, so have the skills needed to prepare for and respond to those threats. To effectively and efficiently address today's national security challenges, federal agencies need a qualified, well-trained workforce with the skills and experience that can enable them to integrate the diverse capabilities and resources of the U.S. government. Our work has found that personnel often lack knowledge of the processes and cultures of the agencies with which they must collaborate. Some federal government agencies lack the personnel capacity to fully participate in interagency activities and some agencies do not have the necessary capabilities to support their national security roles and responsibilities.²² For example, in June 2009, we reported that DOD lacks a comprehensive strategic plan for addressing its language skills and regional proficiency capabilities.²³ Moreover, as of September 2009, we found that 31 percent of the State Department's generalists and specialists in language-designated positions did not meet

²¹[GAO-08-251](#).

²²Catherine Dale, Nina M. Serafino, and Pat Towell, Congressional Research Service, *Organizing the U.S. Government for National Security: Overview of the Interagency Reform Debates*, RL34455 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 16, 2008).

²³GAO, *Military Training: DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency*, [GAO-09-568](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2010).

the language requirements for their positions, an increase from 29 percent in 2005.²⁴ Similarly, we reported in September 2008 that USAID officials at some overseas missions told us that they did not receive adequate and timely acquisition and assistance support at times,²⁵ in part because the numbers of USAID staff were insufficient or because the USAID staff lacked necessary competencies.²⁶ We also reported in February 2009 that U.S. Africa Command has faced difficulties integrating interagency personnel into its command.²⁷ According to DOD and Africa Command officials, integrating personnel from other U.S. government agencies is essential to achieving Africa Command's mission because it will help the command develop plans and activities that are more compatible with those agencies. However, the State Department, which faced a 25 percent shortfall in midlevel personnel, told Africa Command that it likely would not be able to fill the command's positions due to personnel shortages. DOD has a significantly larger workforce than other key agencies involved in national security activities as shown in figure 2.

²⁴GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, [GAO-09-955](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009). We explained that although it can be difficult to link foreign language shortfalls to a specific negative outcome or event, these shortfalls could be negatively affecting several aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including consular operations, security, public diplomacy, economic and political affairs, the development of relationships with foreign counterparts and audiences, and staff morale.

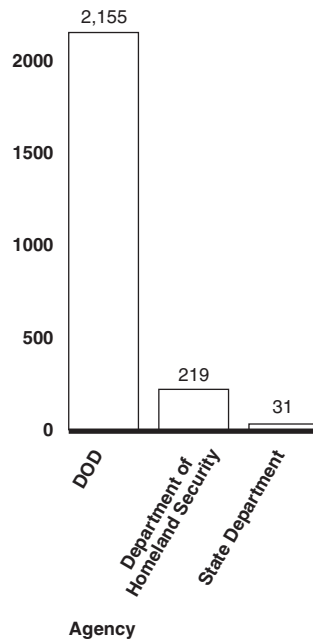
²⁵Over the last few decades, as the U.S. government has increasingly come to rely on the private sector to perform various functions, USAID has shifted from conducting its own activities to managing acquisition and assistance instruments, which are awarded to and implemented by mainly nongovernmental organizations.

²⁶GAO, *USAID Acquisition and Assistance: Actions Needed to Develop and Implement a Strategic Workforce Plan*, [GAO-08-1059](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2008).

²⁷[GAO-09-181](#).

Figure 2: Number of Civilian Government Employees and Military Personnel Employed by Key Agencies Involved in National Security

Number of personnel (in thousands)
2500



Source: DOD, State Department, and Department of Homeland Security.

Notes: Data are as of the end of fiscal year 2008 and do not include contractor personnel. Numbers are rounded.

Furthermore, agencies' personnel systems often do not recognize or reward interagency collaboration, which could diminish agency employees' interest in serving in interagency efforts. In June 2009 we reviewed compensation policies for six agencies that deployed civilian personnel to Iraq and Afghanistan, and reported that variations in policies for such areas as overtime rate, premium pay eligibility, and deployment status could result in monetary differences of tens of thousands of dollars per year.²⁸ The Office of Personnel Management acknowledged that laws and agency policy could result in federal government agencies paying different amounts of compensation to deployed civilians at equivalent pay

²⁸GAO, *Human Capital: Actions Needed to Better Track and Provide Timely and Accurate Compensation and Medical Benefits to Deployed Federal Civilians*, [GAO-09-562](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2009).

grades who are working under the same conditions and facing the same risks. In another instance, we reported in April 2009 that officials from the Departments of Commerce, Energy, Health and Human Services, and the Treasury stated that providing support for State Department foreign assistance program processes creates an additional workload that is neither recognized by their agencies nor included as a factor in their performance ratings.²⁹

Various tools can be useful in helping agencies to improve their ability to more fully participate in collaboration activities. For example, increasing training opportunities can help personnel develop the skills and understanding of other agencies' capabilities. We have previously testified that agencies need to have effective training and development programs to address gaps in the skills and competencies that they identified in their workforces.³⁰ Moreover, we issued a report in April 2010 on DOD's Horn of Africa task force, which found that DOD personnel did not always understand U.S. embassy procedures in carrying out their activities.³¹ This resulted in a number of cultural missteps in Africa because personnel did not understand local religious customs and may have unintentionally burdened embassies that must continuously train new staff on procedures. We recommended, and DOD agreed, that the department develop comprehensive training guidance or a program that augments personnel's understanding of African cultural awareness and working with interagency partners. Training and developing personnel to fill new and different roles will play a crucial part in the federal government's endeavors to meet its transformation challenges. Also, focusing on strategic workforce planning can support agencies' efforts to secure the personnel resources needed to collaborate in interagency missions. We have found that tools like strategic workforce planning and human capital strategies are integral to managing resources as they enable an agency to define staffing levels,

²⁹GAO, *Foreign Aid Reform: Comprehensive Strategy, Interagency Coordination, and Operational Improvements Would Bolster Current Efforts*, [GAO-09-192](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2009).

³⁰GAO, *Human Capital: Federal Workforce Challenges in the 21st Century*, [GAO-07-556T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2007).

³¹GAO, *Defense Management: DOD Needs to Determine the Future of Its Horn of Africa Task Force*, [GAO-10-504](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 15, 2010).

identify critical skills needed to achieve its mission, and eliminate or mitigate gaps between current and future skills and competencies.³²

In recent years we have recommended that the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Administrator of USAID, and the U.S. Trade Representative take a variety of actions to address the human capital issues discussed above, such as staffing shortfalls, training, and strategic planning. Specifically, we have made recommendations to

- develop strategic human capital management systems and undertake strategic human capital planning,
- include measurable goals in strategic plans,
- identify the appropriate mix of contractor and government employees needed and develop plans to fill those needs,
- seek formal commitments from contributing agencies to provide personnel to meet interagency personnel requirements,
- develop alternative ways to obtain interagency perspectives in the event that interagency personnel cannot be provided due to resource limitations,
- develop and implement long-term workforce management plans, and
- implement a training program to ensure employees develop and maintain needed skills.

In commenting on drafts of those reports, agencies generally concurred with our recommendations. In some cases, agencies identified planned actions to address the recommendations. For example, in our April 2009 report on foreign aid reform, we recommended that the State Department develop a long-term workforce management plan to periodically assess its workforce capacity to manage foreign assistance. The State Department noted in its comments that it concurred with the idea of further improving

³²The five key principles that strategic workforce planning should address are: (1) involve management, employees, and other stakeholders in developing and implementing the strategic workforce plan; (2) determine the critical skills and competencies needed to achieve results; (3) develop strategies to address gaps in human capital approaches for enabling and sustaining the contributions of all critical skills and competencies; (4) build the capability to address requirements important to support workforce planning strategies; and (5) monitor and evaluate the agency's progress toward its human capital goals and the contribution that human capital results have made. GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

employee skill sets and would work to encourage and implement further training.³³

Sharing and Integrating National Security Information Across Agencies

U.S. government agencies do not always share relevant information with their national security partners due to a lack of clear guidelines for sharing information and security clearance issues. The timely dissemination of information is critical for maintaining national security. Federal, state, and local governments and private-sector partners are making progress in sharing terrorism-related information. For example, we reported in October 2007 that most states and many local governments had established fusion centers—collaborative efforts to detect, prevent, investigate, and respond to criminal and terrorist activity—to address gaps in information sharing.³⁴ However, we found that non-DOD personnel could not access some DOD planning documents or participate in planning sessions because they may not have had the proper security clearances. Moreover, because of concerns about agencies' ability to protect shared information or use that information properly, other agencies and private-sector partners may be hesitant to share information. For example, we have reported that Department of Homeland Security officials expressed concerns about sharing terrorism-related information with state and local partners because such information had occasionally been posted on public Internet sites or otherwise compromised. To facilitate information sharing, it is important to establish clear guidelines, agreements, and procedures that govern key aspects, such as how information will be communicated, who will participate in interagency information sharing efforts, and how information will be protected.

When agencies do share information, managing and integrating information from multiple sources presents challenges regarding redundancies in information sharing, unclear roles and responsibilities, and data comparability. For example, we reported in December 2008 that in Louisiana, reconstruction project information had to be repeatedly resubmitted separately to state and Federal Emergency Management

³³GAO, *Foreign Aid Reform: Comprehensive Strategy, Interagency Coordination, and Operational Improvements Would Bolster Current Efforts*, [GAO-09-192](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2009).

³⁴GAO, *Homeland Security: Federal Efforts Are Helping to Alleviate Some Challenges Encountered by State and Local Information Fusion Centers*, [GAO-08-35](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 30, 2007).

Agency officials during post-Hurricane Katrina reconstruction efforts because the system used to track project information did not facilitate the exchange of documents. Information was sometimes lost during this exchange, requiring state officials to resubmit the information, creating redundancies and duplication of effort. As a result, reconstruction efforts in Louisiana were delayed.³⁵ In another instance, we reported in October 2008 that biometric data, such as fingerprints and iris images, collected in DOD field activities such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, were not comparable with data collected by other units or with large federal databases that store biometric data, such as the Department of Homeland Security biometric database or the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fingerprint database. A lack of comparable data, especially for use in DOD field activities, prevents agencies from determining whether the individuals they encounter are friend, foe, or neutral, and may put forces at risk.³⁶

Since 2005, we have recommended that the Secretaries of Defense, Homeland Security, and State establish or clarify guidelines, agreements, or procedures for sharing a wide range of national security information, such as planning information, terrorism-related information, and reconstruction project information. We have recommended that such guidelines, agreements, and procedures

- define and communicate how shared information will be protected;
- include provisions to involve and obtain information from nonfederal partners in the planning process;
- ensure that agencies fully participate in interagency information-sharing efforts;
- identify and disseminate practices to facilitate more effective communication among federal, state, and local agencies;
- clarify roles and responsibilities in the information-sharing process; and
- establish baseline standards for data collecting to ensure comparability across agencies.

³⁵GAO, *Disaster Recovery: FEMA's Public Assistance Grant Program Experienced Challenges with Gulf Coast Rebuilding*, [GAO-09-129](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2008).

³⁶GAO, *Defense Management: DOD Can Establish More Guidance for Biometrics Collection and Explore Broader Data Sharing*, [GAO-09-49](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 15, 2008).

In commenting on drafts of those reports, agencies generally concurred with our recommendations. In some cases, agencies identified planned actions to address the recommendations. For example, in our December 2008 report on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's public assistance grant program, we recommended that the Federal Emergency Management Agency improve information sharing within the public assistance process by identifying and disseminating practices that facilitate more effective communication among federal, state, and local entities. In comments on a draft of the report, the Federal Emergency Management Agency generally concurred with the recommendation and noted that it was making a concerted effort to improve collaboration and information sharing within the public assistance process.³⁷ Moreover, agencies have implemented some of our past recommendations. For example, in our April 2006 report on protecting and sharing critical infrastructure information, we recommended that the Department of Homeland Security define and communicate to the private sector what information is needed and how the information would be used.³⁸ The Department of Homeland Security concurred with our recommendation and, in response, has made available, through its public Web site, answers to frequently asked questions that define the type of information collected and what it is used for, as well as how the information will be accessed, handled, and used by federal, state, and local government employees and their contractors.

Importance of Sustained Leadership

Underlying the success of these key areas for enhancing interagency collaboration for national security-related activities is committed and effective leadership. Our prior work has shown that implementing large-scale change management initiatives or transformational change—which is what these key areas should be considered—are not simple endeavors and require the concentrated efforts of leadership and employees to realize intended synergies and to accomplish new goals.³⁹ Leadership must set the direction, pace, and tone and provide a clear, consistent rationale

³⁷GAO, *Disaster Recovery: FEMA's Public Assistance Grant Program Experienced Challenges with Gulf Coast Rebuilding*, [GAO-09-129](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2008).

³⁸GAO, *Information Sharing: DHS Should Take Steps to Encourage More Widespread Use of Its Program to Protect and Share Critical Infrastructure Information*, [GAO-06-383](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2006).

³⁹GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, [GAO-03-669](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003).

for the transformation. Sustained and inspired attention is needed to overcome the many barriers to working across agency boundaries. For example, leadership is important in establishing incentives to promote employees' interest in serving in interagency efforts.

The 2010 National Security Strategy calls for a renewed emphasis on building a stronger leadership foundation for the long term to more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century.⁴⁰ Moreover, the strategy identifies key steps for improving interagency collaboration. These steps include more effectively ensuring alignment of resources with our national security strategy, adapting the education and training of national security professionals to equip them to meet modern challenges, reviewing authorities and mechanisms to implement and coordinate assistance programs, and other policies and programs that strengthen coordination. National security experts also note the importance of and need for effective leadership for national security issues. For example, a 2008 report by the Project on National Security Reform notes that the national security system requires skilled leadership at all levels and, to enhance interagency coordination, these leaders must be adept at forging links and fostering partnerships all levels.⁴¹ Strengthening interagency collaboration—with leadership as the foundation—can help transform U.S. government agencies and create a more unified, comprehensive approach to national security issues at home and abroad.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

For future information regarding this statement, please contact John H. Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or at pendletonj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs can be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement are listed in appendix II.

⁴⁰National Security Strategy, (Washington, D.C.: May 2010).

⁴¹Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield* (Arlington, Va.: Nov. 26, 2008).

Appendix I: Related GAO Products

Defense Management: DOD Needs to Determine the Future of Its Horn of Africa Task Force, [GAO-10-504](#), Washington, D.C.: Apr. 15, 2010.

Homeland Defense: DOD Needs to Take Actions to Enhance Interagency Coordination for Its Homeland Defense and Civil Support Missions, [GAO-10-364](#), Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 2010.

Interagency Collaboration: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight of National Security Strategies, Organizations, Workforce, and Information Sharing, [GAO-09-904SP](#), Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2009.

Military Training: DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency. [GAO-09-568](#). Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2009.

Influenza Pandemic: Continued Focus on the Nation's Planning and Preparedness Efforts Remains Essential. [GAO-09-760T](#). Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009.

U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight. [GAO-09-679SP](#). Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2009.

Military Operations: Actions Needed to Improve Oversight and Interagency Coordination for the Commander's Emergency Response Program in Afghanistan. [GAO-09-61](#). Washington, D.C.: May 18, 2009.

Foreign Aid Reform: Comprehensive Strategy, Interagency Coordination, and Operational Improvements Would Bolster Current Efforts. [GAO-09-192](#). Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2009.

Iraq and Afghanistan: Security, Economic, and Governance Challenges to Rebuilding Efforts Should Be Addressed in U.S. Strategies. [GAO-09-476T](#). Washington, D.C.: Mar. 25, 2009.

Drug Control: Better Coordination with the Department of Homeland Security and an Updated Accountability Framework Can Further Enhance DEA's Efforts to Meet Post-9/11 Responsibilities. [GAO-09-63](#). Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2009.

Defense Management: Actions Needed to Address Stakeholder Concerns, Improve Interagency Collaboration, and Determine Full Costs Associated with the U.S. Africa Command. [GAO-09-181](#). Washington, D.C.: Feb. 20, 2009.

Combating Terrorism: Actions Needed to Enhance Implementation of Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership. [GAO-08-860](#). Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2008.

Information Sharing: Definition of the Results to Be Achieved in Terrorism-Related Information Sharing Is Needed to Guide Implementation and Assess Progress. [GAO-08-637T](#). Washington, D.C.: July 23, 2008.

Highlights of a GAO Forum: Enhancing U.S. Partnerships in Countering Transnational Terrorism. [GAO-08-887SP](#). Washington, D.C.: July 2008.

Stabilization and Reconstruction: Actions Are Needed to Develop a Planning and Coordination Framework and Establish the Civilian Reserve Corps. [GAO-08-39](#). Washington, D.C.: Nov. 6, 2007.

Homeland Security: Federal Efforts Are Helping to Alleviate Some Challenges Encountered by State and Local Information Fusion Centers. [GAO-08-35](#). Washington, D.C.: Oct. 30, 2007.

Military Operations: Actions Needed to Improve DOD's Stability Operations Approach and Enhance Interagency Planning. [GAO-07-549](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2007.

Combating Terrorism: Law Enforcement Agencies Lack Directives to Assist Foreign Nations to Identify, Disrupt, and Prosecute Terrorists. [GAO-07-697](#). Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2007.

Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies. [GAO-06-15](#). Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact name above, Marie Mak, Assistant Director; Laurie Choi; Alissa Czyz; Rebecca Guerrero; and Jodie Sandel made key contributions to this testimony.

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