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## U.S. Military Is Stretched Too Thin, Defense Board Warns

By Mark Mazzetti

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The U.S. military lacks sufficient personnel to meet the nation's current war and peacekeeping demands throughout the world in coming years, despite steps being taken by the Army to stretch its ranks and increase the number of soldiers available for combat, according to a Pentagon advisory board.

The report by the Defense Science Board, a panel of outside advisors to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, argues that "inadequate total numbers" of troops mean the United States can "not sustain our current and projected global stabilization commitments." Army initiatives to create more combat brigades out of its 10 active divisions are "important, but partial, steps toward enhanced stabilization operations," the panel said.

The report offers several options for easing the burdens on a military strained by missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among them are adding substantial numbers of troops and scaling back the number of peacekeeping missions. The board did not specify troop numbers.

The findings surfaced last week when Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) cited the report during a congressional hearing and questioned Rumsfeld about it. Rumsfeld called it an "excellent piece of work" but said the panel probably had not been briefed on the Army's plans to squeeze more out of existing forces before reaching its conclusions.

Rumsfeld has argued that the military has enough troops and that initiatives underway at the Pentagon will create more front-line combat forces. A key change at the Army is creating additional deployable combat brigades, in part by eliminating headquarters staff, a process known as "modularity."

"I don't know if they were briefed on

However, a copy of the panel's findings obtained by the Los Angeles Times indicated that the advisory group did account for the modularity plans.

The panel found the plans insufficient to deal with the burdens that combat and peacekeeping missions are placing on the military.

“Modularity, in and of itself, does not ensure an effective stabilization capability,” the report concludes.

A Pentagon spokesman said Wednesday that while Rumsfeld appreciated that the board undertook the study, he did not accept its conclusion that the U.S. military was too small to handle its global responsibilities.

“Obviously, we don’t feel that their recommendation that we need to have a permanent increase in end strength is justified,” spokesman Lt. Col. Gary Keck said. “There are many other people other than the Defense Science Board working on this issue.”

Congressional Democrats, however, said the contents of the report showed that the Defense Science Board took a much more comprehensive look at the strains on the military than Rumsfeld at first acknowledged.

“They were fully apprised of what the military was doing,” said Reed, who has introduced legislation to bolster the Army’s ranks by 20,000. “They were quite familiar with the Army’s plans to create a more efficient force. Still, they’re pretty clear that you need more troops.”

During the Senate hearing last week, Rumsfeld said that if he were ever convinced by military commanders that a larger military was necessary, “then by golly, you’re right, we’ll have to go to an increase in end strength.”

Top Pentagon officials concede that the U.S. military is stretched thin by lengthy combat and peacekeeping assignments since Sept. 11. The Army has been the service hardest hit, as some soldiers have been forced to pull back-to-back deployments in combat zones.

Officials in the Army remain concerned that the lengthy deployments will eventually take a toll on the all-volunteer force. On Wednesday, Defense officials said the Army had met most of its recruiting goals for 2004, yet might have more difficulty meeting them next year. The Army National Guard expects to fall roughly 5,000 soldiers short of its 2004 recruiting goal of 56,000.

Rumsfeld and the Army chief of staff, Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, have argued that the Army’s plans to create 10 combat brigades from its current numbers over the next three years should be sufficient to get it through an assignment in Iraq that is already far more burdensome than the Pentagon predicted.

Last year, the Army projected it would have only eight combat brigades left in Iraq by late 2004. There are 20 deployed there.

Privately, some in the Army say that while Schoomaker’s plans to create more combat brigades will help ease the burden on the force, a potentially bigger problem will be addressing shortages of logistics units that provide front-line fuel, ammunition and engineering services – what the Army calls combat service support.

It is not yet clear, officials say, where such units are going to come from as the Army fills out more of its combat brigades.

“We’ve never had enough [combat service support] to go in two directions at once,” said one Army official who works on readiness issues, speaking on condition of anonymity. “This is going to be where we are really strapped.”

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