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Ready or Not? An Analysis of US Military Readiness

The United States (US) has achieved what few other nations have: the coveted recognition as a global superpower. The US is reliant on two things to achieve such global standing. One of which is diplomacy. The other is the ever-prevalent role of the US military in global power projection and threat suppression. Looking principally at the US military, it is a cornerstone in international relations. It suppresses the threats of belligerent nations and ensures the overall welfare of global interactions. To this end, billions of dollars are appropriated to the Department of Defense (DOD) and its programs each year. Lately, however, defense money has not been utilized efficiently, with the US military increasingly becoming unable to carry out its missions and goals in an evolving, modernizing military environment. As new technology comes online and warfighting evolves, the US rapidly finds itself slipping into a "readiness hole," as described by Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall in 2022 (Hadley). Although the extent to which readiness is compromised across each military branch varies and takes different forms, several parallels can be drawn which conclude that the US military as a whole is not mission-ready in the modern warfare environment. Readiness is compromised due to misleading metrics, lack of critical infrastructure and personnel, and shifting political atmospheres.

Before examining how the US military's readiness is compromised, it is important to discover what readiness means. The term "readiness" (similar to "preparedness") is ambiguous in the US military. Even still, the DOD attempts to define readiness as "the ability of military

forces to fight and meet the demands of assigned missions" (Herrera). While this definition is vague, three important things can be taken away from it as defense analyst James Herrera noted in a 2022 report for the Congressional Research Service (see fig. 1). Principally, the definition addresses the *ability* of forces, stipulating that it is measurable. Secondly, the definition refers to *military forces,* including warfighters (people) and equipment (planes, ships, tanks, etc). Lastly, the definition includes an *assigned mission,* which is what forces are tasked to do. For the whole military, this means the ability to fight two separate, independent wars simultaneously (Isenburg). At the unit level, the assigned mission is constrained by unit classification. For example, an air wing's mission is to ensure air superiority over a battlespace. Overall, readiness is the means of examining the reliability, capabilities, and availability of each weapon system and warfighter (Nicastro).

First, readiness is compromised by misleading metrics. These metrics give inconclusive and broad measurements that have caused and continue to cause an inflated sense of readiness. Additionally, new and improved reporting capabilities exist, yet remain unexploited. Before looking at new capabilities and how their disuse detracts from readiness, current metrics and their shortfalls must be understood. The DOD uses two meshed systems to report readiness to Congress (fig. 2): the Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS) and the Chairman's Readiness System (CRS) (Herrera). Looking first at the DRRS, it is the primary method for all branches of the US military to report readiness to the DOD. Each branch submits reports via the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNet), a centralized computer network for the DOD (Herrera). Each report contains a C-rating to measure Resourcing and Training on a scale from one to five, with extrema C-1 denoting a *fully* prepared unit with all resources and training and extrema C-5 denoting *underprepared* (Herrera). A DRRS report also assesses Mission

Capability with a "Y/Q/N" assessment, in which a unit commander designates their forces as capable of meeting all (Y), most (Q), or few (N) tasks (Herrera). Closely related to DRRS, is the other readiness system: CRS. This report is aggregated semi-annually by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, using a Joint Force Readiness Review (JFFR) to analyze the capabilities of the armed forces *and* non-DOD support agencies (Nicastro). The facets of the system discussed thus far are not what compromises readiness. Rather, the means of aggregating data to determine the C-rating, Y/Q/N assessment, and JFER are where shortfalls lie. The *Mission Capability* Rate (MC) is the primary means by which the aforementioned assessments are based. The MC ratio is unambiguous: Uptime to total time, or mathematically, $\frac{Uptime}{Uptime + Downtime} \times 100$ (Herrera). This metric is flawed, due in part to its simplicity. For instance, an MC rate is just a percentage. In the context of a weapon system, take the F-35B aircraft for example, the MC rate is 60% which indicates already deficient readiness for performing one mission. However, the full MC rate for the F-35B to complete all missions is closer to 15% as the initial metric does not account for inadequate training, planning, and effectiveness of the warfighters/pilots while the second does (Mauer). Since, the MC rate influences DRRS and CRS, government and military officials act upon poor information. Case and point: The Iranian hostage crisis. In April of 1980, 53 US embassy officials were held hostage in Tehran, Iran (Lambert). President Jimmy Carter and military officials decided a rescue operation, known as Eagle Claw, would be conducted using US Navy CH-53D "Sea Stallion" helicopters (Wikipedia). The rescue required six helicopters to evacuate all the hostages. Therefore, eight were sent on the mission based on the MC rate of 75% for the CH-53D (75% of eight being six) (McLemore). However, due to the inaccuracy of the MC rate, the mission was aborted and deemed a failure after three helicopters experienced mechanical failures, leaving only five operational when six were needed (Wikipedia). Despite

this incident occurring over 40 years ago, the US military still bases its readiness and warfighting capabilities on this inaccurate and dangerous metric. In both illustrations, the MC rate inflates the accuracy of DRRS and CRS and actively contributes to an ill-prepared nation as military forces cannot reliably deploy and counter threats if their actual combat readiness is vastly lower than reported. New metrics, however, can improve readiness. Stochastic Scenario Modeling, developed for military use by Connor McLemore and other probability contractors, moves past the binary assessments currently used. Gone are the days of ready-or-not. Now, stochastic modeling allows readiness to be quantified for *specific missions*. The model takes information from the SIPRNet and NIPRNet (non-secure/commercial web) to organize readiness data in Stochastic Information Packets (SIPs) (McLemore). The model utilizes SIPs to present a probabilistic, data-centric simulation that military forces can utilize at any operational level. If this model was adopted by the military, readiness metrics would be more accurate. Reconsidering Operation Eagle Claw, utilizing SIPs would have projected a readiness rate of 68% for the helicopters (rather than 75%) because of risk associated with night flight in hot, sandstorm conditions (McLemore). The updated model would have prevented the mission's failure as planners would have sent more helicopters to compensate for the lower readiness metric. However, this model is still not used by the US military, preventing better-prepared forces. In summary, continuing to rely on old models in the face of better ones sets the readiness bar low for the US, leading the nation further into a readiness crisis.

While misleading metrics contribute to poor readiness, the lack of critical infrastructure and personnel also compromise readiness. While the following examples examine how poor infrastructure and personnel shortages impact the Navy, Army, and Air Force, these issues also impact the entire US military. First, the Navy’s readiness has deteriorated due to the inability to

quickly service ships. Currently, four shipyards provide “depot-level maintenance, emergency repairs, modernization, and deactivations” for the Navy: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Pearl Harbor, and Puget Sound (Mauer). These shipyards do not have the materials to fix ships due to parts shortages and an ageing fleet with obsolete parts. Additionally, the infrastructure, specifically dry docks, is in dire need of repair. The Navy planned to rectify this in 2018, appropriating $6.1 billion to repair Pearl Harbor’s dry docks; however, as Mauer and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found, the cost projection rose to $16 Billion (162% cost increase) and funding was cut (Mauer). Without repair funding, shipyards continue to deteriorate and are unable to efficiently service ships, hence limiting US readiness to counter threats abroad as fewer ships are available to deploy. Additionally, as the boomer generation retires and as the Navy struggles to hire yardmen, repair projects take longer as there are fewer workers and less experience available (Suciu). The same issue is mirrored in the Air Force, as F-35 repairs take two times as long due to the lack of spare parts and aircraft maintainers (Mauer). With repairs taking 140 hours instead of 60, the Air Force cannot meet mission requirements as planes are grounded and unable to deter threats in the skies (Mauer). Finally, if the US were to get involved in a global conflict, Army units would require the use of railway systems to transport vehicles and personnel to ports for deployment. Deployment from a single base, for instance, would require 2,200 rail cars and maintained rail tracks on site (Mauer). However, Mauer and the GAO’s analysis found that 60% of rail tracks were “in such poor condition that the track was closed pending repairs” (Mauer). Army units, therefore, cannot effectively deploy, and the US military is unable to provide a timely response to global conflict. In each example, infrastructure and/or personnel problems retract from the US military’s ability to respond to global threats due

to degraded readiness. If problems are not rectified, the US will not improve its readiness posture, becoming more and more susceptible to hostile intent.

Finally, readiness is compromised by shifting political atmospheres. In today's two-party political environment, military programs are influenced, positively or negatively, depending on which party resides in office. Looking back to 2013, the government shut down when the fiscal year budget could not be agreed upon by both parties. In an effort of compromise, President Obama signed into law a series of budget cuts, part of a process known as sequestration, that aligned with the Republican agenda in exchange for an increase in the debt ceiling for Democrats (Dana). This system reduced the economic ramifications of the situation but established a dangerous precedent for military spending and budgeting. According to a report by the DOD, sequestration means an “across-the-board 10% cut of all accounts” (DOD). However, the report notes that sequestration is disproportionately applied to Operation and Maintenance DOD accounts (which fund weapon systems and maintenance) as funding related to military pay and benefits are exempt (Carlisle). Due to politicians’ inability to release party views, this system has reduced the amount of money to maintain ready forces and infrastructure, which, as previously examined, are in dire need of funding. In more current news, Republican politicians compromised military readiness through a series of decisions. The Trump administration and the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by Elon Musk, have started probationary firings to reduce the size of the government (Bowman). In doing so, 55,000 specialized, trained personnel have been fired, leaving significant workforce shortages in critical areas (Bowman). Without such trained federal employees, the US is vulnerable to bad actors as contractors with limited experience are expected to fill these roles. The decision to cut $50 billion in defense spending while adding a $100 billion “American Iron Dome” missile defense

program (modeled off Israel) by the Trump administration will also threaten readiness (Bowman). For starters, the program serves no practical purpose in the US as the threats that induce the need for the “Iron Dome” in Israel do not exist around the US. In effect, $150 billion less dollars can be used to fix the current readiness issues because poor political spending and budgeting hinder the US military, contributing to the inability to counter threats in the modern warfare environment. As both examples have illustrated, the preparedness of the US military is subject to the whims of politicians. Depending on what party is in office, readiness can be dramatically affected. In light of new programs and the ongoing effects of older ones, readiness has deteriorated, contributing to an underfunded and understaffed force that cannot meet operational demands should conflict spark today.

This analysis reflects heavily on the current unreadiness of the US military, presenting the idea that the US is not ready for a globalized conflict; however, others argue that the US cannot be earmarked as underprepared due to the sheer size of the appropriated defense budget. Despite cuts, the US defense budget in 2024 was $883.7 billion according to the US Senate Committee on Armed Services. Counteranalysis also reveals the combined military spending of belligerent nations (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba, and North Korea) is only 6% of the US’s, at a mere $15 billion (Isenberg). Those who believe existing readiness assessments aren't worrying because of the dramatic separation in spending, tend to forget the rising threat of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Indo-Pacific region has become a hotbed for tension, with the PRC launching several aircraft carriers and expanding territorial positions in the South China Sea that present a threat to US international military interests (Scobell). As of now, the US is unable to stop the expansion of the PRC because its deployable forces are inhibited by the aforementioned factors reducing readiness. Therefore, the US is at risk given its readiness situation despite attempts at

obscuration by those intoxicated by an American superiority complex. Readiness must be fixed, and it must be fixed soon to counter increasing modern threats.

Analysis has proven that the US military readiness is severely compromised. The US military lives under the guise of being “ready” even though the very metrics that attribute this falsehood are inadequate and inaccurate. Additionally, US military readiness is impacted by infrastructure and personnel shortages. Finally, the misappropriation and asymmetrical cuts of government funds create a political atmosphere that limits the effectiveness of fighting forces. If the US does not take action to improve readiness, whether by using new reporting models or examining funding and shortages, the US will increasingly be vulnerable to external threats by bad actors. Therefore, the US must act decisively to ensure the safety and security of the nation and to end the downward readiness spiral.

Figures

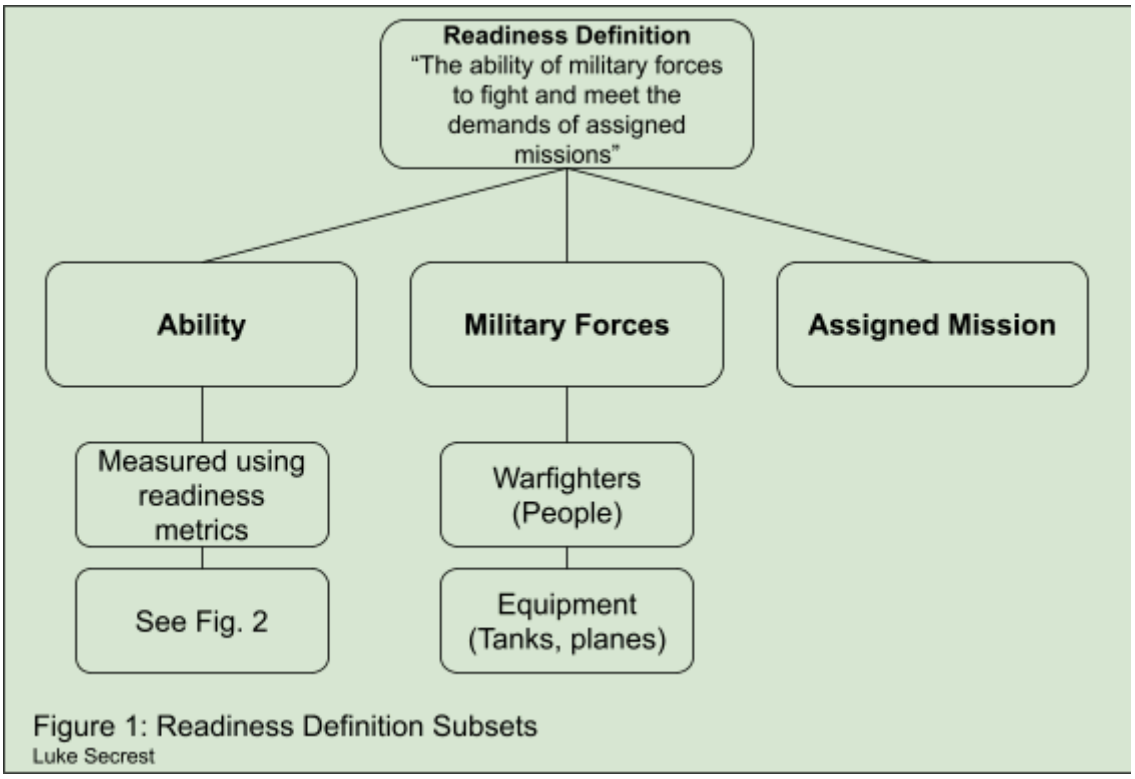

Figure 1: Readiness Definition Subsets
Luke Secrest

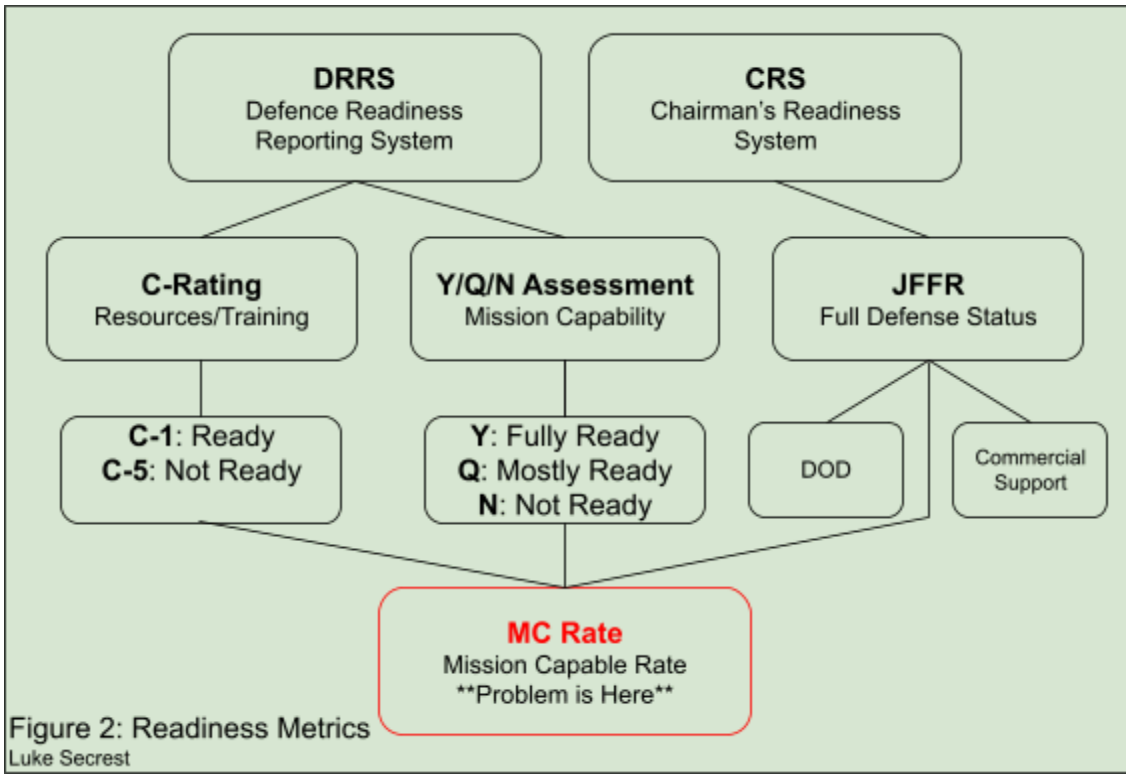

Figure 2: Readiness Metrics
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