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Report to Congressional Committees

August 2023

BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train and Equip Projects

Accessible Version

GAO-23-105842

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-23-105842, a report to congressional committees

August 2023

BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train and Equip Projects

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. provides training and equipment through DOD's Section 333 authority to build the capacity of partner countries' national security forces to conduct specific operations. In fiscal years 2018 through 2022, DOD allocated nearly $5.6 billion for Section 333 projects. DOD is required to jointly develop and plan such projects with State.

The fiscal year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act includes a provision for GAO to review Section 333 projects. This report examines (1) changes in the processes DOD uses for planning Section 333 projects, (2) the extent to which State is involved in planning the projects, and (3) the extent to which DOD addressed key planning elements in selected project proposals and congressional notifications.

GAO analyzed program documents for a nongeneralizable sample of 46 projects notified to Congress in fiscal years 2018 through 2021—the most recent data available at the time of selection. GAO also interviewed DOD and State officials in Washington, D.C.; at the six geographic combatant commands; and at five overseas posts, selected on the basis of factors such as location and project funding.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DOD—to define a joint planning process, establish associated guidance, and improve proposals and notifications. GAO is also making two recommendations to State—to establish planning guidance and enhance security cooperation training. DOD and State concurred with these recommendations.

View GAO-23-105842. For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has instituted a multiyear planning process for projects funded under one of its largest security cooperation programs (known as Section 333) to build foreign partners' security capacity. Initial planning occurs at DOD's geographic combatant commands. Combatant command officials described improvements as well as challenges related to the new planning process. For example, officials cited financial planning targets as improvements but also noted challenges related to guidance and timelines, among others.

Examples of Section 333 Training and Equipment Provided to Partner Nations

Equipment
Military trucks provided for military logistic support, troop transport, and military operations.

Training
Crisis response team training to improve a partner nation's counter-terrorism capabilities.

Sources: U.S. Army Security Assistance Command (left), U.S. Embassy Dushanbe (right). | GAO-23-105842

The Department of State has had inconsistent involvement in Section 333 projects due to the lack of a joint DOD–State planning process and insufficient training. Section 333 requires DOD and State to jointly plan and develop projects and requires State concurrence to conduct or support these projects. However, officials at overseas posts reported varying levels of State participation in planning, and GAO found State officials' involvement in reviewing more detailed proposals occurs later in the planning process. DOD has not worked with State to define a joint process, including timelines for State's review, which has hindered State's ability to contribute expertise. For example, State officials told GAO there is pressure to concur on projects quickly, without sufficient time for review. As a result, projects may have negative outcomes, such as assistance that cannot be used. In addition, State officials overseas lack training in security cooperation, which limits their participation in project planning.

DOD has not addressed longstanding gaps in project planning related to its consideration of partner nations' capacity to absorb and sustain DOD-provided training and equipment. GAO has previously identified gaps related to DOD's planning for these elements, and DOD has found that associated challenges have hindered project success. Most of the Section 333 project proposals GAO reviewed lacked one or more key planning elements critical to project success. For example, 42 of 46 proposals did not fully document a plan for project sustainment, an analysis of the partner nation's absorptive capacity, or measurable objectives. GAO also found that DOD's required congressional notifications provided limited information about its analysis of partner nations' absorptive capacity and its plans for sustainment. As a result, DOD risks continued gaps in its planning that endanger project success.

Contents

Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
DSCA	Defense Security Cooperation Agency
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
GCC	geographic combatant command
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OUSD-P	Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
PM	Bureau of Political-Military Affairs
PPD-23	Presidential Policy Directive 23
SCO	Security Cooperation Organization
SSCI	Significant Security Cooperation Initiative

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
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Congressional Committees

A variety of threats, including terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, threaten the security of the United States and its allies. To build partner nations' capacity to address such threats, the U.S. government provides assistance through security cooperation programs.[1] Building partner capacity has been identified as a key element of U.S. national security, national counterterrorism, and national defense strategies and has become a central pillar of U.S. foreign policy.

Section 333 of title 10 of the U.S. Code (Section 333) authorizes the Department of Defense (DOD) to conduct or support programs providing training and equipment to foreign partners' national security forces for the purpose of building their capacity to conduct specific operations.[2] The assistance authorized by Section 333 replaced multiple capacity-building programs,[3] including the Global Train and Equip program.[4] Section 333 requires DOD and the Department of State to jointly develop and plan

[1]*Security cooperation* refers broadly to Department of Defense (DOD) interactions with foreign security establishments. It includes activities such as the transfer of defense articles and services; military-to-military exercises; military education, training, and advising; and capacity building of partner security forces. See Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-20, *Security Cooperation* (Sept. 9, 2022).

[2]10 U.S.C. § 333.

[3]According to DOD, Section 333 replaced programs associated with the following four authorities: "Section 1204, Authority to Conduct Activities to Enhance the Capability of Foreign Countries to Respond to Incidents involving Weapons of Mass Destruction," "Section 2282, Building Capacity of Foreign Security Forces," "Section 1033, DOD Assistance for Counter-Narcotics Activities by Certain Countries," and "Assistance to the Government of Jordan for Border Security Operations."

[4]The Global Train and Equip program was also known as the Section 1206 program, because it was originally authorized in section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006. See Pub. L. No. 109-163, § 1206, 119 Stat. 3136, 3456 (2006). The Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 authorized a permanent Global Train and Equip program codified at 10 U.S.C § 2282, and the program was often referred to as Section 2282. See Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 1205(a)(1), 128 Stat. 3292, 3533 (2014). The fiscal year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act repealed Section 2282 and replaced it with 10 U.S.C. § 333. Pub. L. No. 114-328, § 1241, 130 Stat. 2000, 2497 (2016).

Section 333 assistance and requires DOD to obtain State's concurrence on Section 333 projects.[5] Section 333 also requires DOD to notify Congress of each project it intends to fund through this authority.

The fiscal year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes a provision for us to review Section 333 activities.[6] In a previous report, we described DOD's funding of Section 333 projects in fiscal years 2018 through 2022 and assessed its delivery and evaluations of such projects.[7] In this report, we (1) identify changes in the processes DOD has used for planning projects since the establishment of Section 333, (2) examine the extent of State's involvement in the planning of Section 333 projects, and (3) assess the extent to which DOD addressed key planning elements in proposals and congressional notifications for selected Section 333 projects in fiscal years 2018 through 2021.[8]

To address these objectives, we analyzed program guidance, project proposals, congressional notifications and associated documents, and allocations data for fiscal years 2018 through 2021. In addition, to identify changes in DOD's project planning processes and examine the extent of State's involvement in the planning of projects, we interviewed State and DOD officials about the project proposal process, State's involvement, and key elements of project planning. Using video conferencing, we met with the officials at State and DOD headquarters; DOD's six geographic combatant commands; and U.S. overseas posts (i.e., embassies) in Ecuador, Romania, Senegal, Tajikistan, and Timor-Leste. We selected these five countries to reflect a range in the amount of funds DOD has allocated for projects in the countries, the maturity of the United States' security cooperation relationships with the countries, the length of tenure of embassy staff, and the countries' geographic distribution, among other factors. We determined that Principles 4 and 12 of *Standards for Internal*

[5]Although the authorizing legislation uses "program" to refer to individual assistance efforts, this report generally uses "project" to refer to individual assistance efforts as proposed, approved, implemented, and assessed and uses "program" to refer to the entirety of the Section 333 program.

[6]Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 1204, 135 Stat. 1541, 1959 (2021) (amending a prior reporting requirement in Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 1205(f) (2014)).

[7]GAO, *Building Partner Capacity: DOD Should Assess Delivery Delays in Train and Equip Projects and Improve Evaluations*, GAO-23-106275 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2023).

[8]Fiscal year 2021 was the most recent year for which data were available when we selected the projects.

Control in the Federal Government were relevant to our examination of State's involvement in Section 333 project planning.[9]

Further, to assess the extent to which DOD addressed key planning elements in proposals and congressional notifications for selected Section 333 projects in fiscal years 2018 through 2021, we reviewed a presidential policy directive and DOD guidance. We identified the key planning elements by reviewing Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD-23), DOD guidance, and reports on Global Train and Equip projects that we had previously issued.[10] We analyzed a nongeneralizable sample of 46 project proposals that DOD approved in fiscal years 2018 through 2021 out of more than 900 total proposals. We also reviewed congressional notifications of proposed projects as well as related materials.[11] We selected the sample of projects to reflect a range in the amount of funding DOD allocated for the projects, the geographic location of the partner nation, the nature of the assistance, and the year of notification, among other factors. We determined that Principle 13 of Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government was relevant to our assessment.[12] For more details of our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to August 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[9]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

[10]See GAO, *Counterterrorism: DOD Should Fully Address Security Assistance Planning Elements in Global Train and Equip Project Proposals*, GAO-18-449 (Washington, D.C.: May 30, 2018); *Counterterrorism: DOD Should Enhance Management of and Reporting on Its Global Train and Equip Program*, GAO-16-368 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 18, 2016). Also see the last page of this report for a list of related GAO products.

[11]Section 333 requires DOD to notify Congress of each project it intends to fund through the authority. See 10 U.S.C. § 333.

[12]GAO-14-704G.

Background

U.S. Security Sector Assistance Policy and Authorities

Over the last decade, the U.S. government has taken steps intended to improve the effectiveness of its security sector assistance, including security cooperation. Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD-23), published in 2013, was aimed at strengthening the ability of the United States to help partner nations build their own security capacity. PPD-23 identified principal goals and guidelines for security sector assistance that highlight the importance of including the following four planning elements in project design and execution:

- identifying objectives that address partner nation needs;
- considering partner nations' capacity to absorb U.S. assistance;
- anticipating partner nations' ability to sustain capabilities provided through the assistance; and
- integrating assessment, monitoring, and evaluation to provide policymakers, program managers, and implementers with information and evidence necessary to make effective decisions and maximize program outcomes.

PPD-23 also designated State as the lead agency responsible for the policy, supervision, and general management of U.S. security sector assistance.

Within the security sector realm, DOD and State both play primary roles in managing and executing assistance provided to partner nations for security-related purposes. DOD generally manages and executes security cooperation efforts authorized under Title 10 of the U.S. Code and various public laws, while State generally manages and executes security assistance efforts authorized under Title 22 of the U.S. Code and various public laws.

Evolution of U.S. Efforts to Build Partner Capacity

Since 2006, DOD has used Section 333 or similar authorities to provide equipment, training, services, and small-scale construction activities

intended to build the capacity of partner nations' national security forces to conduct a variety of operations (see text box).

Statutory Authorities for Programs to Build Partner Nations' Security Capacity since 2006

Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2006 authorized the Global Train and Equip program as a pilot program for building the capacity of foreign nations' military forces to conduct counterterrorism operations or to participate in, or support, military and stability operations with U.S. armed forces.[a] According to guidelines from the Departments of Defense and State, which implemented the program, the Global Train and Equip program was to be distinct from other security assistance programs in that its projects were to respond to urgent and emergent needs and not overlap with other train-and-equip programs.

Section 2282 of the Fiscal Year 2015 NDAA authorized the Global Train and Equip program as a permanent program to provide assistance to build partner nations' capacity to conduct counterterrorism operations or participate in coalition operations benefiting U.S. national security interests.[b]

The Fiscal Year 2017 NDAA repealed Section 2282 of title 10 of the U.S. Code and created Section 333 of the same title, authorizing the Department of Defense to provide assistance to build partner nations' capacity to conduct various security-related operations.

Source: GAO analysis of legal statutes and Departments of Defense and State guidance. | GAO-23-106275

[a]Pub. L. No. 109-163, § 1206, 119 Stat. 3136, 3456 (2006). The Global Train and Equip program authorized by this section was also known as the Section 1206 program.

[b]The Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 authorized a permanent program codified at 10 U.S.C § 2282, and the program was often referred to as Section 2282. See Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 1205(a)(1), 128 Stat. 3292, 3533 (2014).

Figure 1 shows examples of the types of support DOD has provided through Section 333 projects.

Figure 1: Examples of Equipment and Training DOD Has Provided to Partner Nations through Section 333 Projects

Equipment
Military trucks provided for military logistic support, troop transport, and military operations.

Training
Crisis response team training to improve a partner nation's counter-terrorism capabilities.

Sources: U.S. Army Security Assistance Command (left), U.S. Embassy Dushanbe (right). | GAO-23-105842

DOD's and State's Roles and Responsibilities for Section 333 Projects

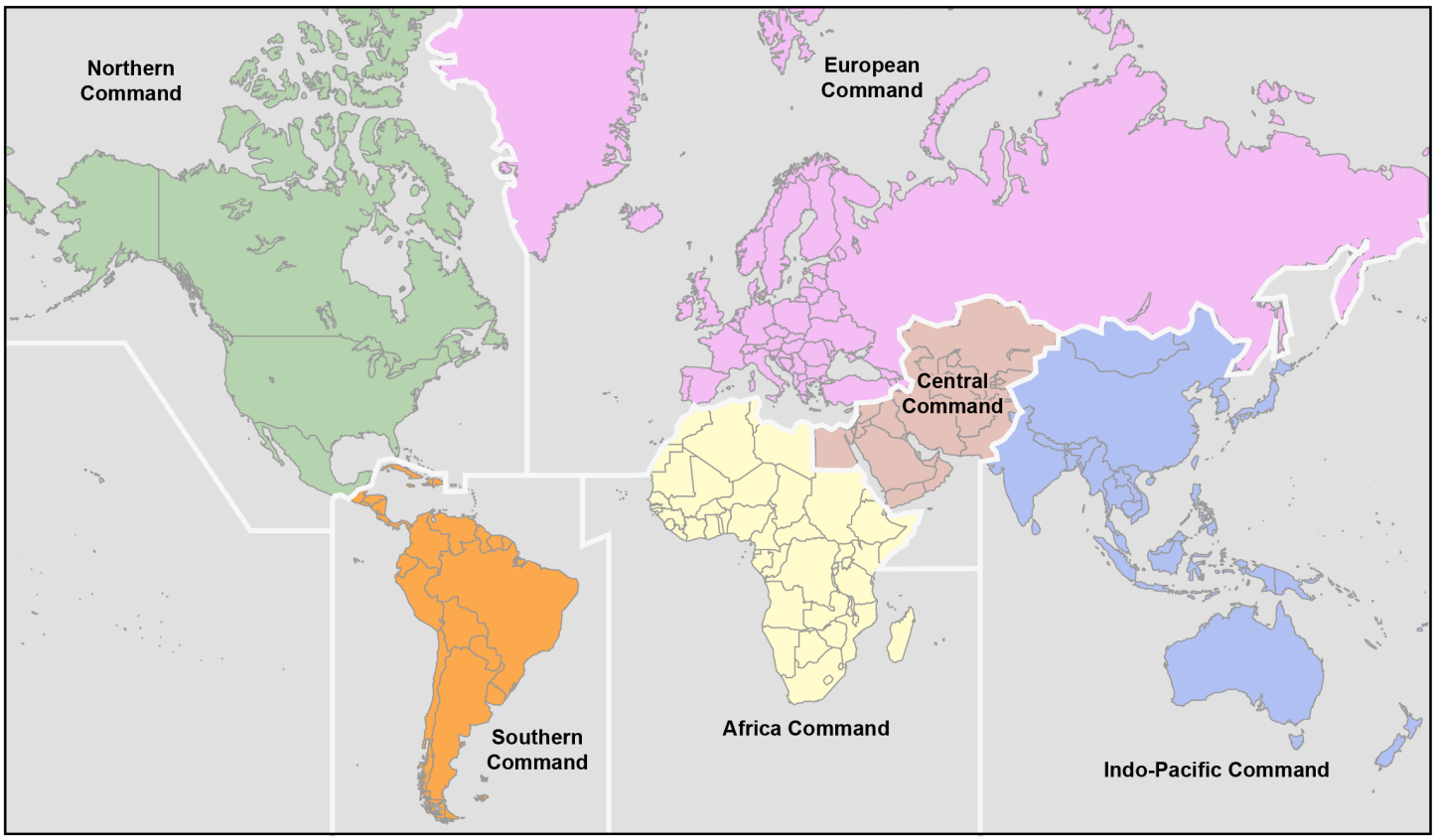
DOD. DOD is the lead agency for managing and executing Section 333 activities and notifying Congress of proposed Section 333 projects. Several agencies and offices within DOD play primary roles with respect to Section 333 projects:

- **Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P).** OUSD-P is responsible for providing policy oversight and guidance for the Section 333 program. OUSD-P leads the DOD project proposal review process, coordinates with State to secure the Secretary of State's concurrence, and leads interactions with Congress.
- **Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).** DSCA administers Section 333 projects under the direction of OUSD-P and provides guidance to DOD components and security cooperation organizations (SCO) regarding the administration and execution of program activities. DSCA oversees program-level logistics planning, provides financial management, develops and implements program policies, operates and maintains applicable program monitoring within information management systems, and otherwise assists in achieving program objectives.
- **Geographic combatant commands (GCC).** DOD's six GCCs are responsible for multi-year planning of Section 333 projects and strategies for the regions and countries in their theaters of operations, as documented in their theater security cooperation plans.[13] In addition, the GCCs have overall responsibility for prioritizing and coordinating security cooperation activities. Figure 2 shows DOD's six GCCs and their designated theaters of operations.[14]

[13]Theater Security Cooperation Plans support geographic combatant command goals and objectives for regional security.

[14]Each of DOD's six GCCs has a defined area of responsibility and a distinct regional military focus. For example, AFRICOM is responsible for all countries on the African continent except Egypt.

Figure 2: DOD's Geographic Combatant Commands and Areas of Responsibility



Source: Map Resources (map), GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information. | GAO-23-105842

- **Security cooperation organizations (SCO).**[15] SCOs at overseas posts in each partner nation support the GCCs through each phase of Section 333 projects. SCOs serve as the communication link between the partner nation, the embassy country team, and the relevant DOD components regarding Section 333 project objectives and

[15]Section 515(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, as amended, authorizes the President to assign U.S. military personnel overseas to manage security assistance programs administered by the DOD. 22 U.S.C. § 2321i. The generic term SCO encompasses all DOD elements, regardless of actual title, located in a foreign country to carry out security cooperation and security assistance management functions under the FAA and the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, as amended. The SCO also manages DOD security cooperation programs under the guidance of the geographic combatant command.

requirements.[16] SCOs provide information about in-country security and logistics to the GCCs.

State. As the lead agency for formulation and execution of foreign policy, State provides leadership in interdepartmental activities of the U.S. government abroad and has expertise in foreign economic and commercial policy as well as foreign social and political developments. Several State offices play a role with respect to Section 333 projects:

- **Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM).** PM's Office of Security Assistance facilitates coordination and clearance on behalf of State for Section 333 projects by, among other things, considering bilateral and regional foreign policy and national security implications; soliciting input from State regional and functional bureaus on Section 333 projects prior to State concurrence; deconflicting title 10 and title 22 assistance to ensure a single coherent strategy with foreign partners; and liaising with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the GCCs, and the military services on proposed Section 333 projects.
- **Overseas posts.** State's overseas posts—led by each post's Chief of Mission and supported by political-military officers and other members of the embassy country team—are to facilitate coordination related to partner nation security needs, which can determine the nature of Section 333 projects.[17]

Requirements for Coordination and Congressional Notification

Coordination between DOD and State. Congress has highlighted the importance of coordination between DOD and State on Section 333 projects. Section 333 requires that DOD and State jointly develop and plan the projects and that DOD obtain State's concurrence for each project.[18] The conference report accompanying the fiscal year 2017

[16]An embassy country team is an interagency group comprising the head of each State section in the embassy and the heads of the other U.S. government agencies represented at the post.

[17]Overseas posts consist of U.S. embassies, consulates, missions to international organizations, and other diplomatic posts in foreign countries. The Chief of Mission—an ambassador or chargé d'affaires—is the principal officer in charge of an overseas post.

[18]10 U.S.C. § 333.

NDAA states that the requirements for joint development and planning and State's concurrence on programs are meant to increase coordination between DOD and State in planning and implementing security sector assistance programs.[19] The conference report urges both departments to enhance visibility and collaboration on such programs early in the planning process and through execution to avoid unnecessary duplication and enhance overall unity of effort.

Notification of Congress by DOD. Section 333 requires DOD to notify Congress of each project before initiating activities under a program. Specifically, DOD is required to submit a congressional notification for each project to the appropriate committee at least 15 days before initiating project activities.[20] These notifications summarize project information such as the project's purpose and estimated cost, the partner nation's absorptive capacity, and plans for sustaining the provided capabilities after the project's completion.

Allocations and Nature of Section 333 Projects

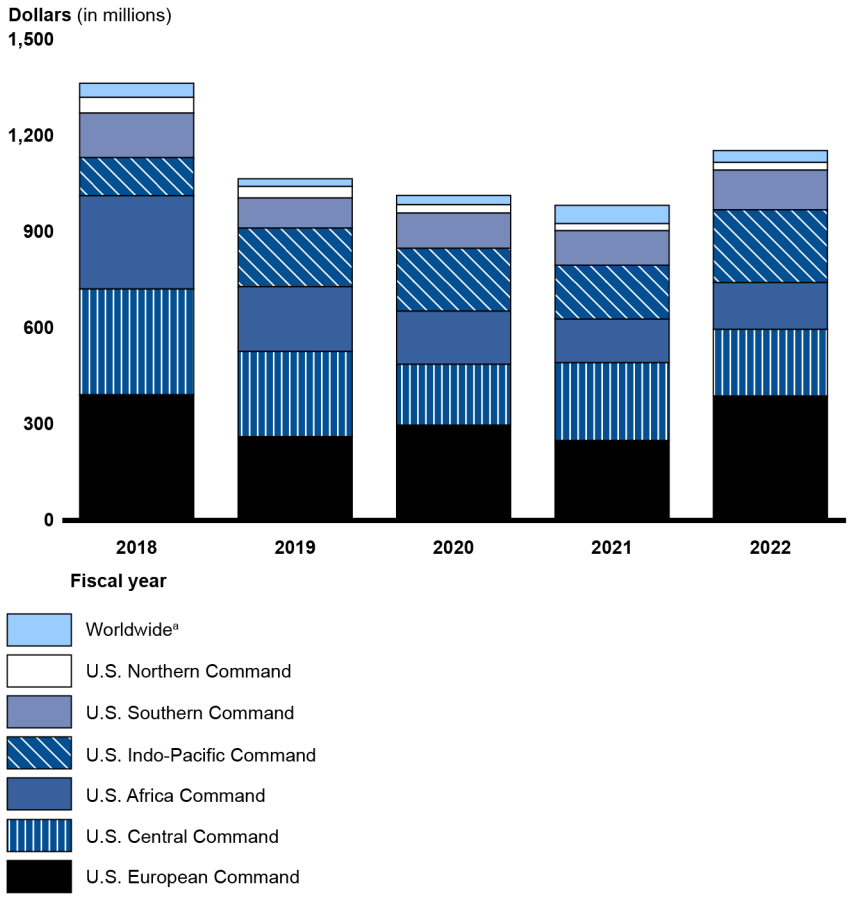
Section 333 is one of DOD's largest security cooperation programs. In fiscal years 2018 through 2022, DOD allocated nearly $5.6 billion for Section 333 projects.[21] About half of this funding—approximately $2.8 billion—was allocated for projects in the European Command's and Central Command's theaters of operation. Figure 3 shows the distribution of funding in these fiscal years across the GCCs. From fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2022, a majority of allocations supported maritime and border security operations and counterterrorism operations.

[19]S. Rep. No. 114-840, at 1197 (2016).

[20]DOD sends these notifications to the Senate Committees on Appropriations, Armed Services, and Foreign Relations and the House of Representatives Committees on Appropriations, Armed Services, and Foreign Affairs, in accordance with federal law. 10 U.S.C. § 301. According to DOD officials, although the department is not required by law to receive the committees' approval, as a matter of comity DOD waits to receive the committee's approval before implementing a project.

[21]For the purposes of this report, the amount of funding DOD allocated for Section 333 projects represents the estimated cost of the projects as notified to Congress, inclusive of any subsequent adjustments. Section 333 projects can only be funded from amounts authorized to be appropriated for such fiscal year for the Department of Defense for operation and maintenance, Defense-wide, and available for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency for such programs and purposes. 10 U.S.C. § 333(g).

Figure 3: DOD Allocations for Section 333 Projects, by Geographic Combatant Command, Fiscal Years 2018–2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-105842

Data for Figure 3: DOD Allocations for Section 333 Projects, by Geographic Combatant Command, Fiscal Years 2018–2022 (Dollars in millions)

Fiscal year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
U.S. European Command	392	261	297	249	388
U.S. Central Command	330	266	190	243	208
U.S. Africa Command	291	202	166	136	146
U.S. Indo-Pacific Command	119	183	196	168	227
U.S. Southern Command	139	94	110	108	124
U.S. Northern Command	49	36	26	22	24
Worldwide	44	24	29	57	37

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-105842

Note: We used unrounded amounts to calculate the totals shown, which we rounded to the nearest dollar. Amounts are shown according to the fiscal year in which DOD notified projects to Congress.

[a]"Worldwide" refers to human rights training and transportation not pertaining to a single geographic combatant command that DOD implemented globally.

DOD Has Instituted a New Project Planning Process since Section 333 Was Established

DOD Plans Section 333 Projects through a Multi-Year, Multi-Authority Process, with Initial Planning at GCCs

For the fiscal year 2020 planning cycle, after the establishment of Section 333, DOD instituted a new multi-year, multi-authority process, using the Significant Security Cooperation Initiative (SSCI) construct, to plan Section 333 projects. Under the SSCI construct, initial planning occurs at the GCCs; previously, initial planning took place at both overseas posts and GCCs.[22] DOD defines SSCIs as multi-year, multi-authority initiatives that include a series of programs, activities, and projects planned as a unified effort to achieve a single desired outcome or set of related outcomes. SSCIs apply security cooperation tools to achieve country, regional, or functional objectives as articulated in specific DOD plans.[23] Section 333 is one of several authorities for which DOD plans activities through the SSCI construct.[24]

According to DOD, it began using the SSCI construct for security cooperation planning in recognition of the fact that security cooperation objectives are more effectively pursued when complementary activities, such as institutional capacity building engagements, are planned and implemented in concert. One DOD official noted that the need to develop lasting capacity of a partner nation required a more deliberate planning process than the one used for earlier train and equip authorities.

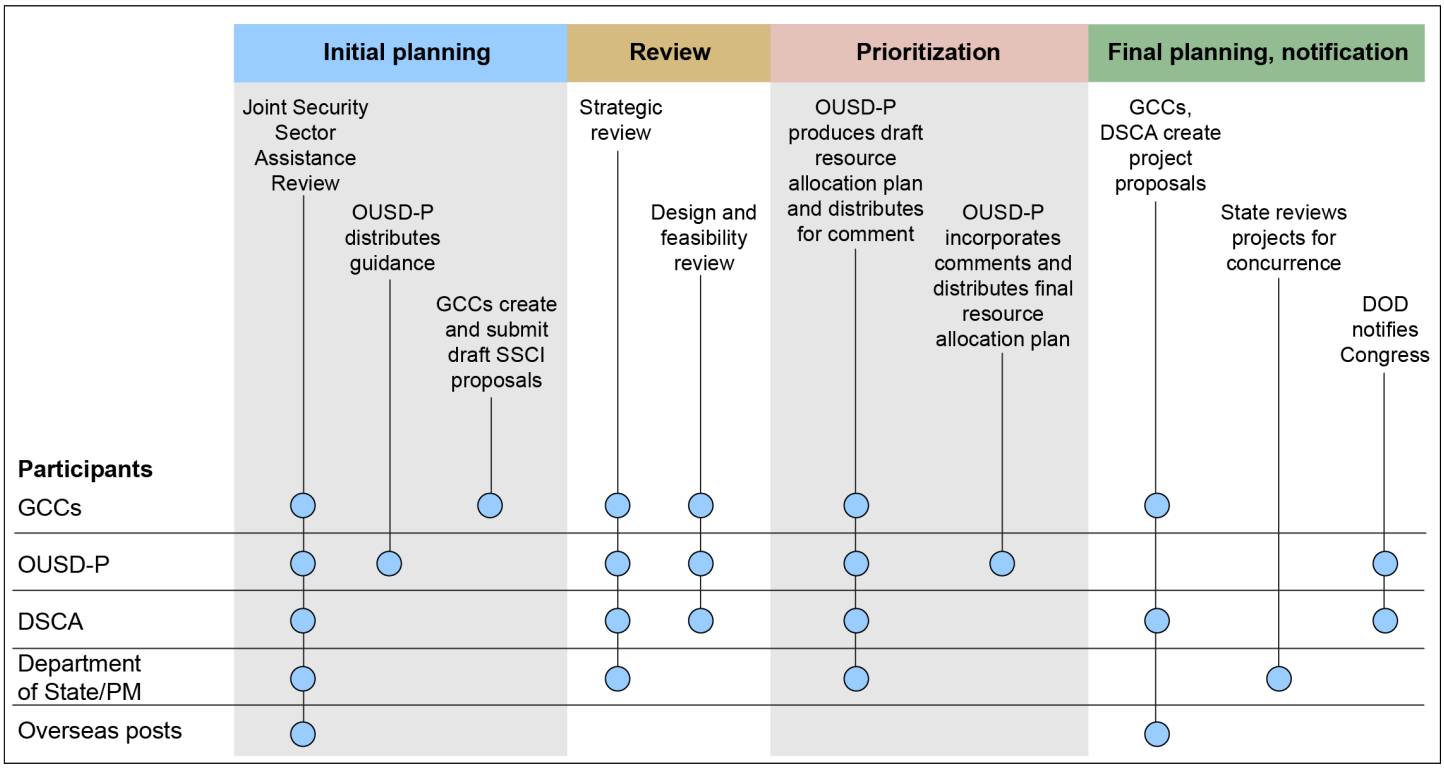
[22]DOD plans several years in advance. For example, the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle (for projects using fiscal year 2024 funds) started in fiscal year 2022.

[23]According to DOD documents, SSCI planning milestones are aligned, to the extent possible, with DOD-wide budgeting timelines.

[24]SSCIs are funded by the DSCA-managed International Security Cooperation Programs account. According to DOD guidance, eligible Title 10 authorities for SSCI funding currently include Section 332 (Institutional Capacity Building), Section 333 (Global Train and Equip), and Section 1263 (Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative). SSCIs may also be planned using resourcing specifically set aside in the ISCP account for Women, Peace, and Security programs.

Figure 4 illustrates DOD's Section 333 project planning process for the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle.

Figure 4: DOD Section 333 Planning Process for Fiscal Year 2024 Projects



Legend: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM), Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs), Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P), Significant Security Cooperation Initiative (SSCI).

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) documents. | GAO-23-105842

Data for Figure 4: DOD Section 333 Planning Process for Fiscal Year 2024 Projects

Participants	Initial planning			Review		Prioritization		Final planning, notification		
GCCs	Joint Security Sector Assistance Review		GCCs create and submit draft SSCI proposals	Strategic review	Design and feasibility review	OUSD-P produces draft resource allocation plan and distributes for comment		GCCs, DSCA create project proposals		
OUSD-P	Joint Security Sector Assistance Review	OUSD-P distributes guidance		Strategic review	Design and feasibility review	OUSD-P produces draft resource allocation plan and distributes for comment	OUSD-P incorporates comments and distributes final resource allocation plan			DOD notifies Congress
DSCA	Joint Security Sector Assistance Review			Strategic review	Design and feasibility review	OUSD-P produces draft resource allocation plan and distributes for comment		GCCs, DSCA create project proposals		DOD notifies Congress
Department of State/PM	Joint Security Sector Assistance Review			Strategic review		OUSD-P produces draft resource allocation plan and distributes for comment			State reviews projects for concurrence	
Overseas posts	Joint Security Sector Assistance Review							GCCs, DSCA create project proposals		

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) documents. | GAO-23-105842

Legend: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM), Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs), Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P), Significant Security Cooperation Initiative (SSCI).

According to DOD documents, the SSCI process is aimed at prioritizing funding for projects based on (1) alignment with relevant strategies, such as the National Defense Strategy; (2) feasibility of the project, including

whether it has specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound objectives; and (3) GCC and OUSD-P priorities. DOD officials told us that DOD's prioritization decisions are constrained by administration and congressional priorities. For example, according to the officials, they may receive congressional direction regarding security cooperation with certain countries or regions and must prioritize security cooperation funding accordingly. According to DOD officials, congressional direction can complicate planning for a variety of reasons, including that Congress typically appropriates funds for each fiscal year after DOD has already completed its multi-year planning process, culminating in a prioritized list of projects, which DOD may then need to adjust.

In adopting the SSCI construct to plan Section 333 projects, DOD largely centralized the generation of project ideas at its GCCs and assigned primary responsibility for planning the projects to GCC officials. It also eliminated the need for early approval of the project by the Chief of Mission of the overseas post in the partner nation receiving the assistance. Under prior authorities for building partner capacity programs, Section 1206 and Section 2282, high-level concepts for projects or project proposals were generated at overseas posts in partner nations as well as at the GCCs. For example, in the Section 2282 planning process, DOD and State vetted, refined, and prioritized the project documentation before submitting to the Secretaries of Defense and State for approval and implementation. DOD used a similar process for Section 333 programming for the fiscal years 2018 and 2019 planning cycles before beginning to institute the SSCI construct for the fiscal year 2020 cycle.

Officials at the GCCs indicated that under the SSCI construct, project ideas can come from SCOs at overseas posts as well as from planners and service component officials at the combatant commands. However, GCC officials indicated that they "owned" the planning process, and some said that SCOs did not have the capacity to create project proposals because of their competing responsibilities.

GCC Officials Highlighted Improvements and Challenges Related to DOD's Evolving Planning Process

DOD has continued to revise its Section 333 planning process since adopting the SSCI construct, and GCC officials we interviewed highlighted improvements and challenges related to the most recent changes that had been made at the time of our review. GCC officials reported that some changes have improved the process. For example,

GCC officials reported improvements related to the following changes in the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle:

- **Provision of financial targets.** OUSD-P began informing each GCC of approximate amounts of funding available for fiscal year 2024 SSCIs, which included Section 333 projects. Officials at one GCC said that being told approximately how much funding to plan for, as well as being instructed to devote about 75 percent to continuing projects and 25 percent to new projects, had facilitated planning.
- **Establishment of "two-gate" review process.** OUSD-P established a two-gate review process for project proposals, which some officials described as an improvement. DSCA officials noted that the first gate is intended as a strategic review to assess a proposal's consistency with national security strategies and DOD priorities, while the second gate is intended to assess the proposal's feasibility. These officials said that all new proposals must go through both gates and that proposals for continuing existing programs may receive approval to bypass the first gate. Officials from one GCC described the two-gate review process as an improvement because they felt it acknowledged that ongoing projects should receive higher priority than new projects. Officials from another GCC noted that the two-gate process is more structured and clearly defined than OUSD-P's previous review processes.
- **Provision of more-specific guidance and feedback.** Officials at two GCCs remarked that OUSD-P had clarified its expectations for proposals. According to one official, DSCA and OUSD-P provided specific guidance and feedback on proposal drafts for fiscal year 2024, in contrast to prior planning cycles, which allowed the GCC to make adjustments before the final consideration.

However, GCC officials also highlighted some challenges associated with the fiscal year 2024 planning process. For example:

- **Later-than-expected issuance of policy and process guidance.** Officials in all six GCCs told us that OUSD-P had issued policy and process guidance later than they expected. The guidance was issued in August 2022 rather than in June. As a result, according to some officials, they started developing their project proposals before receiving the guidance and had to revise them after receiving it, which created extra work. Officials at one GCC stated that a predictable timeline for issuance of the guidance would improve their ability to align the proposals to relevant strategies. OUSD-P officials told us they intended to release policy and process guidance earlier for the

fiscal year 2025 planning process. The guidance had been released by July 2023.

- **Increased input from DSCA.** GCC officials said that DSCA provided more input on project proposals for fiscal year 2024 than for previous years. Officials from one GCC reported that while they welcomed this input, they would have liked more time to incorporate it before having to resubmit the proposals. DSCA officials acknowledged that the feedback process, which allows GCCs to edit proposals in response to input provided, did not go smoothly for the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle, and they said they intended to revise the process for the subsequent year.
- **Required use of new IT system to submit proposals.** According to GCC officials, a requirement that they use a new IT application, Socium, to submit project proposals resulted in wasted time. Socium is intended to replace current DOD systems and allow users to view, manage, assess, and report security cooperation activities and events. GCC officials reported that Socium was not ready for use and that submitting proposals through the system was difficult. Officials at some GCCs said that they wasted time in inputting proposals into Socium because officials at OUSD-P could not access them, and they were then told to provide the documents by email. DOD officials acknowledged that using Socium for the fiscal year 2024 planning process was challenging, but they stated that DOD has continued to make changes to the system to improve usability.

State's Required Involvement in Section 333 Project Planning Is Limited by Absence of a Joint Process and Insufficient Training

Although Section 333 requires that DOD and State jointly plan and develop and coordinate implementation of all Section 333 projects, State's involvement has been inconsistent, dependent on when and how DOD has requested its input, rather than at defined points in the process. DOD has not worked with State to create a process for joint project planning or agreed-upon timelines for obtaining State's concurrence; this has limited State's contributions and risked a number of negative outcomes. Moreover, neither agency has provided internal guidance to facilitate joint planning. In addition, State has not ensured that its political-military officials at posts have access to training and other forms of information about Section 333, which has further constrained their ability to contribute to project planning.

State's Involvement in Developing Section 333 Project Proposals Varies

State Officials in Selected Overseas Posts Reported Inconsistent Levels of Involvement in Project Planning

State officials at selected overseas posts described varying levels of involvement in Section 333 project planning. For example, at three posts, State political-military officers said they had no involvement in Section 333 project planning, and one official reported never having seen a Section 333 project proposal. However, at another post, the State political-military officer reported providing input on projects to the DOD SCO and emphasized that the embassy's small size made coordination routine. At a fifth post, State political-military officers told us that although they are not involved in developing project ideas, they provide information to the SCO about partner nation priorities and preferences as part of the Section 333 planning process.

DOD officials affirmed that SCOs at overseas posts coordinate to varying extents with other members of embassy country teams, including State officials, to obtain their input on Section 333 projects—a responsibility DOD guidance assigns to SCOs. For example, an official at one GCC told us that the command relies wholly on the SCO at each post to work with the country team and expects the country teams to have reviewed anything the SCO approves. However, according to the official, some SCOs do not coordinate at all with their State counterparts at the posts. According to DOD and State PM officials, newer SCO staff sometimes lack a clear understanding of the roles of various officials at overseas posts and may be unaware of their coordination responsibilities.

Planning staff at five of the six GCCs told us they had minimal contact with State officials at posts regarding Section 333 projects. An official at the remaining GCC reported regular calls with a State PM colleague covering that geographical area and noted that the colleague participated in program design for Section 333 projects. The State PM official, in turn, reported that DOD had been responsive to comments and that calls with the GCC had been productive.

In 2007, we reported that GCCs and State country teams coordinated inconsistently when formulating proposals for capacity-building projects for the Global Train and Equip program, which the Section 333 program

replaced.[25] According to our report, DOD and State had developed a process for jointly reviewing and selecting proposals, which called for GCCs and country teams to develop projects jointly before submitting proposals for DOD and State review. However, our analysis found that this coordination occurred in five of 14 instances we examined.

State's Headquarters-Level Involvement in Section 333 Is Determined by Timing and Nature of DOD Requests

State officials' involvement in planning Section 333 projects depends on the timing and nature of DOD requests. State PM and DOD officials reported two ways in which DOD has regularly asked State to provide input on Section 333 programming in the early phases of project planning.

- State and DOD officials have held annual Joint Security Sector Assistance Reviews. During these reviews, DOD, State, and other interagency stakeholders discuss security cooperation planning, including activities, resource levels, and priorities, for future fiscal years.
- DOD has invited State PM staff to participate in biweekly telephone calls hosted by DSCA to discuss security cooperation projects at all stages of planning and implementation. State PM officials told us they also invite functional bureau and country desk colleagues to participate. State PM officials said that participating in these calls can allow them to provide some input or raise concerns about projects that are early in the planning process. State PM officials also noted that they are not always able to participate in these calls because State has significantly fewer resources for security sector assistance planning than DOD.

However, State PM officials emphasized that these two opportunities for early input do not constitute joint planning and development. They noted that their participation in general planning conversations at the annual reviews and on the DSCA calls are not equivalent to reviewing and providing feedback on project proposals, which generally describe the projects and their intended effects in greater detail. State PM officials emphasized that project proposals can differ significantly from the early concepts discussed in these meetings.

[25]See GAO, *Section 1206 Security Assistance Program—Findings on Criteria, Coordination, and Implementation*, GAO-07-416R (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2007).

State's involvement in reviewing the more detailed proposals occurs later in DOD's planning process. Although DOD's documentation of the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle shows State invited to the strategic review of proposed projects, State/PM officials told us that substantive participation in the review is difficult when they have not been part of the earlier planning. DOD also provides State an opportunity to comment on its Resource Allocation Plan—the list of projects OUSD-P has decided to fund each year—before it has been finalized by DOD. However, State PM officials told us that although they provided extensive comments on one GCC's SSCIs during the fiscal year 2023 planning cycle, DOD generally did not incorporate their comments because it received them after completing internal reviews and prioritization. As a result, the officials said, they concluded that investing time to provide detailed comments on future proposals would be an unwise use of State PM's resources.

Additionally, State PM officials told us that they experience pressure to concur with proposals within 2 to 3 weeks, although they sometimes receive concurrence packages with errors they must work to correct. Further, according to the officials, proposed Section 333 projects often relate to projects implemented by other State bureaus and offices, which may not have adequate time to fully review the proposals.

State PM officials said that they rarely recommend that the Secretary of State not concur with project proposals. For example, officials said that when they have told DOD they would recommend nonconcurrence, DOD has elevated the proposals within State and that State eventually concurred with the proposals. Further, State PM officials said they were concerned that recommending nonconcurrence would damage their professional relationships with DOD counterparts in future proposal reviews.

Lack of a Joint Process and Guidance Limits State's Contribution to Section 333 Project Planning, Risking Negative Outcomes

DOD Has Not Created a Process for Involving State in Project Planning, and Neither Agency Has Guidance on State's Planning Role

Although Section 333 requires joint project planning by DOD and State and requires State's concurrence on the projects, DOD has not worked with State to establish a process that defines how and when State will

contribute to project planning and review proposals for concurrence. Section 333 states that DOD and State shall jointly plan and develop Section 333 projects, including jointly considering a country's political, social, economic, diplomatic, and historical factors, if any, of the foreign country, that may affect the effectiveness of the program. The law also requires State concurrence to conduct or support Section 333 projects.

We have previously identified key practices for effective interagency collaboration. In particular, agencies that are working collaboratively should agree on roles and responsibilities.[26] Agencies that articulate their agreements in formal documents, such as policies or memorandums of understanding, can strengthen their commitment to working collaboratively. In addition, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government calls for management to implement control activities through policies, documenting policies for an operational process's objectives and related risks.[27] The policies are to be documented in the appropriate level of detail to allow management to monitor the control activity effectively.

However, since Section 333's establishment in 2016, DOD has not worked with State to define and document a joint process for planning Section 333 projects that specifies when and how State should be involved. According to DOD and State officials, the agencies have not developed a memorandum of understanding defining how they will work together to jointly plan, or obtain State concurrence on, Section 333 projects.

Moreover, neither agency has provided internal guidance to facilitate joint planning. None of the officials at the six GCCs whom we interviewed said their GCC has guidance for involving State PM officials at headquarters or State officials at posts in Section 333 project planning. Similarly, according to State PM officials and other State personnel we interviewed at five overseas posts, State has not developed guidance that specifies how political-military officers at posts should participate in the Section 333 planning process.

The lack of a joint process and the absence of DOD and State guidance to facilitate joint planning have limited State's ability to contribute essential information related to partner nations. DOD requires GCCs, in

[26]GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms,* GAO-12-1022 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

[27]GAO-14-704G.

the course of developing SSCI and project proposals, to collect various information about partner nations, including political, economic, societal, and environmental factors, and about the partner nation's ability to absorb and sustain the assistance. However, DOD and State officials told us that GCC officials may struggle to obtain this information. For example, State officials said that the proposals require nuanced assessments of partner nations' institutions and political environment that military officers, particularly those outside of the partner nation, may be unable to provide. One State PM official said that although some information required in Section 333 proposals is specific to State's areas of expertise, DOD officials had informed her that they did not expect the officials writing the proposals to be able to provide it.

Without a jointly defined process that provides adequate time for State to review project proposals early in the process, and without DOD and State guidance specifying how State should be participating in joint development and planning, State has limited ability to contribute its extensive knowledge of partner nations to the planning of Section 333 projects.

Limiting State's Role Can Lead to Projects That Are Duplicative or Misaligned with Partner Nation or U.S. Objectives

State officials' limited involvement in the planning process for Section 333 projects risks a variety of negative outcomes. Such outcomes include DOD's or State's providing assistance that duplicates or overlaps with assistance provided by the other, providing assistance that is inconsistent with other U.S. objectives, or providing items that partner nations do not need or cannot use. State's limited involvement can also result in its paying for sustainment or other costs for projects that it does not view as strategic priorities. For example:

- **Duplication or overlap.** State and DOD officials expressed concerns that State's inconsistent involvement in DOD's planning process could result in one or both of the agencies' unintentionally funding duplicative or overlapping projects. Officials noted that the types of projects DOD can fund through Section 333—including projects to build a foreign partner's capacity to counter terrorism, enhance border security, and counter weapons of mass destruction—are similar to the types of projects State supports through several other funding authorities. Therefore, according to the officials, it is important for DOD and State to coordinate and deconflict similar types of projects during the early planning stages. For example, a DSCA official told us

that concerns about potentially overlapping projects resulted in a delay in State's review of a recent concurrence package.

- **Inconsistency with other U.S. objectives.** State PM officials said they had seen project and funding proposals that were inconsistent with other U.S. objectives. For example, they noted that a Section 333 project in Azerbaijan had created an apparent imbalance between the amounts of assistance provided to Azerbaijan and Armenia, resulting in political and diplomatic challenges.[28]
- **Mismatch of assistance and partner nation needs.** Sometimes partner nations have been reluctant to accept or unable to use the assistance DOD provided through Section 333—situations that might have been avoided with increased State involvement early in the planning stages. For example, according to State officials, the Turkmenistan government has been reluctant, for diplomatic reasons, to accept boats that DOD had procured for a Section 333 project and only agreed to take possession after the embassy intervened. State and DOD officials at an overseas post told us that GCC officials often recommend solutions that are more advanced than the partner nation's needs and are more appropriate for a U.S. context than for the partner nation's environment. DOD and State officials noted that SCO officials, as well as State officials and other personnel at overseas posts, are often best positioned to provide information about partner nations.
- **Pressure to fund projects that are not State priorities.** State PM officials said that, regardless of Section 333 projects' priority for State, they experience pressure to continue or sustain the projects if DOD can no longer do so. According to the officials, DOD plans projects in 5-year increments but allocates funding on an annual basis. As a result, DOD sometimes cannot complete the projects or provide all funding needed to cover changes or cost increases. State PM officials also said that DOD officials in the partner nations often expect State to fund sustainment for Section 333 projects after DOD funding ends. According to DSCA officials, DOD and State have agreed that DOD should not plan to use State funds to sustain Section 333 programs. However, one former SCO official said that officials at overseas posts

[28]We recently reported on U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan, including Section 333 security cooperation projects. See GAO, "*Foreign Assistance: Agencies Should Take Steps to Improve Reporting on Assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan*, GAO-22-104619 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2022).

look to any available sources of funding to continue a program they view as a priority.[29]

Lack of Training about Section 333 Limits State Officials' Ability to Contribute to Project Planning

State has not ensured that its political-military officials at posts have access to and awareness of training and other forms of information about Section 333, which constrains their ability to contribute to joint planning. Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government calls for management to demonstrate a commitment to recruit, develop, and retain competent personnel to achieve the entity's objectives.[30] These standards also call for management to enable individuals to develop competencies appropriate for key roles, reinforce standards of conduct, and tailor training to address the needs of each role.

We found that State provides limited access to training for political-military officers at overseas posts regarding security cooperation and assistance programs, including planning processes and the use of such programs for various purposes. Specifically, State's training for political-military officers consists of an in-person course at State's Foreign Service Institute. This course provides information about the nature of political-military work, including the function and role of the PM bureau, as well as DOD's function and role in developing and implementing national security policy. However, State does not require political-military officers to take the course and offers it in person only in Washington, D.C.

State PM officials and political-military chiefs at two posts where we conducted interviews said that taking this course can be challenging because of the in-person attendance requirement and the difficulty of aligning their schedules with the course offerings. State PM officials noted that the course was previously offered virtually, which, in their opinion, provided greater access for political-military officers at posts. Moreover, according to State PM officials, the course does not contain detailed information about DOD's Section 333 program.

[29]Under prior Global Train and Equip authorities, DOD officials often planned for State funds to be used for sustainment. For example, in 2016, we reported that DOD project proposals most frequently cited State's Foreign Military Financing funds, as well as partner nation funds, as the source of long-term sustainment. See GAO-16-368.

[30]GAO-14-704G.

State PM officials in headquarters and staff at selected overseas posts acknowledged the need for formalized training in security assistance and cooperation, including training for political-military officers. For example, the chief of the political-military section at one of the overseas posts where we conducted interviews expressed unfamiliarity with Section 333 assistance and how it differs from State's title 22 security assistance authorities. According to this official, additional training could help equip political-military officers to carry out their responsibilities more effectively, including providing input to DOD on proposed Section 333 projects. Headquarters officials told us they are currently conducting a training needs assessment and considering ways to increase training opportunities for State staff. These officials said that they recognize the importance of such training to enable State to play a greater leadership role in security cooperation.

In addition, State has not ensured that its staff are aware of available DOD training on Section 333. In 2020, DOD established a Security Cooperation Workforce certification program with courses run by DSCA's Defense Security Cooperation University, designed to help ensure that personnel assigned to security cooperation military and civilian positions have the training and experience necessary to carry out their responsibilities more effectively. Among the available courses is an introduction to security cooperation, covering title 10 and title 22 programs as well as DOD and State roles and responsibilities. The course is offered online and is available to U.S. government personnel. State PM officials in headquarters and State officials at overseas posts told us that they were not aware of their ability to take this online course.

Better access to training on Section 333 assistance and awareness of how it differs from title 22 security assistance could improve State political-military officers' capacity to participate in Section 333 project development and planning and maximize the potential synergies between the two types of assistance.

DOD Has Not Addressed Long-Standing Planning Gaps, and Its Congressional Notifications Lack Essential Information

We found that DOD's Section 333 project proposals and congressional notifications of the proposed projects lack information about two planning elements that DOD guidance indicates are critical—capacity to absorb

planned assistance and planning for sustainment of the capabilities provided. In our 2016 and 2018 reviews, we identified gaps in DOD's documentation of these elements in project proposals, and DOD evaluations have identified related challenges.[31] Our current review of selected project proposals, of which DOD notified Congress in fiscal years 2018 through 2021, found that most were incomplete, lacking full documentation of these and other elements specified by DOD guidance. Our current review also found that DOD's required congressional notifications provided limited information about its analysis of partner nations' absorptive capacity and its plans for sustainment.

Prior GAO Reports and DOD Evaluations Have Identified Consistent Challenges Related to Absorptive Capacity and Sustainment

Our 2016 and 2018 reviews of DOD's Global Train and Equip program under authorities preceding Section 333 identified persistent concerns about DOD's documentation of recipient units' capacity to absorb the assistance and of planning to sustain the capabilities provided.[32]

- In 2016, we reported that DOD project proposals did not consistently document information about recipient units' absorptive capacity. In addition, we reported that proposals did not consistently document some aspects of sustainment planning specified by DOD guidance. We recommended that DOD take steps to require that proposal packages include documentation of information about absorptive capacity and to ensure that documentation in project proposal packages is complete.[33]
- In 2018, we reported that although DOD had improved its efforts to include information about partner nations' absorptive capacity in project proposals, its proposals did not consistently address this element. We also reported that DOD officials acknowledged that assessing absorptive capacity had been a consistent challenge. In addition, we reported that many proposals did not include complete

[31]GAO-16-368, GAO-18-449.

[32]GAO-16-368, GAO-18-499.

[33]In response to these recommendations, DOD updated its project proposal templates to request information for its assessment of absorptive capacity and identified steps it was taking to ensure project proposals were complete.

sustainment plans. We recommended that DOD formalize its informal process for ensuring that proposal packages fully address all required elements.[34]

In addition, DOD's strategic and post-activity evaluations have found that issues pertaining to absorptive capacity and sustainment have hindered the success of projects to build partner capacity. For example, a 2022 DOD post-activity evaluation of a Section 333 border security project found that it was unsuccessful in part because the partner nation maintenance personnel were unable to independently repair and maintain the equipment provided. The evaluation deemed the equipment consistently unreliable, stating that it had been "non-mission-capable" for extended periods. Additionally, a 2020 strategic evaluation of regional maritime security cooperation efforts found that partner nations' abilities to sustain improved capabilities created by U.S. defense maritime security cooperation were uncertain.[35] The evaluation also noted that many projects included assistance that collectively exceeded the partner forces' absorptive capacity.

Selected DOD Project Proposals Were Not Complete

Our review of DOD proposals for Section 333 projects from 2018 through 2021 also found that most of the proposals were not complete.[36] PPD-23 and DOD guidance on security cooperation project planning emphasize that the following four key elements are critical to project success: (1) project objectives that address the partner nation's needs, (2) assessment of the partner nation's absorptive capacity, (3) sustainment

[34]In response to this recommendation, DSCA revised its guidance to include a formalized review process.

[35]Ralph Espach, et al., *U.S. Defense Maritime Security Cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Evaluation*, Distribution Statement B, DRM-202-U-026199-Final (CNA, June 2020). This evaluation reviewed equipment and training provided under a number of Title 10 authorities, including Section 333 and predecessor programs.

[36]To determine the level of completeness in the project proposals, we selected a nongeneralizable sample of Section 333 projects for which DOD submitted congressional notifications in fiscal years 2018 through 2021. For further explanation of our methodology, see appendix I.

planning, and (4) measurable project objectives.[37] We found that DOD fully documented all four key planning elements in four of the 46 project proposals we reviewed.

As table 1 shows, DOD fully documented project objectives that addressed partner needs in all but one of the proposals we reviewed. Most proposals did not document all three other key elements—planning for sustainment of the capabilities provided, assessment of the recipient unit's absorptive capacity, and measurable project objectives.

Table 1: Extent to Which Department of Defense (DOD) Documented Key Planning Elements in 46 Selected Proposals for Building Partner Capacity Projects, Fiscal Years 2018-2021

Element	Fully documented	Partially documented	Not documented
Objectives addressing partner need[a]	45	1	0
Absorptive capacity assessment[b]	25	21	0
Sustainment planning[c]	20	25	1
Measurable objectives[d]	13	25	8

Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents. | GAO-23-105842

Note: We determined that a key element was fully documented if the proposal included all components of the key planning element. We determined that a key element was partially documented if the proposal included some, but not all, components of the key planning element. For example, if one component was fully documented but another was not documented at all, we assessed the element as partially documented. We determined that a key element was not documented if the proposal included no components of the key planning element.

[a]We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of a partner nation capability gap and (2) an objective that addressed the partner nation's capability gap.

[b]We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement regarding DOD's analysis of the absorptive capacity of the partner nation, (2) any challenges to the partner nation's ability to absorb the assistance, and (3) suggested solutions for handling any identified challenges.

[c]We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of the partner nation's capacity to sustain the proposed project, (2) the source of sustainment funding, and (3) the estimated cost of sustainment.

[37]We identified these four elements as key to the planning process because PPD-23 and DOD guidance identify them as necessary. Additionally, DOD is required to report on in its evaluation of the partner nation's absorptive capacity and the arrangement, if any, for sustainment of the program in its Congressional Notifications. The fourth element we identified—measurable objectives—is described in PPD-23 as "integrating assessment, monitoring, and evaluation." We determined that establishing measurable objectives is one element of that integration. In past reviews, we considered the baseline capabilities of the recipient unit to be the fourth element. However, we did not include baseline capabilities in our analysis of project proposals because baseline assessments were not required for inclusion in the project proposals.

[d]We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of the metrics for which the progress of the proposal would be measured and (2) an objective that was written in terms that could be measured.

Objectives addressing partner need. Forty-five of the 46 proposals we reviewed included documentation of a partner need and a project objective addressing that need. For example, a riverine border security proposal described the partner nation's need to conduct small boat operations on bordering rivers to combat narcotics trafficking and other threats. The proposal's objective was to resource and train a special operations unit capable of conducting the needed riverine border security operations to address that capability gap.

Absorptive capacity assessment. Almost half of the proposals did not address at least one of three components that DOD guidance identifies as needed for a complete assessment of the partner nation's absorptive capacity: (1) the partner nation's ability to absorb the assistance, (2) any challenges associated with absorptive capacity, and (3) how DOD intends to address those challenges.

We found that 25 of the 46 proposals fully addressed all three of the components needed for assessing absorptive capacity. For example, a proposal to mitigate threats from improvised explosive devices stated that the partner nation had the capability to absorb the assistance. The proposal stated that although the capability existed, the project might achieve success only if several other programs and offices continued operations throughout the duration of the proposal. The proposal also discussed a parallel strategy to ensure successful implementation of the planned assistance.

However, the remaining 21 proposals did not address one or more of the three components. For example, a proposal aimed at strengthening airfield operations stated that the partner nation had a limited capability to absorb the assistance. The proposals noted foreseeable challenges to the absorption of the assistance in these partner nations but did not suggest solutions to those challenges.

Sustainment planning. More than half of the proposals we reviewed lacked at least one of three components of a sustainment plan that DOD guidance identified as key to complete planning: (1) the estimated cost of sustainment to the United States or partner nation, (2) the source of sustainment funding, and (3) the partner nation's capacity to sustain the assistance.

Twenty of the 46 proposals included all three sustainment plan components. For example, one intelligence and border protection proposal included a lengthy discussion of the three components. The proposal identified a specific cost for each year of sustainment and identified the years when the United States and the partner nation, respectively, would provide for that cost. The proposal stated that the partner nation was capable of sustaining the assistance provided and described a detailed plan for transferring sustainment responsibility to the partner nation after a period of support.

However, the remaining 26 proposals lacked one or more of the three components of a complete sustainment plan. For example, two proposals—one for a maritime and border security project and the other for a maritime aerial reconnaissance project—listed the estimated cost of sustainment as "$TBD per year," with no other indication of cost.

Measureable objectives. About one-quarter of the proposals included measurable objectives, in accordance with PPD-23 and DOD guidance, as well as performance standards to measure desired operational capability. For the purposes of this report, we determined that a project objective was measurable if the proposal (1) stated the objective in clearly measurable terms and (2) included performance standards to measure desired operational capability.

Of the 46 proposals we reviewed, 13 included both attributes of measurability. For example, one proposal for a project to enhance a partner nation's counterterrorism operations stated its objective as ensuring the recipient unit is capable of achieving four basic goals. This proposal also included a monitoring plan to document the project's progress.

However, the remaining 33 proposals lacked full documentation of a measurable objective, performance standards to measure desired operational capability, or both. For example, a project proposal to increase a partner nation's special operations capability did not indicate how officials could measure progress toward this objective after implementation and identified no performance indicators to measure desired operational capability.

Some officials we spoke with acknowledged that many project proposals were not high quality. For example, one GCC official responsible for managing the SSCI process stated that many proposals are not well conceived or well written yet receive funding because they relate to

strategic priorities. He said that he believed those projects would ultimately be unsuccessful and that those projects served a diplomatic function more than building the partner's capacity. An official from another GCC stated that although their proposals were of high quality, they were sometimes at risk of not being funded, because other projects were deemed to be higher priority. DSCA officials also noted that, given the timeframes required to notify Congress of projects and to obligate funds, some project proposals stemming from congressional directives may lack detail and be developed quickly if DOD had not already planned the projects for the year.

DOD officials acknowledged that documentation of sustainment and absorptive capacity has been incomplete in some project proposals. One GCC official stated that the GCCs sometimes lack information about the costs of sustainment because the implementing agency has not provided it. DSCA officials noted that our analysis spanned several years and said they had seen improvements in recent years. However, they said that the process of implementing changes in the preparation of Section 333 project proposals is slow and that results of such changes can take years to become evident.

According to DSCA officials, documented proposals are required for all projects. However, DOD lacks a mechanism for ensuring proposals are complete before moving forward in the review process. Although DSCA administers Section 333 projects, DSCA officials noted that many stakeholders, including GCCs and implementing agencies, are involved in project proposal development and that DSCA does not have the leverage to ensure that proposals are complete. Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government calls for management to use quality information to achieve the entity's objective; quality information is, among other things, complete information.[38]

Without complete project proposals, DOD may not have the information it needs to assess the likelihood of a project's success. Lacking that information, DOD risks implementing projects without having fully assessed the partner nations' ability to absorb the assistance or having fully planned for sustainment capability. Additionally, officials noted that because of high levels of turnover among SCOs and at the GCCs, the persons responsible for implementing a project may not be those who developed the proposal. In such situations, complete proposals would

[38]GAO-14-704G.

help ensure the transfer of institutional knowledge essential to the projects' success.

In September 2022, DOD issued new guidance outlining a process to ensure that security cooperation programs, which include Section 333 projects, address partner nation capacity and sustainment planning, among other things. The guidance indicates that DOD intends to conduct a more thorough review of the three key elements that we found project proposals did not fully address—sustainment planning, absorptive capacity, and measurable objectives. The guidance also outlines roles and responsibilities for reviewing various elements of proposals and for developing the proposals. However, the guidance does not outline a mechanism for ensuring that proposals are complete. For the fiscal year 2024 planning process, DSCA stakeholders provided substantive feedback related to the key elements we reviewed, but the guidance has not been in place long enough for us to determine its ultimate effect on proposal development.

DOD Has Provided Limited Written Information to Congress about Partner Nations' Absorptive Capacity and DOD's Sustainment Planning

DOD's congressional notifications for Section 333 projects have provided limited information about partner nations' absorptive capacity and DOD's planning for sustainment. Before initiating activities for a Section 333 project, DOD is required to submit a notification to Congress that provides, among other things, (1) a detailed evaluation of the partner nation's and unit's capacity to absorb the training or equipment to be provided and (2) a description of the arrangements, if any, for sustainment of the capabilities, including an estimated cost and source of the funds to support sustainment beyond the project's completion date, if applicable.[39] In preparing the notifications, DOD officials also create slides containing additional details of planned projects, which, according to DOD officials, they verbally communicate in internal briefings but of which they do not typically provide written copies to Congress.

[39]10 U.S.C. § 333(e); DOD is required to provide this notification at least 15 days before initiating any activities for a Section 333 project. However, DOD officials noted that project implementation typically starts well after the 15-day requirement, as funds are rarely available for implementation that quickly.

Since 42 of the 46 project proposals we reviewed were missing key planning elements, we further examined congressional notifications and internal DOD briefing slides for selected projects to determine whether they contained a complete discussion of these key elements.[40]

Our analysis of the notifications for 23 projects found that the information DOD provided to Congress about absorptive capacity and sustainment costs was limited. Specifically, the congressional notifications we reviewed largely used the same language about absorptive capacity and sustainment planning for all of the projects. For example, each notification we analyzed for absorptive capacity included only the following statement summarizing DOD's analysis of the partner nation's absorptive capacity: "[The partner nation and unit] are capable of absorbing and benefiting from the assistance proposed under this Section 333 program." One notification stated that the project included no sustainment costs. All of the other notifications we reviewed stated that 2 years of sustainment was included as part of the project and that the partner nation was responsible for future costs, but did not provide any estimated cost of sustainment. Instead, all of these notifications included a statement such as the following: "This program includes two years of sustainment for equipment. [Partner nation] is responsible for out-year sustainment of the equipment beyond [fiscal year when U.S. sustainment support will end]."

We found that DOD's internal briefing slides sometimes provided additional information about absorptive capacity beyond the information included in the project proposals.[41] For example, the briefing slides for an airfield operations project stated that "[the partner nation's] air component maintains their current aircraft well" and that four partner nation officials were fully qualified to operate the equipment, and six maintenance personnel were planned to complete qualifications. The proposal for this project did not include a complete assessment of the partner nation's ability to absorb the assistance. Conversely, a briefing slide for an aircraft patrol proposal stated that in order to successfully build a training

[40]We selected 11 projects for which the proposals contained partial information about the partner nation's absorptive capacity or did not fully address absorptive capacity challenges and 10 projects for which the proposals did not include the estimated cost of sustainment. We also selected two proposals that included neither an assessment of absorptive capacity nor an estimated cost of sustainment. We therefore analyzed notifications and briefing slides for a total of 23 projects.

[41]DOD officials noted that related project materials, such as planning documents for related institutional capacity building projects, may also contain information about absorptive capacity.

capability, the partner nation would require substantially more robust sustainment planning, as well as human resource management, to retain the technical skills to maintain complex aircraft. However, the slide did not state how DOD intended to address this challenge.

Some briefing slides also included additional information about the cost of sustainment. Specifically, we found estimated costs for sustainment in the briefing slides for eight of the 12 projects whose proposals did not provide estimated annual sustainment costs. However, the briefing slides for four projects did not include estimated costs for sustainment beyond the completion of the program. For example, the proposals for two projects stated that the sustainment cost was "TBD." The briefing slides for one of these projects included an estimated cost of sustainment after the program's completion. However, the slides for the other project stated only that the "program includes two years of sustainment for equipment [and the partner nation] is responsible for out-year sustainment" without including an estimated cost.

Our analysis showed that for some projects, the proposal, notification, and internal briefing slides contained inconsistent statements about absorptive capacity and sustainment planning. For example:

- **Absorptive capacity.** An operations and logistics proposal stated that the partner nation's absorptive capacity was "low/moderate." The notification used the same language as the other notifications to state that the partner nation was capable of absorbing the assistance, while the internal briefing slides indicated that the partner nation had moderate absorptive capacity. Also, a maritime patrol aircraft training proposal stated that to absorb the assistance, the partner nation would have to construct additional infrastructure. In contrast, the notification used the boilerplate language, stating that the partner nation was capable of absorbing the assistance, and the briefing slide for this project stated that the partner nation had "ample infrastructure."
- **Sustainment cost.** A proposal for force development and its associated briefing slide stated there was no sustainment required, but the congressional notification stated that the project included 2 years of sustainment support.

Unless DOD provides in its congressional notifications a detailed evaluation of partner nations' absorptive capacity and the estimated cost of any sustainment needed for the capabilities provided, Congress may

not be able to make fully informed decisions about U.S. security cooperation.

Conclusions

As one of DOD's largest security cooperation programs, Section 333 is an important tool for helping build the capacity and capability of partner nations to address global threats. When Congress enacted Section 333, it established clear expectations that DOD and State jointly develop and plan projects. Additionally, Congress emphasized the need for DOD to consider partner nations' absorptive capacity and to plan for future sustainment of the provided capabilities by requiring DOD to document these considerations in its congressional notifications. However, we have found inconsistent coordination between DOD and State when planning capacity-building projects since 2007, shortly after Congress created the Global Train and Equip program—the Section 333 program's predecessor. We have also found persistent weaknesses in DOD's consideration of absorptive capacity and sustainment planning in project proposals.

For this report, we found that State's involvement in Section 333 project planning has been inconsistent. DOD, as lead agency for managing and executing Section 333, has not worked with State to define and document a joint planning process that specifies when and how State should be involved, and neither agency has established internal guidance to facilitate joint planning. Unless DOD works with State to define a such a process—including timelines for State's review of concurrence packages—and until the agencies establish guidance to support the process, State's ability to contribute its political, social, economic, diplomatic, and historical knowledge will continue to be limited. Moreover, State political-military officers at posts lack training related to Section 333, including planning for Section 333 projects. Increasing political-military officers' access to and awareness of training on Section 333—how it can be used, how it compares to State's title 22 security assistance authorities, and how projects are planned—is critical to enable State to participate in project planning as Congress intended.

Additionally, despite persistent concerns related to DOD's consideration of partner nations' absorptive capacity and its planning for sustainment in security cooperation project proposals, DOD did not consistently include complete information about these elements in the Section 333 project proposals we reviewed. Further, although Congress requires DOD to

address these elements in its notifications of potential projects, the notifications we reviewed provided limited and generic information about partner nations' absorptive capacity and the cost of sustainment after project completion. Without a mechanism for ensuring that Section 333 project proposals are complete, DOD and other stakeholders may not fully consider important factors that are critical to project success. Thus, DOD risks continued planning gaps that endanger the success of its projects and the prudent use of taxpayer funds. Moreover, without more detailed information in DOD's notifications of Section 333 projects, Congress may not be able to make fully informed policy decisions about U.S. security cooperation.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making six recommendations, including four to DOD and two to State.

The Secretary of Defense should work with the Secretary of State to define and document, such as through a memorandum of understanding, a joint process that specifies when and how State should be involved in the planning of Section 333 projects, including timelines for State's review of concurrence packages. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should establish guidance to support the joint process for planning of Section 333 projects. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State should establish guidance to support the joint process for planning of Section 333 projects. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs, working with the Foreign Service Institute, improves political-military officers' and other relevant staff's access to, and awareness of, training on security cooperation authorities by, for example, encouraging staff to use DOD online training. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of Defense should develop a mechanism for ensuring that Section 333 project proposals include all elements required by DOD guidance. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that DOD's congressional notifications for Section 333 projects include detailed information about

partner nations' absorptive capacity and DOD's planning for capability sustainment. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD and State for review and comment. DOD provided comments that are reproduced in appendix II, and State provided comments that are reproduced in appendix III. In their comments, both DOD and State concurred with our recommendations. State noted that it would develop guidance to support a newly defined joint process for Section 333 planning but said that its staffing resources would be an important consideration in implementing a new process. State also noted that it is updating its Political-Military Affairs training course to reflect DOD's security cooperation authorities. State also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Chelsa Kenney
Director, International Affairs and Trade

List of Committees

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Chairman
The Honorable James Risch
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
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The Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
Chairman
The Honorable Barbara Lee
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Section 333 of title 10 of the U.S. Code (Section 333) authorizes the Department of Defense (DOD) to conduct or support security cooperation programs to build the capacity of foreign countries' national security forces to conduct specific operations. This report (1) identifies changes in the processes DOD has used for planning projects since the establishment of Section 333, (2) examines the extent of the Department of State's involvement in the planning of Section 333 projects, and (3) assesses the extent to which DOD addressed key planning elements in proposals and congressional notifications for selected Section 333 projects in fiscal years 2018 through 2021.

To address these objectives, we reviewed the wording of Section 333 and analyzed DOD's annual guidance for its Section 333 program—spanning from the establishment of Section 333 through the fiscal year 2024 planning cycle—as well as other DOD guidance and policies related to security cooperation programs. Through video conferencing, we discussed the project planning process, State's involvement, and key elements of project planning with officials from DOD; State; DOD's six geographic combatant commands (GCC); and selected U.S. overseas posts in Ecuador, Romania, Senegal, Tajikistan, and Timor-Leste. We selected these countries to reflect a range in the amount of funding DOD has allocated for projects in the countries, the maturity of the United States' security cooperation relationships with the countries, the length of tenure of embassy staff, and the geographic distribution of the countries, among other factors.

To determine the extent of State's involvement in the planning of Section 333 projects, we discussed the Section 333 requirement for joint development and planning of projects with both State and DOD officials. In addition, we determined that Principles 4 and 12 of Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government were significant to this objective.[1] We met with State officials in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs to discuss their role in the Section 333 project planning process, including State's role in providing concurrence. We also met, through

[1]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

video conferencing, with State officials and with DOD Security Cooperation Organization officials at selected overseas posts to discuss their experiences related to Section 333 project planning and implementation and their interaction with DOD officials at GCCs and in Washington, D.C. In addition, we discussed with GCC officials their interactions with State officials during the project planning process. Finally, we discussed DOD and State training related to security sector assistance with officials of both departments and reviewed relevant course materials.

To determine the extent to which DOD addressed key planning elements in project proposals in fiscal years 2018 through 2021, we identified key planning elements and analyzed a selection of project proposals. We determined that Principle 13 of Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government was significant to this objective.[2] We identified the key planning elements by reviewing Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD-23), DOD guidance, and reports on Global Train and Equip projects that we had previously issued.[3] We identified four key elements—objectives addressing partner need, absorptive capacity assessment, sustainment planning, and measurable objectives—as key to the planning process because PPD-23 and DOD guidance identify them as necessary. Additionally, Section 333 requires DOD to include a detailed evaluation of the partner nation's absorptive capacity and the arrangements, if any, for sustainment of the program in its notifications to Congress. Finally, because PPD-23 describes measurable objectives as "integrating assessment, monitoring, and evaluation," we determined that establishing measurable objectives is one element of that integration.

To assess the extent to which DOD addressed these elements in its proposals, we used data for Section 333 projects notified to Congress in fiscal years 2018 through 2021 to select a nongeneralizable sample of 55 projects out of a total of more than 900 projects. We selected the sample to reflect a range in the amount of funding DOD allocated (by project and by partner nation), the geographic location of the partner nation, the

[2]GAO-14-704G.

[3]In 2016 and 2018, we reviewed DOD efforts to build the capacity of its foreign partners to counter terrorism through the Global Train and Equip program. See GAO, *Counterterrorism: DOD Should Fully Address Security Assistance Planning Elements in Global Train and Equip Project Proposals*, GAO-18-449 (Washington, D.C.: May 30, 2018); *Counterterrorism: DOD Should Enhance Management of and Reporting on Its Global Train and Equip Program*, GAO-16-368 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 18, 2016).

nature of the assistance, and the year of notification, among other factors. We obtained and analyzed documentation related to these projects—project proposals, notifications that DOD submitted to Congress, and internal briefing slides containing additional details of some planned projects.[4]

We requested the project proposals associated with each of the 55 selected projects. DOD provided us with 53 of the 55 proposals and told us that the remaining two projects did not have proposals because the President had verbally committed to provide the assistance (i.e., ammunition) to the recipient countries. Given the straightforward nature of the equipment required for these projects as well as a short timeframe for execution, DSCA officials said no proposals were produced or requested. We assessed those projects whose proposals were unclassified and included the provision of equipment, training, small-scale construction, or services or a combination of these things. Of the 53 proposals we received, six were classified and one unclassified proposal was for only the sustainment of a previous project.[5] As a result, we analyzed 46 proposals.

Using information in Section 333 statute, PPD-23, and DOD guidance, we developed a data collection instrument to determine the extent to which each proposal documented consideration of the key elements—fully, partially, or not at all. We assessed each key element as follows to determine the extent to which DOD documented two or more components of that element:

- **Objectives addressing partner need.** We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of a partner nation capability gap and (2) an objective addressing that gap.
- **Sustainment planning.** We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of the partner nation's capacity to sustain the proposed project, (2) the source of sustainment funding, and (3) the estimated cost of sustainment.

[4]Section 333 requires DOD to notify Congress of each project it intends to fund through the authority. See 10 U.S.C. § 333.

[5]We reviewed the six classified project proposals to ensure their exclusion would not materially affect our findings. We found that the completeness of information in these proposals was generally consistent with the completeness of information in the unclassified proposals we reviewed.

- **Absorptive capacity assessment.** We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement regarding DOD's analysis of the partner nation's absorptive capacity, (2) any challenges to the partner nation's ability to absorb the assistance, and (3) suggested solutions for any identified challenges.
- **Measurable objectives.** We assessed the extent to which each proposal included (1) a statement of the metrics for which progress on the proposed project would be measured and (2) an objective written in measurable terms.

We assessed each component for completeness and assessed each element on the basis of our completed analysis of the components, as follows:

- **Fully documented.** We determined that a key element was fully documented if the proposal included all components of the key planning element.
- **Partially documented.** We determined that a key element was partially documented if the proposal included some but not all components of the key planning element. For example, if one component was fully documented but another was not documented at all, we assessed the element as partially documented.
- **Not documented.** We determined that a key element was not documented if the proposal included no documented components of the key planning element.

Each project proposal review consisted of two consecutive reviews. The analyst conducting the first review read the proposal, decided on the extent to which it documented consideration of the key elements, and noted sources and justifications for these decisions. Next, the analyst conducting the second review read the project proposal as well as the first reviewer's decisions and notes and either indicated agreement or proposed different decisions. The first and second reviewers subsequently met to reconcile any differences.

For a nongeneralizable subset of the proposals we reviewed, we examined DOD's congressional notifications and internal briefing slides for those projects to determine whether they contained additional discussion of the key elements. Specifically, we selected 11 projects for which the proposals contained partial or no information about absorptive capacity or addressing absorptive capacity challenges. We also selected 10 projects for which the proposals did not address the estimated cost of sustainment. In addition, we selected two projects for which the proposal

included neither complete information about absorptive capacity nor an estimated cost of sustainment. We therefore reviewed congressional notifications and internal briefing slides for a total of 23 projects. We compared these documents to the original project proposals and compared the information in the congressional notifications to Section 333 legal requirements.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2022 to August 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

UNCLASSIFIED

CUI markings removed and letter cleared for public release per correspondence with DSCA officials.

DEFENSE SECURITY COOPERATION AGENCY
2800 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-2800

AUG 08 2023

Ms. Chelsea Kenney
Director, International Affairs and Trade,
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

SUBJECT: (U) Department of Defense (DoD) Response to the Draft Government Accountability Office Report, "Building Partner Capacity: DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train-and-Equip Projects" (GAO-23-105842)."

Dear Ms. Kenney:

(U) This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report, GAO-23-105842, "Building Partner Capacity: DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train-and-Equip Projects" (GAO-23-105842)" dated August 2023 (GAO Code 105842). DoD acknowledges receipt of GAO's Draft Report, and the Defense Office of Prepublication Security Review (DOPSR) has completed a sensitivity review. The subject draft report does not contain protected DoD information and the Department has cleared it for public release.

(U) DoD appreciates the opportunity to respond to the four recommendations in the Draft Report and provides the responses below.

~~(CUI)~~ **RECOMMENDATION 1:** The Secretary of Defense should work with the Secretary of State to define and document, such as through a memorandum of understanding, a joint process that specifies when and how State should be involved in the planning of Section 333 projects, and timelines for State's review of concurrence packages.

(U) DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs.

~~(CUI)~~ **RECOMMENDATION 2:** The Secretary of Defense should establish guidance to support the joint process for planning of Section 333 projections.

(U) DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs.

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~~(CUI)~~ **RECOMMENDATION 5:** The Secretary of Defense should develop a mechanism for ensuring that Section 333 project proposals include all elements required by DoD guidance.

(U) DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs.

~~(CUI)~~ **RECOMMENDATION 6:** The Secretary of Defense should ensure that DoD's congressional notifications for Section 333 projects include detailed information about partner nations absorptive capacity and DoD's planning for capability sustainment.

(U) DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs.

(U) Please address further questions to the DSCA primary action officer, Ms. Hannah Fitter, at 703-692-1134 or via email at hannah.e.fitter.civ@mail.mil

Sincerely,

James A. Hursch
Director

2
UNCLASSIFIED

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

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2800 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-2800

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AUG 08 2023

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(U) DoD RESPONSE: The Department concurs.

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Sincerely,

James A. Hursch

Director

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State

United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

July 20, 2023

Jason Bair
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Bair:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY: DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train-and-Equip Projects," GAO Job Code 105842.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

William B. Davisson
Acting Comptroller

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Chelsa Kenney
OIG – Norman Brown

Department of State Response to the GAO Draft Report

BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY: *DoD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train-and-Equip Projects*
(GAO-23-105842)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report, *"Building Partner Capacity: DoD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train-and-Equip Projects."*

Thank you also for engaging with the Department of State (State) as the Government Accountability Office prepared this report. As you know, State provided multiple rounds of interviews describing the extent of State's involvement in the planning and provision of Secretary of State concurrence with programs under Section 333 of Title 10 of the U.S. code (section 333).

Overall, State found GAO's analysis compelling and identified only a few factual errors in the report. GAO's key findings were consistent with State's experiences. We agree that State has had inconsistent involvement in jointly developing, planning, and coordinating the implementation of section 333 programs, as required by law, and agree with GAO's analysis that inconsistent involvement can - and had - led to negative consequences. In addition, consistent with the principles of transparency in the 2016 Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act, State recommends making this report publicly accessible in its current form.

GAO made six recommendations in this report, including four to DoD and two to State. While we agree with the analysis in the report, State would like to note slight differences with how GAO characterizes its recommendations for State.

Recommendation 3: The Secretary of State should establish guidance to support the joint process for planning of Section 333 projects.

State Response: State agrees with this recommendation but notes that significantly increased State involvement in the joint planning process will require the commensurate resourcing of additional State personnel given the scope, scale, and complexity of section 333 programs. On average, PM presently has two officers per geographic area who cumulatively manage over $6.5 billion in regular FMF assistance in addition to coordinating with DoD on section 333 and other Title 10 programs. As the lead agency for the formulation and execution of foreign policy, State recognizes the important role Congress intended it to play in joint planning of section 333 programs, which are inherently political endeavors. State looks forward to working closely with our DoD colleagues to define and document a joint process that specifies when and how State can be more intentionally involved in the planning of section 333 programs, particularly concerning initial assessments that, by law, should consider the political, social, economic, diplomatic, and historical factors, if any, of the foreign country that may impact the effectiveness of the program.

Recommendation 4: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs, working with the Foreign Service Institute, improves political-military officers' and other relevant staff's access to, and awareness of, training on security cooperation authorities by, for example, encouraging staff to use DoD online training.

State Response: State agrees that greater opportunities for training and knowledge-sharing between DoD and State on security cooperation authorities can contribute to more robust section 333 proposals and more targeted programs. The PM Bureau is currently updating the content of FSI's Political-Military Affairs course to reflect DoD's security cooperation authorities, which will be further refined after DoD and State have developed a Memorandum of Understanding detailing when and how State should be involved in the section 333 planning process. Further, PM is undertaking a long-term initiative to identify training needs for political-

military officers' both in Washington and the field, match them to existing training opportunities, and potentially develop new training modules where existing opportunities are insufficient. PM is simultaneously coordinating with the Defense Security Cooperation University on its development of curriculum for DoD's security cooperation workforce. DoD should also be encouraged to develop or enroll in program management courses such as those offered at FSI, especially pertaining to project design and evaluation given how GAO identified only less than one-third (13/46) of DoD's proposals included measurable objectives.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State

United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

July 20, 2023

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Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

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William B. Davisson
Acting Comptroller

cc: GAO - Chelsa Kenney
OIG - Norman Brown

Enclosure

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Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Chelsa Kenney, (202) 512-2964; kenneyc@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Kara Marshall (Assistant Director), Jennifer Young (Analyst-in-Charge), Bridget Jackson, Theresa Anderson, Adrienne Bober, Reid Lowe, Neil Doherty, Ashley Alley, and Pamela Davidson made key contributions to this report.

Related GAO Products

Building Partner Capacity: DOD Should Assess Delivery Delays in Train-and-Equip Projects and Improve Evaluations. GAO-23-106275. Washington, D.C.: August 29, 2023.

Counterterrorism: DOD Should Fully Address Security Assistance Planning Elements in Global Train and Equip Project Proposals. GAO-18-449. Washington, D.C.: May 30, 2018.

Counterterrorism: DOD Should Enhance Management of and Reporting on Its Global Train and Equip Program. GAO-16-368. Washington, D.C.: April 18, 2016.

International Security: DOD and State Need to Improve Sustainment Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation for Section 1206 and 1207 Assistance Programs. GAO-10-431. Washington, D.C.: April 15, 2010.

Section 1206 Security Assistance Program—Findings on Criteria, Coordination, and Implementation. GAO-07-416R. Washington, D.C.: February 28, 2007.

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