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Highlights

INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE

Overarching Guidance Is Needed to Advance Information Sharing

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Defense (DOD) has numerous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems—including manned and unmanned airborne, space-borne, maritime, and terrestrial systems—that play critical roles in support of current military operations. The demand for these capabilities has increased dramatically. Today's testimony addresses (1) the challenges the military services and defense agencies face processing, exploiting, and disseminating the information collected by ISR systems and (2) the extent to which the military services and defense agencies have developed the capabilities required to share ISR information. This testimony is based on GAO's January 2010 report on DOD's ISR data processing capabilities. GAO reviewed and analyzed documentation, guidance, and strategies of the military services and defense agencies in regard to processing, exploiting, and disseminating ISR data as well as information-sharing capabilities. GAO also visited numerous commands, military units, and locations in Iraq and the United States.

What GAO Recommends

In the January 2010 report, GAO recommended that DOD develop overarching guidance for sharing intelligence information and that the military services develop plans with timelines that prioritize and identify the types of ISR data they will share. DOD agreed with these recommendations.

View GAO-10-500T or key components.
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What GAO Found

The military services and defense agencies face long-standing challenges with processing, exploiting, and disseminating ISR data, and DOD has recently begun some initiatives to address these challenges. First, since 2002, DOD has rapidly increased its ability to collect ISR data in Iraq and Afghanistan, although its capacity for processing, exploiting, and dissemination is limited. Second, transmitting data from ISR collection platforms to ground stations where analysts process, exploit, and then disseminate intelligence to users requires high-capacity communications bandwidth. However, bandwidth can be limited in a theater of operations by the satellite and ground-based communication capacity, and this in turn affects the ability to send, receive, and download intelligence products that contain large amounts of data. Third, shortages of analytical staff with the required skill sets hamper the services' and defense agencies' abilities to exploit all ISR information being collected, thus raising the risk that important information may not be available to commanders in a timely manner. DOD is developing and implementing initiatives to enhance its processing, exploitation, and dissemination capabilities, such as increasing personnel, but its initiatives are in the early stages of implementation and it is too soon to tell how effective they will be in addressing current challenges.

DOD is taking steps to improve the sharing of intelligence information across the department, but progress is uneven among the military services. DOD began plans for its Distributed Common Ground/Surface System (DCGS), an interoperable family of systems that will enable users to access shared ISR information in 1998. DOD subsequently directed the military services to transition their service-unique intelligence data processing systems into DCGS and each of the military services is at a different stage. While the Air Force and the Navy each plan to have a fully functional version of DCGS by the end of fiscal years 2010 and 2013, respectively, the Army does not expect to have a fully functional system until 2016. The Marine Corps has not yet established a completion date for the full operational capability of its DCGS. To facilitate the sharing of ISR data on this system, DOD developed the DCGS Integration Backbone, which provides common information standards and protocols. Although the services are responsible for managing their DCGS programs and conforming to information-sharing standards, according to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and military service officials, DOD has not developed overarching guidance, such as a concept of operations that provides direction and priorities for sharing intelligence information within the defense intelligence community. Without this overarching guidance, the services lack direction to set their own goals and objectives for prioritizing and sharing ISR information and therefore have not developed service-specific implementation plans that describe the prioritization and types of ISR data they intend to share. Moreover, the inability of users to fully access existing information contributes to the increasing demand for additional ISR collection assets.

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