



April 2024

COUNTER- NARCOTICS

DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has identified illicit drugs, as well as the criminal organizations that produce and traffic them, as significant threats to both the U.S. and partner nations. DOD is the lead department responsible for detecting and monitoring the aerial and maritime transport of illicit drugs to the U.S.

Senate report 117-130 accompanying the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act contains a provision for GAO to examine issues related to counternarcotics and counter-transnational organized crime activities. This report examines (1) funding available for DOD's activities and funding allocation in FYs 2018 through 2022; (2) the extent to which DOD components coordinate activities; and (3) how DOD assessed the effectiveness of these activities, and the extent to which its future assessments align with key practices.

GAO reviewed DOD documents and data about its authorities, funding, and activities, including coordination and performance management. GAO also interviewed DOD officials, including officials at headquarters and combatant commands.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that DOD develops a plan to assess agency-wide progress. DOD partially agreed with all recommendations. GAO maintains that fully implementing them is necessary to improve DOD's coordination and assessment of activities.

View [GAO-24-106281](#). For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov.

COUNTERNARCOTICS

DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities

What GAO Found

The amount of funding available for Department of Defense (DOD) counternarcotics and counter-transnational organized crime activities changed from about \$750 million in fiscal year (FY) 2018 to about \$580 million in FY 2022. In FY 2022, DOD allocated most of the funding to support detection and monitoring activities and allocated the remainder to support intelligence activities and efforts, such as constructing training facilities, in partner nations.

DOD's six geographic combatant commands—DOD components responsible for efforts in designated geographic areas—coordinate on activities. However, three reported varying understandings of their roles in an overlapping joint operation area, including confusion over the management of air and naval operations. Although DOD required the three commands to develop agreements defining their responsibilities, the three commands have not fully documented their roles in the overlapping joint operation area. Without such agreements, confusion about the commands' responsibilities in the area may continue, reducing DOD's ability to disrupt the transport of illicit drugs to the U.S.

Map Showing Overlap of Joint Operation Area



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106281

DOD has not assessed the agency-wide effectiveness of its counternarcotics and counter-transnational organized crime activities and does not have a plan for future assessments. DOD has defined its strategic objectives, strategies, and performance goals. But contrary to key practices, it has not identified measurable outcomes for each strategic objective. As a result, DOD cannot measure progress toward these objectives. Officials also said they intend to assess agency-wide progress but have not developed a plan to do so. Assessing agency-wide progress toward its strategic objectives would better position DOD to make decisions about priorities, resource allocations, and strategies for improvements.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	4
	Funding for DOD's CN/CTOC Activities Changed Over Time and Primarily Supported Detection and Monitoring Activities	10
	Inconsistent Data and Unclear Roles Affect Coordination of CN/CTOC Activities	17
	DOD's Performance Measurement System Does Not Enable It to Fully Assess Effectiveness of CN/CTOC Activities	28
	Conclusions	36
	Recommendations for Executive Action	37
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	37
Appendix I	Primary Authorities Available to DOD for Its CN/CTOC Activities	41
Appendix II	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	42
Appendix III	Comments from the Department of Defense	46
Appendix IV	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	50
Tables		
	Table 1: Strategic Objectives Identified in DOD's 2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks	7
	Table 2: DOD Funding Allocations by Components and Programs, Fiscal Years 2018–2022	11
	Table 3: Strategic Objectives and Strategies Identified in DOD's 2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks	30
	Table 4: Examples of Selected 2023 Performance Measurement Plan Performance Goals	31
	Table 5: Primary Authorities Identified by DOD as Available for Its Counternarcotics (CN) and Counter—Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) Activities	41

Figures

Figure 1: Selected Federal Departments and Components with Counternarcotics (CN) Missions and Activities	5
Figure 2: DOD Geographic Combatant Commands' Areas of Responsibility	8
Figure 3: Percentages of Funding DOD Allocated to Support Detection and Monitoring Activities, Intelligence Activities, and Activities Supporting Partner Nations, Fiscal Year 2022	12
Figure 4: JIATF-S Ship That Supports Partner Nation Interceptors	14
Figure 5: Small-Scale Infrastructure Project DOD Funded in Thailand to Train Partner-Country Forces in Counternarcotics and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Activities	16
Figure 6: Overlap of Joint Interagency Task Force—South's Joint Operation Area with U.S. Southern Command's, U.S. Northern Command's, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Areas of Responsibility	25

Abbreviations

AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
C2IE	Command and Control of the Information Environment
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CN/CTOC	counternarcotics/counter-transnational organized crime
DASD CN&SP	Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
INDOPACOM	U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
JIATF-S	Joint Interagency Task Force-South
JIATF-W	Joint Interagency Task Force-West
JTF-N	Joint Task Force-North
NORTHCOM	U.S. Northern Command
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
SOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command

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April 16, 2024

Congressional Committees

Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show nearly 110,000 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in May 2023—the highest number of deaths ever reported in a 12-month period.¹ Synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, are currently involved in the majority of these deaths.² Moreover, the U.S. government has identified illicit drugs—as well as the transnational criminal organizations that produce and traffic most illicit drugs consumed in this country—as significant threats to both the United States and partner nations.³ Among the federal agencies involved in efforts to reduce the availability of illicit drugs, the Department of Defense (DOD) is the single lead agency responsible for detecting and monitoring their aerial and maritime transport to the United States.

The Senate Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to examine issues related to DOD’s counternarcotics (CN) and counter–transnational organized crime (CTOC) activities.⁴ This report examines (1) funding available for DOD’s CN/CTOC activities, as well as DOD’s allocation of funding in fiscal years 2018 through 2022; (2) the extent to which DOD components coordinate their CN/CTOC activities; and (3) how DOD has assessed the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC activities, as well as the extent to which its

¹According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reported provisional counts for 12-month ending periods are the number of deaths received and processed for the 12-month period ending in the month indicated. Drug overdose deaths are often initially reported with no cause of death (pending investigation) because they require lengthy investigation, including toxicology testing. Reported provisional counts may not include all deaths that occurred during a given time period. Therefore, they should not be considered comparable with final data and are subject to change.

²There were more deaths in 2023 involving synthetic opioids than from any other type of opioid, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Synthetic opioids are highly potent drugs manufactured to mimic naturally occurring opioids such as morphine.

³In this report, as in certain U.S. government documents we reviewed, *drugs* and *narcotics* are used interchangeably to refer to opioids, such as heroin and fentanyl, or to stimulants, such as cocaine.

⁴S. Rept. 117-130 at 235-236 accompanying S. 4543, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (enacted into law as Pub. L. No. 117-263, 136 Stat. 2395 (2022)).

plans for future assessments align with key practices.⁵ The act also includes a provision for us to describe the primary legal authorities available to DOD for its CN/CTOC activities; see appendix I for a list of these authorities.

To obtain information about these issues, we interviewed officials from DOD components and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) regarding DOD authorities, funding, coordination, and performance measurement. We interviewed DOD officials from 17 DOD components, including six geographic combatant commands. We selected these components on the basis of DOD's CN/CTOC priorities.

To determine the amount of funding for DOD's CN/CTOC activities, we reviewed relevant appropriations acts and DOD documents. We reviewed the most recent appropriations acts for fiscal years 2018 through 2022 to identify the amount of funding Congress directed for the CN fund.⁶ In addition, we reviewed the Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities President's Budget for fiscal years 2020 through 2024 to identify the amount of funding DOD allocated to its components. To assess the reliability of the allocations data, we conducted several validity checks and interviewed DOD officials. We found the data related to the amounts DOD allocated to its components to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objective. In addition, we identified legal authorities available to DOD for CN/CTOC activities and confirmed with DOD officials the primary authorities they use. For a full list of these authorities, see appendix I.

To examine the extent to which DOD components coordinate their CN/CTOC activities, we interviewed DOD officials about how, and with which entities, they coordinate and the successes and challenges they

⁵In this report, *DOD components* refers to the combatant commands, military departments, and defense intelligence agencies that implement counternarcotics activities. *Combatant commands* refers to the functional and geographic combatant commands. *Geographic combatant commands* refers to the geographic combatant commands and their respective task forces.

⁶Congress appropriates these funds through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation, which includes directed spending amounts for four budget activities. Our review focuses on the Counter-Narcotics Support budget activity, which we refer to as the counternarcotics (CN) fund. The additional three budget activities include the (1) Drug Demand Reduction Program, (2) National Guard Counter-Drug Program, and (3) National Guard Counter-Drug Schools Program. For a review of the National Guard Counterdrug and Schools Programs, see GAO, *Drug Control: DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the National Guard Counterdrug Program*, [GAO-19-27](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2019).

have experienced. Furthermore, we interviewed DOD officials to discuss the data systems they use to facilitate coordination. We determined that an internal control principle related to using quality information for effective monitoring was significant to this objective.⁷ We also reviewed documents DOD components provided to us, such as memorandums of agreement between combatant commands and between combatant commands and law enforcement agencies. We evaluated DOD components' coordination against selected leading practices we have previously identified, such as enhancing interagency collaboration and coordination,⁸ and against a DOD requirement to develop agreements between combatant commands.⁹

To examine how DOD has assessed the effectiveness of its activities, we reviewed information about performance metrics DOD has used in the past and its plans to assess its activities under a 2023 Performance Measurement Plan in the future. We evaluated DOD's strategic objectives and performance goals against selected key practices we have previously identified to help agencies assess the results of their efforts.¹⁰ See appendix II for a full description of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2022 to April 2024 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.

⁷GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

⁸GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

⁹Department of Defense, *Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) Area Responsibilities Memorandum* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 21, 2003).

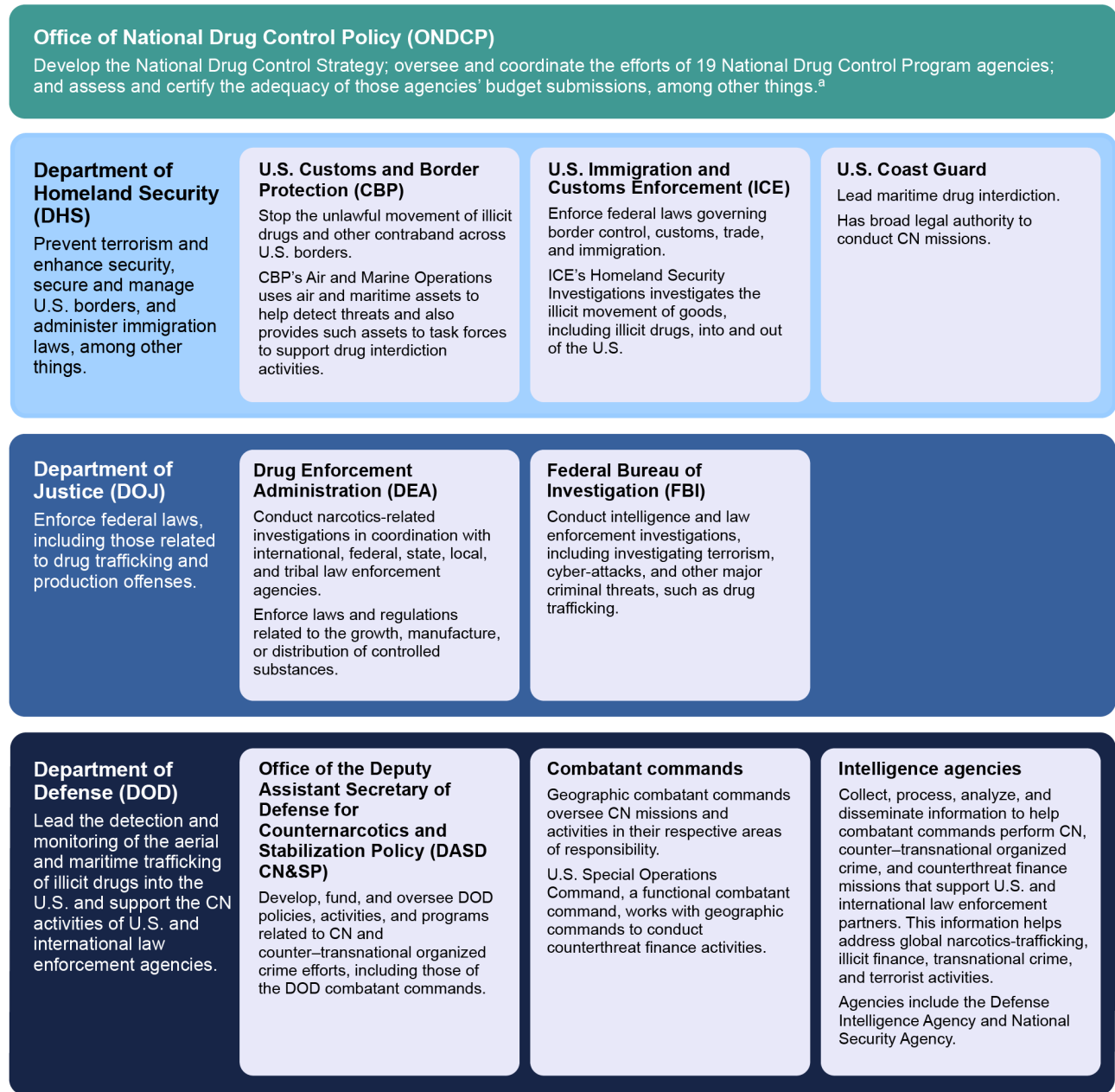
¹⁰GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2023).

Background

Federal Agencies' Roles in CN Missions and Activities

Multiple federal departments and components have CN missions and implement activities to combat the flow of illicit drugs into the United States (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Selected Federal Departments and Components with Counternarcotics (CN) Missions and Activities



Source: GAO summary of information provided by the entities listed. | GAO-24-106281

^aONDCP is a component of the Executive Office of the President. In addition to the entities shown, ONDCP also coordinates with the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, and Treasury on CN activities. For example, Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control implements economic and trade sanctions programs against targeted foreign countries and regimes; terrorists; international

narcotics traffickers; proliferators of weapons of mass destruction; and other entities that threaten national security, foreign policy, or the U.S. economy.

DOD's Strategic Approach for CN/CTOC Activities

Since 1989, the Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation has been the principal means used to finance DOD's CN activities, according to DOD documents.¹¹ From this appropriation, DOD uses the CN fund to implement CN activities as well as CTOC activities related to narcotics trafficking. The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy (DASD CN&SP) allocates the funding among DOD's components.

In 2019, DOD published the *Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks* (2019 Framework) to provide guidance to DOD components for implementing its policies, plans, and programs to counter illicit drug trafficking and illicit networks. According to the 2019 Framework, DOD's vision is to help disrupt and degrade drug trafficking and other illicit threat networks to a level that allows law enforcement agencies, local and regional security forces, or other elements of national power to manage the threat. The 2019 Framework identifies three strategic objectives to help achieve this vision (see table 1).¹²

¹¹Congress appropriates funds for these activities through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation, which includes directed spending amounts for four budget activities. Our review focuses on the Counter-Narcotics Support budget activity, which we refer to as the counternarcotics (CN) fund. The additional three budget activities include the (1) Drug Demand Reduction Program, (2) National Guard Counter-Drug Program, and (3) National Guard Counter-Drug Schools Program. For a review of the National Guard Counterdrug and Schools Programs, see GAO, *Drug Control: DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the National Guard Counterdrug Program*, [GAO-19-27](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2019).

¹²DOD's 2019 Framework refers to objectives, which we identify as strategic objectives for the purposes of this report. DASD CN&SP officials confirmed that the objectives in the 2019 Framework are DASD CN&SP's strategic objectives.

Table 1: Strategic Objectives Identified in DOD’s 2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks

Strategic objective	Definition
Disrupt and degrade threat networks	Illicit threat networks lose the capacity to conduct sustained operations or activities.
Reduce drug trafficking and criminal activity	Fewer illicit drugs enter U.S. markets, and other forms of transnational criminal activity decline.
Strengthen partners	U.S. and international partners strengthen their combined efforts to combat drug trafficking and other illicit threat networks.

Source: Department of Defense (DOD). | GAO-24-106281

The 2019 Framework also lists eight priorities for DOD’s CN/CTOC activities. The following are the top three priorities:

1. Disrupt and degrade the flow of heroin, fentanyl, and amphetamine-type stimulants, chiefly from Mexico, focusing on the cartels that traffic them.
2. Support interagency partners in stopping the flow of fentanyl from China and elsewhere into the United States, Mexico, and Central America, and degrade the unlawful diversion and smuggling of precursor chemicals from Asia to the Western Hemisphere.
3. Build Colombia and Peru’s capacities to detect and interdict illicit trafficking, including drugs, precursor chemicals, and profits.

DOD Components Involved in CN/CTOC Activities

Generally, DOD implements CN/CTOC activities through its combatant commands, military departments, and defense intelligence agencies. According to DOD, these components provide assets—for example, aircraft, patrol ships, and military personnel—as well as intelligence analysis and other assistance to support U.S. law enforcement agencies and foreign security forces in countering narcotics trafficking.

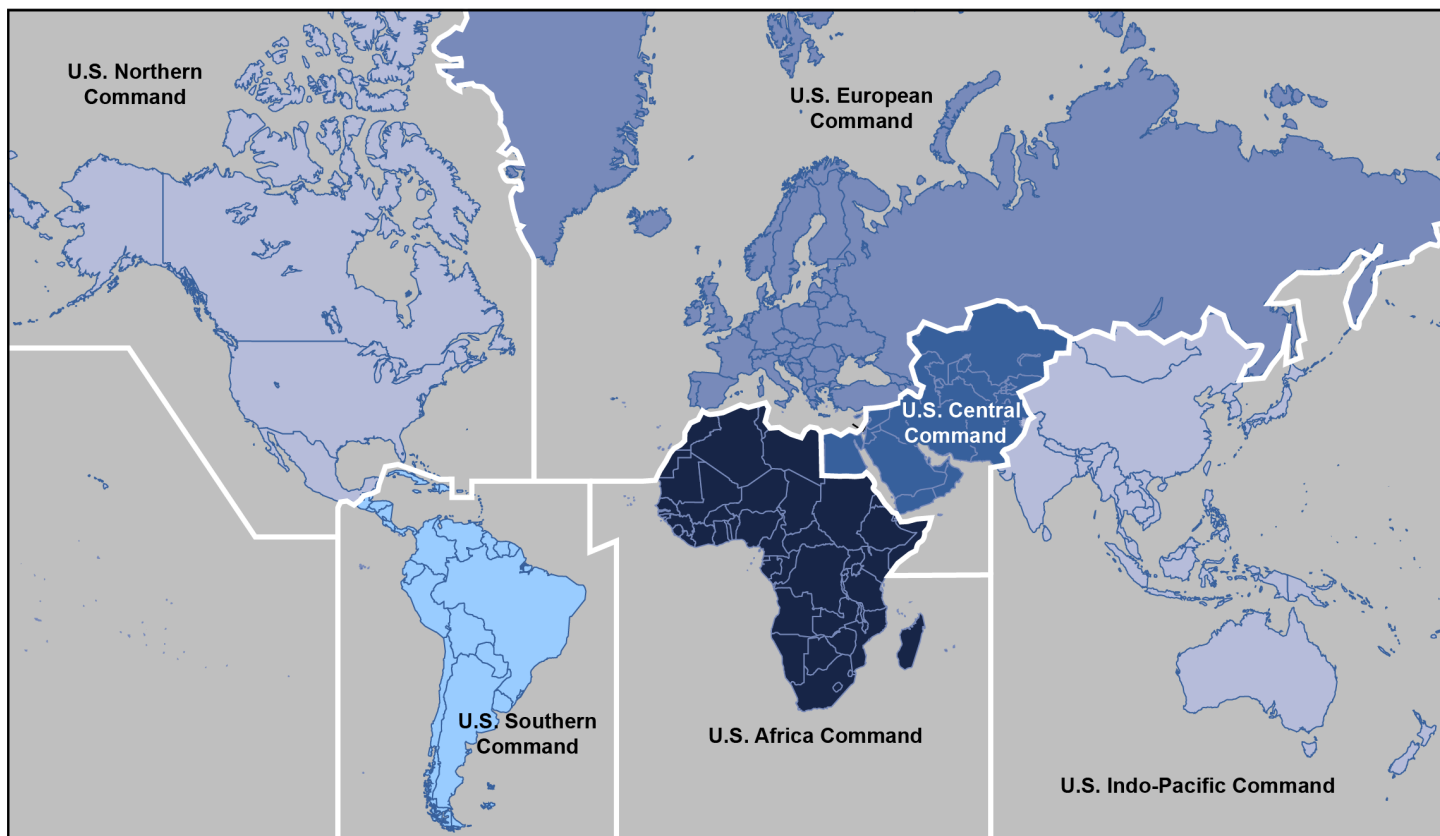
DOD guidance outlines these components’ responsibilities.¹³ For example, the guidance states that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is responsible for developing CN/CTOC doctrine and for implementing, in consultation with combatant commands and DASD CN&SP, guidance that establishes responsibilities and procedures to coordinate CN/CTOC activities.

¹³Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Instruction 3000.14: DoD Counterdrug and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 28, 2020).

According to the guidance, DOD’s combatant commands plan and execute CN/CTOC activities and oversee funding allocated by DASD CN&SP. U.S. Special Operations Command, a functional combatant command, reviews, approves, and conducts CN/CTOC activities—specifically, counterthreat finance activities—to support geographic combatant commands and federal agencies. The guidance states that another functional combatant command, U.S. Transportation Command, reviews and approves the use of DOD equipment to move personnel and cargo for DOD and other federal agencies.

DOD’s six geographic combatant commands plan and execute CN/CTOC activities, such as small-scale infrastructure projects, on behalf of DOD within their respective areas of responsibility (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: DOD Geographic Combatant Commands’ Areas of Responsibility



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106281

Three of DOD's geographic combatant commands also have task forces. In 1989, DOD created several task forces, which aimed to connect the military's CN/CTOC efforts with those of civilian, federal law enforcement agencies. These task forces have since evolved and eventually developed into the following:

- Joint Interagency Task Force–South (JIATF-S), under the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM);
- Joint Interagency Task Force–West (JIATF-W), under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM); and
- Joint Task Force–North (JTF-N), under the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM).

JIATF-S and JIATF-W comprise representatives from several federal agencies and support primarily maritime and aerial activities conducted by both military and law enforcement entities. In contrast, JTF-N consists solely of DOD personnel and does not generally operate in the maritime domain. JIATF-S and JIATF-W include representatives from DOD, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of Justice (DOJ).

Coast Guard admirals currently serve as the Directors of both JIATF-S and JIATF-W. Task force officials stated that the Coast Guard, which is both a military and a law enforcement agency, encourages participation from both DOD and DHS. Previously, DOD service components led JIATF-S, but DOD is statutorily precluded from taking law enforcement actions, such as interdiction, in counternarcotics efforts.¹⁴ The deputy and vice leadership positions at the JIATFs are held by officers and civilians from DOD, DHS, and DOJ components, which allows the task forces to leverage various experiences and authorities across the components, according to task force officials.

¹⁴See 18 U.S.C. § 1385 and 10 U.S.C. § 275.

Funding for DOD's CN/CTOC Activities Changed Over Time and Primarily Supported Detection and Monitoring Activities

CN/CTOC Funding and Activities Changed Over Time

The amount directed to the CN fund changed from about \$750 million in fiscal year 2018 to about \$580 million in fiscal year 2022. According to DOD officials, the funding levels changed in part because of changes in the authorized activities. For example, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 shifted DOD's authority to train and equip partner nations from the CN fund activities overseen by DASD CN&SP to the security cooperation program overseen by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency.¹⁵ In addition, Congress stopped providing additional funding designated for Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terrorism to the Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation beginning in fiscal year 2021.

DOD Allocated Half of Its Funding to U.S. Southern Command

In fiscal years 2018 through 2022, DASD CN&SP allocated over \$3 billion for CN/CTOC activities from the CN fund. DASD CN&SP allocated half of this funding—around \$1.5 billion—to SOUTHCOM. According to DOD data, the majority of SOUTHCOM's allocation in fiscal years 2018 through 2022 supported JIATF-S's operations and equipment, such as a radar system, aircrafts, and a ship, that JIATF-S officials use to implement narcotics detection and monitoring efforts. For example, in fiscal year 2022, SOUTHCOM allocated \$68 million for a multidomain radar system,

¹⁵Section 1241 of Pub. L. No. 114-328, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, established a consolidated building partner capacity authority codified at 10 U.S.C. § 333 that authorizes train and equip programs, including those that focus on counter-illicit drug trafficking and counter-TOC operations. That provision included a requirement that these programs be funded from DOD's Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide account and be made available to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. See 10 U.S.C. § 333(g). We did not include these funds in our review. For recent reviews of the building partner capacity programs, see 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); and *Building Partner Capacity: DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train and Equip Projects*, [GAO-23-105842](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2023).

\$56 million for a maritime patrol aircraft, and \$23 million for a ship to assist partner nations' interdiction efforts. The data also show that SOUTHCOM was the only component that received allocations from the CN fund for such equipment. SOUTHCOM officials explained that they have received support for this equipment since JIATF-S was established in 1989 as part of the anti-drug enforcement policy to disrupt cocaine and marijuana trafficking in the Caribbean.

Table 2 shows DOD allocations for components' and programs' CN/CTOC activities in fiscal years 2018 through 2022.

Table 2: DOD Funding Allocations by Components and Programs, Fiscal Years 2018–2022

Allocations in millions of dollars

DOD component or program	Allocated amounts					Total	Percentage of all allocations
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022		
U.S. Southern Command	289	307	323	328	305	1,552	50
Enterprise-wide intelligence programs	60	55	84	88	110	397	13
U.S. Central Command	160	57	73	31	20	341	11
U.S. Northern Command	35	52	69	46	86	288	9
Other ^a	135	14	13	8	10	180	6
National Guard ^b	20	30	19	19	19	107	4
U.S. Indo-Pacific Command	21	27	22	20	15	105	3
U.S. Africa Command	8	15	13	8	4	48	2
U.S. Special Operations Command	8	8	9	9	7	41	1
U.S. European Command	5	6	9	10	4	34	1
U.S. Transportation Command	3	.5	.3	0	0	4	0
Total	744	572	634	567	580	3,097	100

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106281

Notes: The data shown reflect DOD allocations of the funding Congress directed for DOD's Counter-Narcotics Support budget activity, which we refer to as the counternarcotics (CN) fund. We rounded the data to calculate the totals shown. Congress appropriates these funds through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation. Amounts in the appropriation designated for Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terrorism were not directed to a specific budget activity but were allocated by DOD to the CN fund.

The data shown do not include additional funding U.S. Northern Command received in fiscal years 2019 and 2020. According to DOD documentation, U.S. Northern Command received \$2.5 billion in fiscal year 2019 and \$3.8 billion in fiscal year 2020 from DOD transfers to the CN fund, pursuant to authority set forth at 10 U.S.C. § 284(b)(7), for barrier construction to block narcotics smuggling corridors along the U.S. southern border. In 2019, we released a legal opinion concluding that the use of these amounts for the border fence construction was permissible under various statutory provisions. See GAO, Department of Defense—Availability of Appropriations for Border Fence Construction, [B-330862](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 5, 2019).

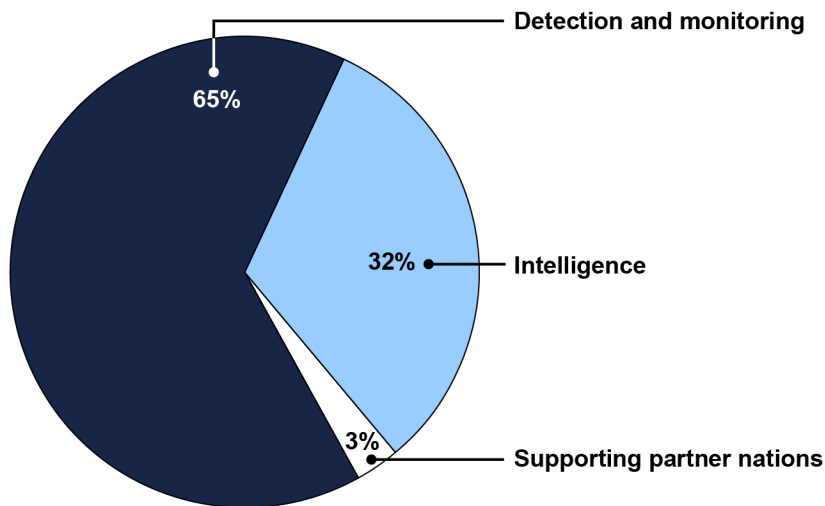
^aOther includes funding allocated to the military services, such as the Department of the Navy, and to the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

^bDOD provided support from the CN fund to the National Guard for its general operations in headquarters and for its language translation, transcription, and analysis center. Through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation, Congress directs additional funding to the National Guard that is not included in this table. This includes funding for the National Guard Counter-Drug Program and Counter-Drug Schools Program.

Most DOD Funding Supported Detection and Monitoring Activities

DOD implements various CN/CTOC activities focused on detecting and monitoring illicit drugs; collecting, processing, analyzing, and disseminating intelligence; and supporting partner nations.¹⁶ In fiscal year 2022, DOD allocated the largest percentage of CN funds to support detection and monitoring activities, such as programs to detect and monitor the aerial and maritime transit of illegal narcotics toward the United States. DOD also allocated funding to support intelligence activities as well as activities, such as small-scale construction, in partner nations. Figure 3 shows the percentages of funding that DOD allocated for activities in these three categories in fiscal year 2022.

Figure 3: Percentages of Funding DOD Allocated to Support Detection and Monitoring Activities, Intelligence Activities, and Activities Supporting Partner Nations, Fiscal Year 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106281

Notes: The data shown reflect DOD allocations of the funding Congress appropriated for DOD's Counter-Narcotics Support budget activity, which we refer to as the counternarcotics (CN) fund. Through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation, Congress directs spending for three other budget activities that are not included in our review: (1) the Drug Demand Reduction Program, (2) the National Guard Counter-Drug Program, and (3) the National Guard Counter-Drug Schools Program.

¹⁶See appendix I for a list of the primary authorities DOD reported using to implement CN/CTOC activities.

DOD's detection and monitoring activities focus on the aerial and maritime transit of illegal narcotics toward the United States. DOD's intelligence activities include technology and programs used to collect, process, analyze, and disseminate strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence and information to help support interdiction operations conducted by U.S. and partner nation law enforcement agencies. DOD's activities supporting partner nations include small-scale infrastructure projects that DOD works with U.S. law enforcement agencies to build in those nations.

Detection and monitoring activities. DOD conducts detection and monitoring activities to support interdiction operations of U.S. and partner nation law enforcement agencies.¹⁷ Funding supports logistics and base operations for maritime patrol, reconnaissance, and aircraft as well as the maintenance of DOD-owned maritime patrol aircraft and multimission support vessels.

According to officials, JIATF-S implements most of these activities to assist U.S. and partner nations' law enforcement agencies in interdicting cocaine trafficking. For example, JIATF-S maintains a ship that embarks and refuels partner nations' interceptor vessels (see fig. 4). The ship helps extend the operational reach and endurance of the vessels and allows them to complete interdictions in deeper waters. The ship also allows partner nation interceptor crews to rest, obtain food and water, and complete mission planning.

¹⁷10 U.S.C. § 124 designates DOD "as the single lead agency of the federal government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States."

Figure 4: JIATF-S Ship That Supports Partner Nation Interceptors



Joint Interagency Task Force–South’s (JIATF-S) ship embarking partner nations’ interceptor vessels.



Area on the ship where partner nation interceptor crews complete mission planning and rest.



Source: Department of Defense (photos). | GAO-24-106281

Intelligence activities. DOD’s intelligence activities include personnel, technology, and programs used to collect, process, analyze, and disseminate strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence and information required for combatant command and interagency CN/CTOC operations and activities. DOD shares the technology and intelligence

with U.S. and partner nation law enforcement agencies to assist their investigation and interdiction operations.¹⁸

Some DOD components have established groups to facilitate the sharing of intelligence they gather. For example, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) established the Regional Narcotics Interagency Fusion Cell, comprising DOD and law enforcement agency officials who analyze and share military and law enforcement information to support CN/CTOC activities in Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. This group partners with other DOD components, such as U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), and with partner nations to coordinate and collaborate on intelligence information.

DOD components also implement counterthreat finance activities to deny, disrupt, destroy, or defeat the generation, storage, movement, and use of assets to fund activities supporting an adversary's ability to negatively affect U.S. interests. According to DOD officials, they coordinate efforts with U.S. law enforcement agencies to assist them in reducing the supply of illicit substances through targeted law enforcement actions. They also help U.S. law enforcement agencies commercially disrupt criminal organizations by undermining the illicit finance networks that make drug trafficking both possible and profitable.

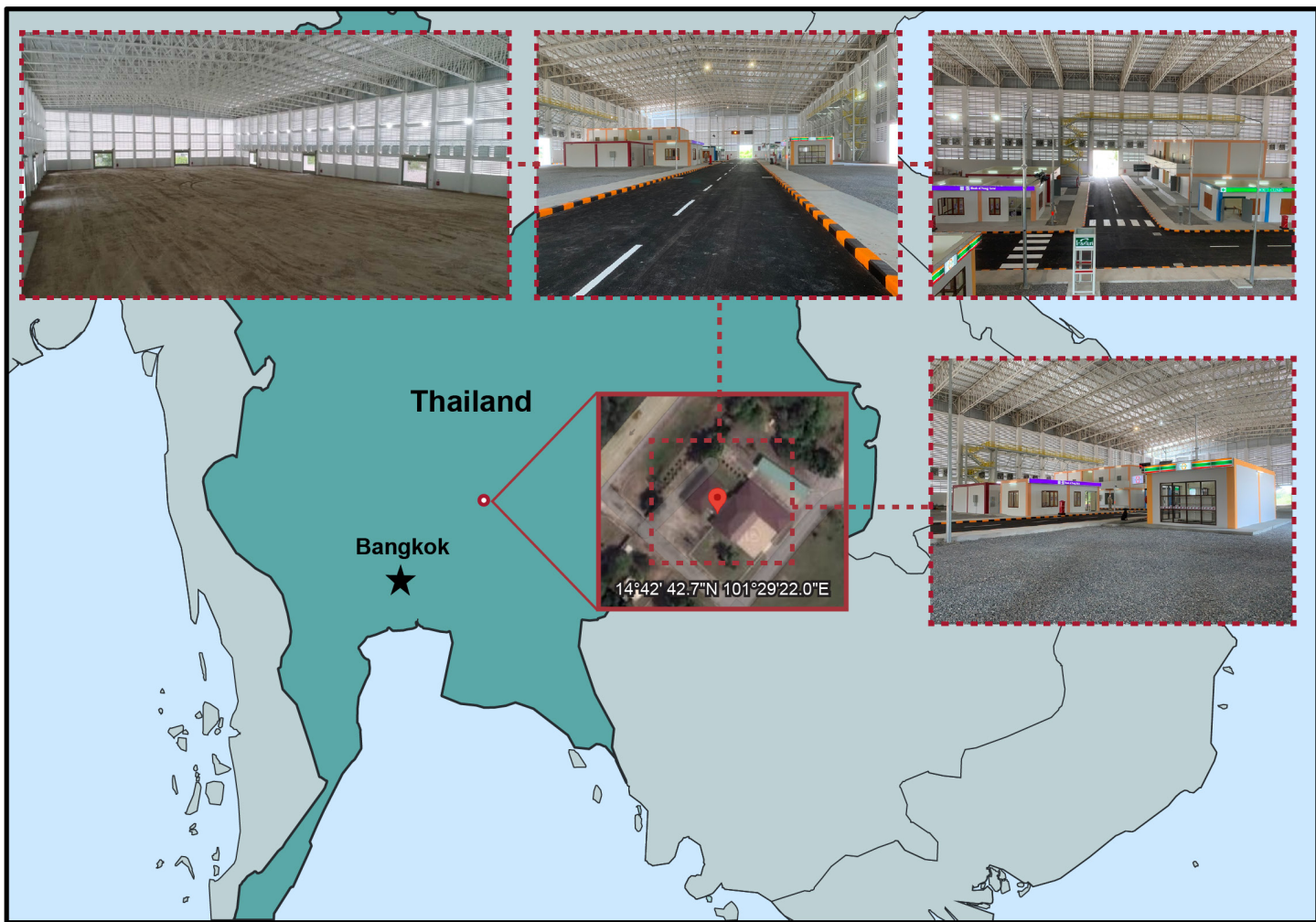
Activities in partner nations. DOD supports CN/CTOC activities that the geographic combatant commands implement in partner nations, such as activities to disrupt the cultivation and transportation of illicit drugs. According to officials, they also support small-scale infrastructure projects that they work with U.S. law enforcement to build in partner nations.¹⁹ Officials from JIATF-W said that in fiscal year 2018, they worked with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement to implement a small-

¹⁸According to officials, DOD implements these activities under 10 U.S.C. § 284, which authorizes it to support CN/CTOC activities of any other department or agency of the federal government or of any state, local, tribal, or foreign law enforcement agency. Specifically, 10 U.S.C. § 284(b)(9) authorizes DOD to provide linguistic and intelligence analysis services.

¹⁹According to officials, DOD implements these activities under 10 U.S.C. § 284(c), which authorizes DOD to support foreign law enforcement agencies, including to establish small-scale construction to facilitate CN/CTOC activities of a foreign law enforcement agency outside of the United States.

scale construction project in Thailand to train partner nations in CN/CTOC activities (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: Small-Scale Infrastructure Project DOD Funded in Thailand to Train Partner-Country Forces in Counternarcotics and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Activities



Sources: Department of Defense (DOD) (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106281

Note: The photos show an indoor mock village used to train multiple partner-country forces in Thailand.

Inconsistent Data and Unclear Roles Affect Coordination of CN/CTOC Activities

Combatant Commands Use Various Means to Coordinate Their Activities with Each Other and non-DOD Entities

Prevalence of Synthetic Drug Trafficking Varies in Combatant Commands' Areas of Responsibility

Although DOD components recognize addressing the trafficking of synthetic drugs as a high priority, the prevalence of such trafficking in their areas of responsibility varies. According to DOD officials, synthetic drugs, especially fentanyl and methamphetamine, are prevalent in U.S. Northern Command's and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's areas of responsibility, because transnational criminal organizations purchase precursor chemicals from China and manufacture fentanyl in Mexico for its distribution.

Officials of U.S. Africa Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) said that fentanyl is not common in their areas of responsibility but methamphetamines are a concern. CENTCOM officials stated that Captagon is also a major concern for them. (Captagon is a trademark name for fenethylamine, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant.)

Source: Interviews with Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-24-106281

DOD components coordinate their CN/CTOC activities with each other and with non-DOD entities, such as U.S. law enforcement agencies, as well as with foreign partners, according to documents and DOD officials we interviewed.

Coordination among combatant commands. To coordinate their CN/CTOC activities, combatant commands share intelligence with one another, attend working groups and conferences, and colocate representatives in shared spaces, according to officials. Geographic combatant command officials told us that they share information with other geographic combatant commands when it is relevant to their areas of responsibility. For example, officials said that JIATF-W shares intelligence on precursor chemicals with NORTHCOM and JIATF-S, because precursor chemicals often pass from Asia to North America.

According to DOD documentation, combatant commands also participate in coordination meetings, including working groups focused on cartels; on heroin and fentanyl; and on integrating detection, monitoring, and law enforcement with interdiction efforts. The combatant commands also have participated in each other's yearly program management reviews, where they hear about CN/CTOC activities that other combatant commands have implemented.²⁰ In addition, JIATF-S, JIATF-W, and JTF-N maintain representatives in the Information Analysis Center, which focuses on interdiction and intelligence activities, at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City.²¹ Further, officials of U.S. European Command and AFRICOM, which are headquartered in the same city in Germany, participate in each other's meetings and share information.

²⁰Program management reviews are an annual forum for combatant commands to discuss prior performance and upcoming programs, according to combatant command officials. DASD CN&SP also uses program management reviews to conduct performance reviews and plans to use them to discuss the commands' performance metrics.

²¹The Information Analysis Center, managed by JTF-N, works with JTF-N's mission partners in Mexico to counter transnational criminal organizations, assisting with narcotics interdictions.

Combatant commands also use a variety of data systems to communicate with each other and with outside entities. For example, DASD CN&SP developed and initiated a CN/CTOC module in DOD's knowledge management database, known as Command and Control of the Information Environment (C2IE). DASD CN&SP developed the CN/CTOC module to serve as a program of record for combatant commands' activities and to facilitate coordination.

Coordination with U.S. law enforcement agencies. Combatant commands provide intelligence analysis services to U.S. law enforcement entities to support their counternarcotics operations, according to officials.²² For example, JIATF-W officials described flagging suspicious shipments from Asia to Mexico for U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials and Drug Enforcement Administration officials to review when the shipments arrive at port. Officials of both U.S. European Command and JTF-N stated that they provide support to law enforcement agencies that request information, analyzing intelligence to help the agencies build cases and target criminal networks. NORTHCOM officials stated that they focus on supporting law enforcement agencies' CTOC activities.

Combatant command officials also said they coordinate with U.S. law enforcement by hosting liaison officers from law enforcement agencies.²³ For example, liaison officers from DOJ and DHS are colocated in AFRICOM headquarters, according to memorandums of understanding between AFRICOM and these agencies. CENTCOM documentation shows that CENTCOM and AFRICOM officials participate in the DOD-funded Regional Narcotics Interagency Fusion Cell, which hosts representatives from the Drug Enforcement Administration and Homeland Security Investigations.

JIATF-S supports law enforcement by performing detection and monitoring activities, tracking alerts of potential narcotics shipments, and targeting the shipments for law enforcement interdiction. JIATF-S documentation shows that it also maintains tactical analysis teams in 15

²²A Joint Chiefs of Staff 2019 Joint Publication establishes joint doctrine to govern the activities of DOD components when conducting counterdrug operations. The publication states that DOD supports federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in their efforts to disrupt illicit drug trafficking. See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Counterdrug Operations*, JP 3-07.4 (Washington, D.C.: 2019).

²³Combatant commands work with DHS's Homeland Security Investigations and DOJ's Drug Enforcement Administration and Federal Bureau of Investigation. Some combatant commands also work with DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

countries to enable information sharing with U.S. law enforcement officials embedded in those countries.

Coordination with foreign partners. Officials of combatant commands coordinate with foreign partners regarding intelligence and interdiction, according to officials and documents. For example:

- JIATF-S coordinates operations with foreign partners, some of which provide physical assets for interdiction. Also, JIATF-S documentation states that JIATF-S contracts a ship that offers docking capabilities for smaller interceptor vessels manned by foreign partners, which increases the vessels' operational range.
- NORTHCOM and JTF-N officials stated that they coordinate with Mexican law enforcement agencies, such as by providing time-sensitive information, to help them counter transnational criminal organizations and interdict illicit drugs.
- SOUTHCOM officials said they are working with Colombian government officials to help the government develop counterthreat finance capabilities.
- CENTCOM officials reported coordinating with the Combined Maritime Forces—which comprises forces from 38 nations—to conduct boardings, searches, and seizures of vessels in the Indian Ocean.²⁴

In July 2019, we reported that JIATF-S and JIATF-W used mechanisms such as working groups and liaison officers to enhance counternarcotics efforts and avoid duplication of missions and activities.²⁵ We also reported that task force officials had described their coordination efforts as effective and had expressed overall satisfaction with the level of coordination.

Combatant command officials we interviewed in 2023 spoke positively about their coordination with other combatant commands and with entities outside DOD, citing the benefits of collaboration and the complementary

²⁴The Combined Maritime Forces is a multinational maritime partnership, headquartered in Bahrain, that was developed to counter illicit nonstate actors on the high seas. Its main focus areas include counternarcotics and countersmuggling.

²⁵GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2019).

nature of their work. Officials also described the following challenges to coordination as well as steps they have taken to address them:

- According to DOD components, they support multiple federal agencies and have observed that there is no lead agency that coordinates all federal agencies on counternarcotics activities at the tactical and operational level. Although ONDCP is responsible for the implementation of the National Drug Control Strategy, DOD officials stated that coordination between federal agencies at the tactical and operational level depends on each agency's policy, leadership, or officials. ONDCP accomplishes its responsibilities through methods such as an interdiction committee that includes combatant command members, public health and national security working groups, and interagency policy committees focused on drug policy and national security. However, according to ONDCP officials, the extent to which ONDCP's strategy's goals and objectives inform other agencies' priorities depends on each agency.²⁶ Combatant command officials told us that they have worked to build ongoing relationships with their partner agencies to facilitate coordination.
- Law enforcement agencies sometimes hesitate to share sensitive information with combatant commands, according to combatant command officials. Officials noted that when coordinating with U.S. law enforcement agencies, DOD components have a supporting role and therefore follow the law enforcement agencies' information-sharing requirements. The officials attributed law enforcement agencies' hesitation to share information to their desire to protect their sources as well as concern that sharing information might negatively affect their cases against individuals and groups suspected of trafficking drugs. DOD officials stated that as a result, they are sometimes restricted from sharing information with each other. The officials said they have worked to address this challenge by embedding U.S. law enforcement liaison officers at the combatant commands, embedding DOD analysts at U.S. law enforcement agencies, and building relationships with these agencies to establish trust.

²⁶GAO's 2023 High-Risk Series report identifies the national effort to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse as a high-risk issue. The report also highlights the importance to coordinate issues related to this effort across all levels of the federal government. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 2023). In addition, ONDCP's 2022 Strategy highlights the need to strengthen this coordination. See Office of National Drug Control Policy, *2022 National Drug Control Strategy*.

Combatant Commands' Data Inputs for Activities Are Not Consistent

DOD officials reported that officials from combatant commands enter inconsistent data in C2IE, DASD CN&SP's main data system for sharing information on CN/CTOC activities, which sometimes complicates efforts to use the system for coordination. C2IE is a DOD-wide system described by officials as a program of record. In 2022, DASD CN&SP officials told us that they used CN funds to develop and implement a counternarcotics-specific module in C2IE with the intention of improving coordination and information sharing among components.

C2IE allows components to report on their CN/CTOC activities. They are required to input certain information about the activities, such as the authorities they used, the law enforcement agencies they supported, and details of the activities completed. The system has a "deconfliction tab" that allows users to view other activities or incidents that occurred in the same country, met the same reporting requirement, or were within a certain time period or geographical distance. Before C2IE was established, each combatant command had its own documentation system; however, all commands now use C2IE to record their activities, according to officials. Officials added that C2IE is a cost-effective way to increase transparency and information sharing across DOD. We have reported that leveraging resources and information, such as through web portals like C2IE, is a leading practice to enhance interagency collaboration.²⁷

DASD CN&SP officials told us that they also use information from C2IE to develop required quarterly reports about their CN/CTOC activities for Congress.²⁸ C2IE also facilitates DASD CN&SP officials' ability to respond quickly to various requests for information from Congress and other federal agencies. For example, in response to a National Security Council request for information about DOD's activities related to fentanyl, DASD CN&SP officials used C2IE to develop an agency-wide report on that topic. DASD CN&SP officials reported that as of August 2023, the CN module in C2IE had approximately 3,800 data entries made by about 400 users.

²⁷[GAO-23-105520](#).

²⁸DOD is required to provide, on a quarterly basis, a report to Congress regarding the activities it implements using the authority set forth at 10 U.S.C. § 284(b) to conduct counterdrug activities and activities to counter-transnational organized crime in support of any other department or agency of the federal government or of any state, local, tribal, or foreign law enforcement agency. 10 U.S.C. § 284(h)(3).

DASD CN&SP officials stated that they continue to make changes to the system through working groups and have provided training materials to combatant commands. Currently, C2IE is available only through DOD's secure network. According to officials, DASD CN&SP plans to expand C2IE to include additional CN/CTOC activities they conduct, such as small-scale construction projects. DASD CN&SP also plans to incorporate data from other systems used by DOD components. Further, according to the officials, they are considering tracking performance measurement metrics in C2IE.

DASD CN&SP's standard operating procedures for C2IE state that one of its goals is to improve transparency and effectiveness. The procedures also state that use of C2IE allows for increased visibility into DOD components' operations, activities, and investments, leading to increased information sharing and collaboration.²⁹ However, combatant command officials reported a lack of consistent data entry as a challenge associated with C2IE, noting that this complicates efforts to facilitate coordination of CN/CTOC activities. For example, an official at one combatant command stated that combatant commands' categorization of threats varies. Officials at another combatant command stated that data inputs are not uniform across combatant commands or within their own command, which complicates their efforts to provide a common operating picture of their activities.

DASD CN&SP officials also identified a lack of consistent reporting in C2IE by DOD components as a challenge, despite mechanisms, such as drop-down menus, intended to minimize inconsistencies. According to the officials, the validity of data in the system depends on the consistency of both the information entered and the data provided by interagency partners. The officials said that they had found and corrected inconsistencies in C2IE data that they use for the reports to Congress—for example, citations of incorrect authorities, entry of an incorrect descriptor or area of responsibility, or entry of a dollar amount when such data were not required. Given these challenges, combatant command officials said that C2IE is not helpful to deconflict and coordinate with other combatant commands and that they prefer to contact officials in other combatant commands directly because it is more reliable than the information in C2IE. However, according to officials, frequent turnover within DOD components, as military personnel rotate through positions,

²⁹Department of Defense, *C2IE SOP & Business Rules: CN & CTF Activity Manager*.

complicates the consistency in C2IE data and the ability to contact officials for coordination.

Although DOD staff review the quality of C2IE data, DASD CN&SP's standard operating procedures for C2IE do not specifically address the need for data consistency or assign responsibility for verifying the data to ensure consistency. DASD CN&SP's standard operating procedures for C2IE describe, and provide examples of, the types of data to be entered in each field and identify best practices for data entry.³⁰ The procedures also state that each component is responsible for ensuring that the information it enters in C2IE is thorough and accurate. In addition, the procedures state that a Knowledge and Information Management Cell representative, who supports DASD CN&SP, should review the data for anomalies, missing fields, and general quality control. However, the procedures do not specify what constitutes quality control, such as accuracy and consistency, and do not assign responsibility for verifying that the information the combatant command officials enter is accurate and consistent.

According to standards for internal control in the federal government, effective internal control systems have certain attributes, including reliable internal and external sources that provide data that are reasonably free from error and bias.³¹ These standards also state that management makes revisions when necessary so that the information is quality information.

Providing guidance that specifies the measures of quality that the Knowledge and Information Management Cell representative should review, such as measures addressing the need for data accuracy and consistency, and that assigns responsibility for verifying the data's accuracy and consistency would strengthen DASD CN&SP's ability to confirm that these data are entered accurately and consistently across combatant commands. This would also increase confidence in the data it reports to Congress and other federal agencies and could encourage combatant commands to use the system for coordination—particularly as DASD CN&SP looks to expand C2IE's use for coordination and other possible purposes, such as performance management.

³⁰Department of Defense, *C2IE SOP & Business Rules*.

³¹[GAO-14-704G](#).

Geographic Combatant Commands Have Not Fully Documented Their Roles in an Overlapping Operation Area

Officials of three geographic combatant commands whose areas of responsibility overlap with JIATF-S's joint operation area reported varying understandings of their roles and the flow of illicit drugs in the overlapping area.³² In 2003, in an effort to ensure continuity of CN/CTOC operations and support activities, DOD published a memorandum that expanded JIATF-S's joint operation area to include JIATF-W's former joint operation area, which included the western coasts of the United States and Mexico. JIATF-S's expanded joint operation area encompasses SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility and parts of NORTHCOM's and INDOPACOM's (see fig. 6).

³²GAO has previously reported on actions agencies could take in areas where federal programs are inefficient or ineffective because they are fragmented, overlapping, or duplicative. Fragmentation, overlap, and duplication exist across many areas of government activity. However, in some cases it may be appropriate or beneficial for multiple agencies or entities to be involved in the same programmatic or policy area due to the complex nature or magnitude of the federal effort. For more information see GAO, *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, [GAO-15-49SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015).

Figure 6: Overlap of Joint Interagency Task Force—South’s Joint Operation Area with U.S. Southern Command’s, U.S. Northern Command’s, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s Areas of Responsibility



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106281

Note: The dashed lines show the borders of the combatant commands’ areas of responsibility.

Officials stated that confusion over roles in the joint operation area has occurred among the three geographic combatant commands and their task forces. For example, regarding islands in the Caribbean Sea, DOD’s 2023 Unified Command Plan identifies that NORTHCOM’s area of responsibility includes the land domains of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. However, the 2003 memorandum identifies JIATF-S’s joint operation area as including all Caribbean islands and the maritime space around them. According to officials, this can lead to confusion about the management of ground and air operations in this region. They identified this as a top challenge and stated that one combatant command should be responsible for the Caribbean Sea. Officials also reported

Other Reported Factors Affecting DOD Efforts to Combat Synthetic Drugs

According to combatant command officials, there has been a recent trend by transnational criminal organizations to shift their focus from plant-based drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, to synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl. Officials explained that synthetic drugs are more lucrative and easier to produce and transport in smaller quantities, making them more difficult to detect and monitor. In addition, precursor chemicals diverted by transnational criminal organizations for illicit use can also have legal uses.

However, officials said that transnational criminal organizations generally do not specialize in a single drug. Thus, DOD component officials stated that they generally do not base their approach on the type of drug being trafficked in each case and instead focus on disrupting the transnational organized crime networks. In addition, officials said that synthetic drugs are typically trafficked through the land domain to the U.S., particularly through commercial ports of entry, and that DOD's authority to monitor and detect illicit drugs is generally limited to the aerial and maritime domains.

Source: Interviews with Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-24-106281

confusion over management of activities in Mexico, such as naval operations in the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. They explained that two combatant commands view this area as part of their responsibility, and they described it as an opportunity to improve coordination and how they approach this maritime space.

The commands prioritize supporting law enforcement agencies' interdiction of the illicit drugs prevalent in the commands' respective areas of responsibility, according to officials. NORTHCOM and JTF-N officials identified supporting the interdiction of fentanyl as a top priority, while SOUTHCOM and JIATF-S officials said they focus on supporting interdiction of cocaine trafficking. INDOPACOM and JIATF-W officials stated that they prioritize supporting interdiction of synthetic drugs and the precursor chemicals used to create them. They also said that they prioritize supporting the interdiction of shipments of fentanyl, methamphetamines, and cocaine.

Moreover, officials' analysis has led them to different conclusions regarding the flow of fentanyl in the Western Hemisphere. For example:

- Officials of one geographic combatant command said that fentanyl flows from both Mexico and Canada into the United States.
- Officials of a second geographic combatant command said that fentanyl flows only from Mexico.
- Officials of the third geographic combatant command stated conflicting information about seeing fentanyl movement in their area of responsibility. Some officials said they had not seen fentanyl, but others said that they had recently identified fentanyl and precursor flows in their area of responsibility. Although these officials said conflicting information, other federal agencies have reported the presence of precursor chemicals in the area and one of DASD CN&SP's priorities is to support interagency partners in stopping the flow of fentanyl in their area of responsibility.

When we asked combatant commands in 2023 for documentation that outlines their roles and responsibilities in the area, officials from two of the three combatant commands provided the 2003 memorandum that expanded JIATF-S's joint operation area. This memorandum requires that the commanders of SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM, and INDOPACOM "complete Command Arrangement Agreements to define . . . Task Force areas of responsibility and associated procedures." When we asked the geographic combatant commands and task forces for documentation of

such agreements, INDOPACOM provided a 2008 agreement between itself and NORTHCOM, and the other two did not provide agreements.

The 2008 agreement discusses various topics, including the commands' support of each other's operations, establishment of liaison officers, communications procedures, and training exercises. The agreement also states that it should be reviewed for currency and applicability every 2 years. However, we found that the agreement had not been updated to address detection and monitoring of precursor chemicals used to develop fentanyl—currently a significant issue in both combatant commands' areas of responsibility—or to clarify the commands' responsibilities and procedures with respect to these chemicals. As a result of frequent turnover within DOD components, officials told us that they had been in their roles for less than 2 years and could only reference information contained in the 2008 agreement.

In March 2024, DOD provided a 2014 agreement between SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM. They also provided an updated 2023 agreement between SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM, and the Coast Guard that superseded the 2014 agreement. However, DOD has not updated the 2008 agreement between INDOPACOM and NORTHCOM and does not have an existing agreement between INDOPACOM and SOUTHCOM.

We have previously identified leading practices for interagency collaboration, which state that agencies working together should define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities.³³ The leading practices also state that agencies should articulate these agreements in written guidance that is regularly updated and monitored. Without defining and maintaining comprehensive, up-to-date agreements, the geographic combatant commands whose areas of responsibility overlap with JIATF-S's joint operation area may continue to face confusion regarding their roles and responsibilities in the joint operation area as well as uncertainty about the flow of fentanyl in the area. This confusion may, in turn, reduce their ability to coordinate their efforts when conducting activities to disrupt the transport of illicit drugs into the United States by transnational criminal organizations.

³³[GAO-23-105520](#).

DOD's Performance Measurement System Does Not Enable It to Fully Assess Effectiveness of CN/CTOC Activities

DOD's performance measurement system has two key issues that limit DOD's ability to assess the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC activities. First, it cannot use its strategic objectives—its long-term CN/CTOC goals—to measure progress, because each objective

- lacks measurable outcomes and
- is not clearly aligned with DOD's CN/CTOC performance goals—its near-term measurable goals—or its strategies for achieving each goal.

Second, DOD has not assessed agency-wide progress toward its strategic objectives and does not have a plan to do so.

Strategic Objectives Do Not Have Measurable Outcomes Needed to Assess CN/CTOC Activities

DOD's *2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks* (2019 Framework) establishes CN/CTOC strategic objectives and strategies.³⁴ To help establish standard performance goals for these efforts, DASD CN&SP published the *2023 Performance Measurement Plan: DOD Counterdrug and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Policy, Programs and Activities* (2023 PMP). However, the 2019 Framework's strategies do not clearly align with any of its strategic objectives. As a result, the 2023 PMP's performance goals—which are linked to the strategies—cannot be used to measure progress toward the strategic objectives, as called for by key practices for performance management.³⁵ Without identifying measurable outcomes for each of its strategic objectives, DASD CN&SP cannot reasonably determine the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC activities.

Key practices for federal agencies' performance management call for defining goals as a first step to effectively build and use evidence to manage its performance.³⁶ This includes setting both long-term goals, such as strategic objectives, and near-term measurable goals, such as

³⁴The 2019 Framework refers to *objectives*, which we identified as strategic objectives, and *ways*, which we identified as strategies. DASD CN&SP officials confirmed that the objectives in the 2019 Framework are DASD CN&SP's strategic objectives. The officials defined *ways* as providing a path to achieve the objectives and key areas to focus on. As a result, we determined that the *ways* described in the 2019 Framework meet the definition of strategies in key practices for performance measurement—that is, they are planned actions to achieve each goal (see [GAO-23-105460](#)). Officials reported that DOD developed these elements by reviewing interagency documents, DOD documents, joint publications, and intelligence priorities, as well as working with the DOD components.

³⁵[GAO-23-105460](#).

³⁶[GAO-23-105460](#).

performance goals.³⁷ Strategic objectives should be framed so they can serve as standards against which an assessment can reasonably be performed to determine the effectiveness of the agency's implementation of its programs. Agencies should also clearly define measurable outcomes for each strategic objective.³⁸ Once an agency has defined its goals, it should determine how it plans to achieve them by identifying strategies for each goal.

According to DASD CN&SP, the 2019 Framework is DOD's overarching strategy to counter narcotics trafficking and transnational organized crime. DOD guidance requires DASD CN&SP and the DOD components to develop performance measurement processes and metrics to measure the absolute and relative success of programs and activities in the context of the strategic objectives of DOD's 2019 Framework.³⁹

Table 3 shows the three strategic objectives and five strategies that the 2019 Framework identifies.

³⁷Performance goals are target levels of performance to be accomplished within a time frame. They are generally expressed as tangible, measurable objectives, or as quantitative standards, values, or rates. See [GAO-23-105460](#).

³⁸GAO, *Managing for Results: Practices for Effective Agency Strategic Reviews*, [GAO-15-602](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2015).

³⁹Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Instruction 3000.14*.

Table 3: Strategic Objectives and Strategies Identified in DOD’s 2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks

Strategic objectives	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrupt and degrade threat networks • Reduce drug trafficking and criminal activity • Strengthen partners 	<p>Strategy and plans. DOD develops, synchronizes, and implements doctrine, strategies, plans, and programs to facilitate and support operations with U.S. and international partners.</p> <hr/> <p>Intelligence and information sharing. DOD conducts intelligence and information-sharing activities to support partner activities to detect, disrupt, degrade, and disable illicit drug trafficking and other forms of transnational organized crime.</p> <hr/> <p>Operational support. DOD supports and enables U.S. and international partners to disrupt and disable illicit threat networks by targeting the networks’ leadership, operations, logistics, communications, finances, and key facilitators.</p> <hr/> <p>Domain awareness. DOD will collect, integrate, and analyze surveillance, intelligence, and all-source information, and will share this information among U.S. and international partners in order to make decisions or operate effectively to identify and target illicit drug trafficking and other illicit threat networks.</p> <hr/> <p>Capacity building. DOD assists foreign partners to improve their capability and capacity to disrupt and degrade illicit drug trafficking, transnational organized crime, and other illicit threat networks.</p>

Source: Department of Defense (DOD). | GAO-24-106281

Note: We have previously defined strategic objectives as the outcomes or impacts the agency is intending to achieve through its activities and strategies as planned actions to achieve each goal. See GAO, Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2023).

According to DASD CN&SP officials, each of the strategies defined in the 2019 Framework supports, and provides guidance for, activities that can be used to achieve all three strategic objectives. For example, the officials said that the intelligence and information sharing strategy relates to all of the strategic objectives because activities implemented under the strategy help to reduce criminal activity, improve intelligence, and strengthen foreign partners’ activities. Similarly, they said that activities implemented under the domain awareness strategy help to disrupt cartels, reduce trafficking, and strengthen partners. While it may be possible to find associations between all of the strategies and all of the strategic objectives, without making these links readily apparent, DASD CN&SP cannot identify activities that contribute most effectively to achieving any single objective or measure their contribution.

In January 2023, DASD CN&SP issued the 2023 PMP to provide guidance for establishing performance goals that could be used to

measure progress toward the achievement of the strategic objectives.⁴⁰ DASD CN&SP subsequently published the performance goals in September 2023. However, instead of developing the performance goals as near-term, measurable goals directly connected to each strategic objective, DASD CN&SP developed them under each of the 2019 Framework strategies (see table 4).⁴¹

Table 4: Examples of Selected 2023 Performance Measurement Plan Performance Goals

Strategic objectives	Strategies ^a	Examples of performance goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disrupt and degrade threat networks Reduce drug trafficking and criminal activity Strengthen partners 	Strategy and plans	Number of DOD counterdrug component-sponsored/hosted cross-combatant command events, venues, and entities.
	Intelligence and information sharing	Requests for information/requests for support answered in support to partners is equal to or greater than 90 percent of the previous 3 fiscal years' average.
	Operational support	Ninety-five percent of total support directed toward a high-priority transnational criminal organization network.
	Domain awareness	Eighty percent of detected events in Joint Interagency Task Force-South area of responsibility successfully handed off to interdiction and apprehension forces.
	Capacity building	Greater than 90 percent total number of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense approved projects are used as intended 1 year from Full Operational Capability.

Source: Department of Defense (DOD). | GAO-24-106281

Note: The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy did not set quantitative targets for the "strategy and plans" performance goals because the goals are meant to measure the relative presence of the counternarcotics mission set in government strategy, plans, and doctrine over time and to identify organizations and areas where the counternarcotics mission set is not represented. DOD identifies the strategic objectives and strategies in its *2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks* and *2023 Performance Measurement Plan: DOD Counterdrug and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Policy, Programs and Activities*.

^aThe 2023 Performance Measurement Plan also includes two additional strategies, Readiness and Workplace Safety (Drug Demand Reduction) and Program Management, that are not included in the 2019 Framework and are outside the scope of this review.

⁴⁰DASD CN&SP officials told us that they had recognized the absence of standardized performance goals in the 2019 Framework as an issue for several years but were not able to address it until 2023 due to resource constraints.

⁴¹The 2023 PMP also includes two additional strategies, Readiness and Workplace Safety (Drug Demand Reduction) and Program Management, that are not included in the 2019 Framework and are outside the scope of this review.

Since DASD CN&SP has not clearly defined how each strategy aligns with each strategic objective, it is unclear how the new performance goals can be used as measurable outcomes to assess progress toward each strategic objective. For instance, as table 4 shows, one of DASD CN&SP's new performance goals under the operational support strategy is that 95 percent of total support should be directed toward a high-priority transnational criminal organization. However, the lack of defined alignment between the operational support strategy and any one, or all three, of the strategic objectives makes it unclear how DASD CN&SP would determine which strategic objective this performance goal contributes to, or the extent to which achieving this performance goal would result in progress toward one or more of the strategic objectives.

According to DASD CN&SP officials, combatant commands began using the new performance goals in October 2023.⁴² Officials said that they intend to use the information collected with these goals primarily for DASD CN&SP's annual program management review and program objective memorandum processes, which will help leadership to make decisions across the agency, such as personnel and technology investment decisions, and to determine return on investment.⁴³ The officials also emphasized that developing the 2023 PMP and its performance goals is an iterative process, and they will review and revise the plan after its implementation. However, because the performance goals developed under the 2023 PMP are directly linked to the strategies defined in the 2019 Framework and not to the strategic objectives, the lack of direct alignment between the strategies and each strategic objective limits DASD CN&SP's ability to use the performance goals to assess progress toward the objectives.

We have previously reviewed and reported on approaches that federal agencies have used to clarify and clearly define measurable outcomes for each strategic objective.⁴⁴ For example, agencies have developed a matrix or logic model to illustrate and define the linkages between specific strategic objectives and specific strategies and performance goals. Agencies have also used a detailed written narrative to ensure that each of its strategies and performance goals, and their alignment to individual

⁴²All combatant commands participated in developing the 2023 PMP performance goals, and combatant command officials we spoke with gave positive feedback about the plan.

⁴³The program objective memorandum is an annual assessment that projects funding and activities for 5 future fiscal years.

⁴⁴[GAO-15-602](#).

strategic objectives, is specific enough to enable assessment of how the strategy or goal helps to achieve each objective. Agencies with long-term, complex outcomes have developed subgoals for each strategic objective that directly connect to, and can be measured by, performance goals.

By identifying measurable outcomes for its strategic objectives, DASD CN&SP will gain reasonable assurance that its activities contribute to achieving these objectives and will better understand the extent of their contribution. As a result, DASD CN&SP will be able to use this evidence to inform possible management actions, such as revising its strategies to achieve better results and address emerging threats or reallocating resources to effectively use funding to meet its targets.

DOD Has Not Assessed Agency-Wide Progress toward CN/CTOC Strategic Objectives and Does Not Have a Plan to Do So

Previous GAO Findings and Recommendations on DOD's Counternarcotics Performance Measurement

We have previously reported on, and provided recommendations related to, performance measurement for the Department of Defense's (DOD) counternarcotics (CN) activities.

- In 2005, we recommended that DOD develop and coordinate CN performance measures (see GAO-06-200). In response to our recommendation, in May 2009, DOD submitted to the Office of National Drug Control Policy performance measures for its CN activities.
- In 2010, we reported that DOD did not have an effective performance measurement system to track the progress of its CN activities. We also reported that DOD's performance measures did not align with a number of leading practices, such as measures being clearly stated and objective (see GAO-10-835). DOD reviewed its CN performance measures and made improvements in response, but GAO found that DOD's measures still lacked key attributes. DOD officials we spoke with in 2023 said that they no longer use the performance measurement system or performance measures we reviewed in 2010.

Although DASD CN&SP has processes to evaluate the performance of individual DOD components' CN/CTOC activities, it has not assessed agency-wide progress in achieving its CN/CTOC strategic objectives and does not have a plan to conduct such assessments. DOD guidance requires DASD CN&SP to measure the absolute and relative success of programs and activities in the context of the strategic objectives that DOD's 2019 Framework identifies.⁴⁵ Moreover, key practices for performance management identify a number of uses for the information produced by assessing progress toward an agency's strategic objectives.⁴⁶ Such uses include informing long-term strategy, informing annual planning and budget formulation, and improving decision-making response time. Performance data could also inform DASD CN&SP's investment decisions, such as determining allocations of CN/CTOC resources across combatant commands.

In fiscal years 2018 through 2022, combatant commands used a variety of performance metrics to assess the results of their CN/CTOC efforts. DASD CN&SP did not provide guidance specifying the performance metrics they should use, and the metrics the commands used were not standardized across combatant commands. As a result, both the performance metrics and the number of metrics used differed among combatant commands. For example, one combatant command used about 30 metrics for its activities, while another used about 70 metrics.

However, DASD CN&SP did not use the performance data collected by combatant commands for fiscal years 2018 through 2022 to assess

⁴⁵Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Instruction 3000.14*.

⁴⁶[GAO-23-105460](#).

agency-wide progress toward its strategic objectives. According to officials, combatant commands reported results for some of their performance metrics to DASD CN&SP as part of the annual program management review process and the program objective memorandum process.⁴⁷ Combatant commands may also have used performance data to support their requests for funding and project approval, although DASD CN&SP did not require this, and officials said that some combatant commands provided fewer metrics than others. Combatant command officials said that DASD CN&SP is primarily concerned about combatant commands' return on investment. DASD CN&SP officials stated that they focus primarily on whether combatant commands are operating within the bounds of DOD's CN-related authorities and appropriations.

DASD CN&SP issued the 2023 PMP to standardize metrics across combatant commands but has no plan to assess agency-wide progress toward its strategic objectives. The assessment, monitoring, and evaluation guidance in the 2023 PMP applies to the DOD components and does not include requirements for DASD CN&SP to assess agency-wide performance. Officials told us that the collection of metrics data is not solely for assessment of individual CN-funded programs or entities. According to officials, the data will be used to compare performance across combatant commands, assess the totality of DASD CN&SP's efforts, and expand future reporting to ONDCP and Congress.

However, DASD CN&SP has not developed or documented a plan outlining how it will use the data to assess progress toward the strategic objectives, when it will begin conducting such assessments, and what management decisions the data will inform. Officials told us that as they further develop the 2023 PMP and reporting, they will determine how they can use the 2023 PMP to assess DOD-wide progress toward the strategic objectives. They added that because the combatant commands will report most of the performance data on an annual basis, DASD CN&SP officials will focus their efforts on the program management review and program objective memorandum processes, which center on the performance of individual combatant commands rather than DOD's overall performance.

⁴⁷DOD also reports some performance data collected by combatant commands to ONDCP. As a National Drug Control Program agency, DOD is required to report some performance data in ONDCP's Budget and Performance Summary Report. For example, DOD reports the percentage of detected events successfully handed-off to interdiction and apprehension resources, a JIATF-S performance metric. Decision makers use these performance measures to guide the allocation of CN/CTOC budgetary resources during the annual planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process.

DASD CN&SP officials also emphasized that their strategic objectives reflect goals shared by multiple agencies, and they stated that it can be challenging to assess agency-wide performance when DOD often plays a supporting role to law enforcement agencies and partner nations. Although assessing the effectiveness of DASD CN&SP's and the DOD components' support to partners may be difficult—especially when such assessments rely on data from those partners—this does not negate the benefit of DOD assessing its own efforts. Given DOD's role as the lead agency for detection and monitoring of the aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs to the United States, assessing progress toward DASD CN&SP's strategic objectives and collecting reliable data across the organization will help ensure that its efforts and use of resources achieve the desired outcomes.

Since DASD CN&SP and the DOD components have already developed the 2023 PMP performance goals, which includes standardized metrics across DOD, they are well positioned to assess agency-wide progress without needing to rely on external partners for data. If DOD determines that assessing its support to its external partners would provide a more complete view of its progress, then it could work with these partners to develop performance goals for those collaborative efforts.⁴⁸

DASD CN&SP officials also told us that, rather than reviewing CN/CTOC activities as a whole, from a management perspective, they have regular discussions about how funding is spent in relation to their priorities. They added that it is difficult to collectively assess CN/CTOC activities because each combatant command focuses on different priorities. According to officials, it therefore makes more sense to focus on assessing the individual performance of combatant commands during the annual performance review processes.

However, evaluating only individual combatant commands' performance rather than overall progress toward the strategic objectives will provide DASD CN&SP an incomplete picture of the extent to which the agency is achieving its desired outcomes. Consequently, DOD will lack complete evidence to understand the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC mission, what led to the results it achieved, or why desired results were not achieved. This will, in turn, limit DOD's ability to efficiently and effectively determine

⁴⁸We have previously identified leading interagency collaboration practices, which include defining common outcomes and ensuring accountability. See [GAO-23-105520](#).

priorities, allocate resources, and identify strategies for improvement, and to maintain accountability for results.

Conclusions

DOD has the lead role in the federal government's efforts in detecting and monitoring the aerial and maritime transport of illicit drugs into the United States and plays a significant role in supporting federal agencies' CN/CTOC activities. For these reasons, and as priorities and types of narcotics evolve—such as the recent trend away from plant-based toward synthetic drugs—it is important that DOD is able to coordinate and assess the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC activities. DASD CN&SP collects information about some CN/CTOC activities in its C2IE data system, but officials reported that lack of consistency in the data entered is a challenge. DASD CN&SP reviews the data but has not provided guidance that specifies the measures of quality they should review, such as measures addressing the need for data accuracy and consistency, and that assigns responsibility for verifying the data's accuracy and consistency. Documenting this information would help increase trust in C2IE as a data system and coordination tool.

In addition, DOD established a joint operation area that overlaps with three combatant commands that are focusing on addressing the trafficking of cocaine, fentanyl, and precursor chemicals, among other threats. DOD also required the commands to complete agreements defining their responsibilities in the joint operation area. However, DOD has not updated a 2008 agreement between INDOPACOM and NORTHCOM and does not have an existing agreement between INDOPACOM and SOUTHCOM. As a result, the three combatant commands, and their associated task forces, do not have up-to-date agreements that outline their individual and joint responsibilities in the overlapping operation area. Defining and documenting these responsibilities would help the combatant commands address any confusion and prevent different understandings of the flow of narcotics in the area and improve the commands' ability to coordinate their efforts to disrupt the transport of illicit drugs into the United States.

Finally, the lack of measurable outcomes for each strategic objective in the 2019 Framework makes it unclear that DOD will be able to assess progress toward these objectives or use this information to make management decisions that may allow it to adapt to emerging threats. Moreover, a plan to assess agency-wide progress toward its strategic objectives would better position DOD to make decisions about priorities, resource allocations, and strategies for improvement. Assessing progress toward DASD CN&SP's strategic objectives and collecting reliable data

across DOD are essential to ensure that its efforts and use of resources achieve the desired outcomes.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of four recommendations to DOD:

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy updates standard operating procedures for the C2IE data system to specify the quality control measures that should be reviewed and to assign responsibility for verifying that the information is accurate and consistent across combatant commands. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy works with INDOPACOM, SOUTHCOM, and NORTHCOM to develop up-to-date agreements that clarify and define their and their task forces' respective roles and responsibilities in the overlapping operation area. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy identifies measurable outcomes for each of DOD's CN/CTOC strategic objectives that can be used to assess progress toward the objective. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy develops a plan to assess DOD-wide progress toward its CN/CTOC strategic objectives. (Recommendation 4)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to ONDCP and DOD for review and comment. ONDCP did not provide any comments. DOD provided comments that we have reproduced in appendix III. DOD also provided technical comments that we incorporated as appropriate.

In its comments, DOD stated that it partially agreed with our four recommendations. The following summarizes DOD's comments and our evaluation:

Recommendation 1. DOD agreed to update its standard operating procedures for the C2IE data system to specify the quality control measures that should be reviewed. However, DOD did not agree to assign responsibility for verifying the accuracy and consistency of

information across combatant commands. DOD asserted that each of its components that enters information in C2IE is responsible for verifying the information's accuracy. As our report describes, the procedures include guidance stating that each component is responsible for ensuring that the information it enters is thorough and accurate. Yet even with this guidance, combatant command officials identified a lack of consistent data entry as a challenge associated with C2IE, noting that this complicates efforts to facilitate coordination of CN/CTOC activities. Further, DASD CN&SP officials told us that they had found and corrected inconsistencies in C2IE data that they use for reports to Congress. Holding components solely responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the data they enter in the system has not been sufficient to ensure the data's accuracy or their consistency across the combatant commands. Therefore, we maintain that updating its procedures to assign responsibility for verifying the information would help DOD ensure that C2IE data are both accurate and consistent across combatant commands.

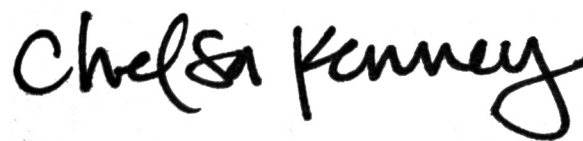
Recommendation 2. Having stated that it partially agreed with the recommendation, DOD sent us copies of agreements after we sent our draft report to DOD. Officials provided copies of two agreements. The first agreement is from 2014 between NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM and the other from 2023 between NORTHCOM, SOUTHCOM, and the Coast Guard. Nevertheless, these agreements do not fully satisfy the intent of our recommendation or DOD's requirement. Specifically, there is no existing agreement between INDOPACOM and SOUTHCOM and no updated agreement between INDOPACOM and NORTHCOM. We maintain that in the absence of such agreements, confusion about the commands' responsibilities in the joint operation area may continue, reducing DOD's ability to disrupt the transport of illicit drugs to the U.S.

Recommendation 3. DOD agreed that developing measurable outcomes to assess progress toward its strategic objectives would be helpful. Developing these outcomes would satisfy the intent of our recommendation. In its comment letter, DOD asserted that it does not concur with our assessment that its strategic objectives are not clearly aligned with its performance goals or its strategies for achieving each goal. However, DOD did not offer evidence to show how its performance goals or strategies align with the objectives. As our report describes, alignment between performance goals, strategies, and strategic objectives is important to show how progress toward performance goals collectively contributes to progress toward each strategic objective.

Recommendation 4. DOD agreed that a plan to assess agency-wide programs supporting its CN/CTOC strategic objectives would be helpful, but it did not agree that it lacks an assessment plan to evaluate the totality of its CN/CTOC efforts. As our report states, officials told us that the data they collect, as described in the 2023 PMP, will be used to compare performance across combatant commands, assess the totality of DASD CN&SP's efforts, and expand future reporting to ONDCP and Congress. However, although DASD CN&SP has a plan to collect the data, it has not documented a plan outlining how it will use the data to assess agency-wide progress toward each strategic objective, when it will begin conducting such assessments, and what management decisions the data will inform. Therefore, we maintain that it should develop a plan to document these and other critical decisions.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and other interested parties. 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 me 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 key 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 Jon Tester
Chair
The Honorable Susan Collins
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Chair
The Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Primary Authorities Available to DOD for Its CN/CTOC Activities

The Department of Defense (DOD) identified various authorities it uses to support its counternarcotics (CN) and counter-transnational organized crime (CTOC) activities (see table 5).

Table 5: Primary Authorities Identified by DOD as Available for Its Counternarcotics (CN) and Counter—Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) Activities

Authority ^a	Description
1 10 U.S.C. § 124: Detection and Monitoring of Aerial and Maritime Transit of Illegal Drugs	Designates DOD as “the single lead agency of the federal government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States.”
2 10 U.S.C. § 284: Support for Counterdrug Activities and Activities to Counter Transnational Organized Crime	Authorizes support for CN/CTOC activities of any other department or agency of the federal government or of any state, local, tribal, or foreign law enforcement agency.
3 10 U.S.C. § 333: Foreign Security Forces- Authority to Build Capacity ^b	Authorizes provision of training and equipment to foreign national security forces for the purpose of building the capacity of such forces to conduct, among other things, CN/CTOC operations.
4 Section 1021 of Pub. L. No. 108-375, the Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, as amended	Authorizes support of a unified campaign by the government of Colombia against narcotics trafficking and against activities by organizations designated as terrorist organizations.
5 Section 1022 of Pub. L. No. 108-136, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004, as amended (10 U.S.C § 271 note)	Authorizes uses of DOD joint task forces to provide support to law enforcement agencies conducting CN/CTOC and counterterrorism activities.
6 Executive Order 12333: Support to the intelligence community	Directs DOD, in accordance with priorities set by the President, to support the collection of information concerning, and conduct activities to protect against, international criminal narcotics activities.

Source: Department of Defense (DOD) documentation. | GAO-24-106281

^aThe Department of Defense has additional CN/CTOC authorities that are not applicable to this review. These include 10 U.S.C. § 978, which mandates the testing of people applying for an original enlistment or for appointment in the armed forces; 32 U.S.C. § 112, which authorizes the Secretary of Defense to provide funds to support National Guard drug interdiction and counternarcotics activities; and 5 U.S.C. § 7301, which authorizes the President to prescribe regulations that support the continuation of random drug testing program for certain DOD employees.

^bSection 1241 of Pub. L. No. 114-328, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, established a consolidated security cooperation authority codified at 10 U.S.C. § 333 that authorizes train and equip programs, including those that focus on CN/CTOC operations. That provision included a requirement that these programs be funded from DOD’s Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide account and be made available to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. See 10 U.S.C. § 333(g). Because 10 U.S.C. § 333 programs are not funded through the CN fund, they are outside the scope of our review. For recent reviews of DOD’s building partner capacity programs, see 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); and Building Partner Capacity: DOD and State Should Strengthen Planning for Train and Equip Projects, [GAO-23-105842](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2023).

Appendix II: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Senate Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to examine issues related to the Department of Defense's (DOD) counternarcotics (CN) and counter-transnational organized crime (CTOC) activities.¹ This report examines (1) funding available for DOD's CN/CTOC activities and how DOD allocated funding in fiscal years 2018 through 2022; (2) the extent to which DOD components coordinate their CN/CTOC activities; and (3) how DOD has assessed the effectiveness of its CN/CTOC activities, as well as the extent to which DOD's plans for future assessments align with key practices. The act also includes a provision for us to describe the primary legal authorities available to DOD for CN/CTOC activities; see appendix I for a list of these authorities.

To obtain information for all of our objectives, we reviewed relevant DOD documents, such as *DOD Instruction 3000.14: DOD Counterdrug and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Policy*, *DOD's 2019 Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Networks* (2019 Framework), and DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities President's Budgets. We also interviewed officials from the Office of National Drug Control Policy and 17 DOD components to discuss authorities and funding, coordination, and performance measurement. DOD components included the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy (DASD CN&SP), combatant commands, intelligence agencies, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We selected these components on the basis of DOD's CN/CTOC priorities.

To identify the legal authorities available to DOD for CN/CTOC activities, we reviewed the authorities noted in DOD Instruction 3000.14 and the Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities President's Budgets. We compiled a list of possibly relevant authorities and interviewed DOD officials to confirm the authorities that are available to DOD for its CN/CTOC activities. We also asked DOD component officials to identify the authorities the components use to conduct their CN/CTOC activities. We list these authorities in appendix I.

We reviewed the fiscal years 2018 through 2022 appropriations acts to identify the amounts of funding that Congress most recently directed to CN/CTOC activities. Congress provides CN/CTOC funds through DOD's Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities appropriation. This

¹S. Rept. 117-130 at 235-236 accompanying S. 4543, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (enacted into law as Pub. L. No. 117-263, 136 Stat. 2395 (2022)).

appropriation supports four budget activities; our review focuses on one, the Counter-Narcotics Support budget activity, which we refer to as the CN fund.² Further, we reviewed the fiscal years 2020 through 2024 Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities President's Budgets to identify the amount of funding DASD CN&SP allocated to DOD components in fiscal years 2018 through 2022 and the amount it allocated to support various CN/CTOC activities in fiscal year 2022.

To assess the reliability of the funding data, we conducted several validity checks, including developing an analysis of the information in the President's Budgets, creating charts and tables to identify totals for each combatant command across multiple data points, and comparing data we received from combatant commands to the data in the President's Budgets. We also interviewed DOD officials and verified whether information they provided was shown in the data. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting the amounts DOD allocated to its components. We also interviewed officials from DASD CN&SP and the DOD components about the amount of funding they received, changes in the funding over time, and the activities they used the funding to support.

To examine the extent to which DOD components coordinate their CN/CTOC activities, we interviewed DOD officials to discuss the data systems they use to facilitate coordination. We reviewed guidance and training documentation for these data systems as well as reports to Congress that DOD used the systems to produce. We determined that the internal control principle related to using quality information for effective monitoring was significant to this objective.³ Officials from a combatant command also showed us how they use the Command and Control of the Information Environment data system and described some benefits and challenges of using the system to coordinate efforts with other combatant commands.

Furthermore, we interviewed DOD officials about how and with which entities they coordinate as well as successes and challenges they have

²The other three budget activities are the (1) Drug Demand Reduction Program, (2) National Guard Counter-Drug Program, and (3) National Guard Counter-Drug Schools Program. For a review of the National Guard Counterdrug and Schools Programs, see GAO, *Drug Control: DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the National Guard Counterdrug Program*, [GAO-19-27](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2019).

³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

experienced in coordinating their CN/CTOC activities. We reviewed documents that DOD components provided to us, such as memorandums of agreement between combatant commands and between combatant commands and law enforcement agencies. We also reviewed DOD guidance on how combatant commands should coordinate. An analyst evaluated DOD components' coordination against selected leading practices to enhance interagency collaboration and coordination that we have previously identified.⁴ These practices include clarifying roles and responsibilities and developing and updating written guidance and agreements. The analyst also evaluated components' coordination against a 2003 DOD requirement that certain combatant commands complete agreements to define areas of responsibility and associated procedures.⁵ A second analyst independently verified this evaluation.

To determine how DOD has assessed the effectiveness of its activities, we identified performance metrics that DASD CN&SP and the DOD components used for fiscal years 2018 through 2022. We interviewed officials from DASD CN&SP and the DOD components to discuss performance data they had collected, reported, and assessed. To examine DOD's plan to assess its activities in the future, we reviewed DOD's 2019 Framework as well as DOD's *2023 Performance Measurement Plan: DOD Counterdrug and Counter-Transnational Organized Crime Policy, Programs and Activities* (2023 PMP) and related performance metrics. An analyst evaluated the strategic objectives identified by the 2019 Framework and the performance goals identified by the 2023 PMP against selected key practices for performance management that we had previously identified to help agencies assess the results of its efforts.⁶ A second analyst independently verified this evaluation. Additionally, we interviewed officials from DASD CN&SP and the DOD components about the development and planned implementation of the new performance measurement plan and its metrics.

⁴GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

⁵Department of Defense, *Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) Area Responsibilities Memorandum* (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 21, 2003).

⁶GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2023).

**Appendix II: Objectives, Scope, and
Methodology**

We conducted this performance audit from October 2022 to April 2024 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 objectives.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense

CUI



SPECIAL OPERATIONS /
LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
2500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2500

26 MAR 2024

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

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report GAO-24-106281SU, "COUNTERNARCOTICS: DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities," dated February 12, 2024. The Department partially concurs in the recommendations and provides comments to improve the accuracy of the report (TAB A).

Also attached is a copy of the MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT on Command Coordination (TAB B), in support of recommendation two.

My point of contact is Mr. Alex Longworth, who can be reached at alexander.j.longworth.civ@mail.mil and phone (703) 692-4182.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James E. Saenz".

James E. Saenz
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for
Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy

Attachments:
As stated

Controlled By: SOLIC
Controlled By: CNSP
CUI Category: PROV
Limited Dissemination Control: FEDCON
POC: Joseph J. McMenam, (703) 692-6693

CUI

UNCLASSIFIED with the Removal of TAB B

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) DRAFT REPORT DATED
FEBRUARY 12, 2024
GAO-24-106281SU

*“COUNTERNARCOTICS: DOD SHOULD IMPROVE COORDINATION AND
ASSESSMENT OF ITS ACTIVITIES”*

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy updates standard operating procedures for the C2IE data system to specify the quality control measures that should be reviewed and to assign responsibility for verifying that the information is accurate and consistent across combatant commands.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur.

DoD concurs in the recommendation to update the standard operating procedures and business rules for command and control of the information environment (C2IE) to specify quality control measures that should be reviewed. We do not concur in the recommendation to assign responsibility for verifying that the information is accurate and consistent across combatant commands. The responsibility to provide accurate information belongs to the counterdrug-funded component providing the information. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy will work to clarify those responsibilities and provide additional guidance for verifying accuracy, but the ultimate responsibility will remain with the combatant commands and other components to ensure their own data is accurate and consistent.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy works with INDOPACOM, SOUTHCOM, and NORTHCOM to develop agreements that clarify and define their and their task forces’ respective roles and responsibilities in the overlapping operation area.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur.

There is an existing memorandum of agreement (MOA) between USNORTHCOM, USSOUTHCOM, United States Coast Guard (USCG) Atlantic Area (LANTAREA), and USCG Pacific Area (PACAREA), for command coordination, signed July 2023, which replaced an earlier USNORTHCOM-USSOUTHCOM Command Arrangement Agreement that had been in place for a decade. The July 2023 USNORTHCOM response to the GAO referred to the MOA, and USNORTHCOM staff cited it during the December 2023 exit interview with the GAO. However, USNORTHCOM did not provide a copy because DoD guidance (DoD Instruction 7650.01) requires each of the signatory Components to agree to its release. As of February 21, 2024, USSOUTHCOM, USCG LANTAREA and USCG PACAREA have concurred in release

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

2

of the MOA to the GAO. We have included a copy of the MOA as an attachment to this response.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy identifies measurable outcomes for each of DOD's CN/CTOC strategic objectives that can be used to assess progress toward the objective.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur.

DoD partially concurs in the overarching recommendation to identify measurable outcomes for each of DoD's CN/CTOC strategic objectives to assess progress. The office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy (DASD(CNSP)) agrees it would be helpful to develop measurable outcomes to assess progress toward strategic objectives. However, DoD does not concur in GAO's assessment that the performance goals, established in our January 2023, *Performance Metrics Plan* (PMP) and further refined in our September 2023 *Performance Metrics Guidance*, do not align with and support the Strategic goals and outcomes established in the 2019 *Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks*.

The GAO assessment (p. 27) heavily cites the July 2023, GAO published guidance: *Evidence-Based Policymaking – Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts* (GAO-23-105460) as the benchmark for assessment development. This ideational guidance proffers a common-sense cyclical methodology for assessment development. The DASD (CNSP) assessment process and construct developed and documented over the past five years closely aligns with the preponderance of the 13 key practices detailed in the GAO guidance, even though the guidance was published well into the assessment period for this draft report.

As detailed in GAO-23-105460, assessment development is an iterative and evolutionary process driven by strategic goals shaped by both hierarchical (Administration and executive level) guidance and internally generated direction in response to the emerging environment. The environment, as well as the data collected in the assessment process, should and will continually drive refinement at all levels of any assessment program. The DASD(CNSP) program was initially developed with a limited spectrum of historical data and has subsequently initiated the programmatic collection of data under the current construct commencing in Fiscal Year 2024. The DASD(CNSP) plans to review all levels of its assessment process periodically and will update documentation as necessary.

It is also important to recognize that the four levels of DASD(CNSP) assessment guidance documentation (the 2019 *Framework*, the 2020 DoD Instruction 3000.14, the January 2023 *Performance Measurement Plan*, and the September 2023 *Performance Metrics Guidance*) are all in compliance with DoD regulatory and programmatic guidance.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy develops a plan to assess DOD-wide progress toward its CN/CTOC strategic objectives.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur.

DoD partially concurs in the recommendation to develop a plan to assess DoD-wide progress toward CN/CTOC strategic objectives. The office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Stabilization Policy (DASD(CNSP)) agrees that a plan to assess DoD-wide programs supporting CN/CTOC Strategic objectives would be helpful, but does not concur with the GAO in its assessment that the DASD(CNSP) lacks an assessment plan to evaluate the totality of DoD DASD(CNSP)-funded efforts.

The GAO historical analysis of data from 2018 to 2022 precedes the implementation of the January 2023 *Performance Measurement Plan (PMP)* and the September 2023 *Performance Metrics Guidance* enacted by this office and therefore fails to account for the current and ongoing assessment efforts detailed in these documents.

Current data collection efforts are grounded in the PMP, which defines seven Lines of Effort (LOEs) shaped around strategic guidance detailed in the 2019 *Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks*. The seven LOEs in turn serve as the basis for the 52 metrics and 66 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) delineated in the September 2023 *Performance Metrics Guidance*. Metrics data collection under the current program commenced in Fiscal Year 2024 and is captured in a single consolidated database. Currently, there are 15 DASD(CNSP) CD-funded entities, and all are required to submit their data into the database on a defined periodic schedule. The combined data in turn provides the DASD(CNSP) with a consolidated and quantifiable tool to assess DoD CD-funded efforts toward CN/CTOC strategic objectives.

This assessment process is further addressed and reinforced during the annual DASD(CNSP) Program Management Review (PMR) process, as well as the annual Program Objective Memorandum (POM) process within this office's Program, Planning, Budget and Execution process.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Valérie L. Nowak (Assistant Director), Katya E. Rodriguez (Analyst-in-Charge), Emma O'Shea, Megan Ferren, Mark Dowling, Reid Lowe, Christopher Keblitis, and Pamela Davidson made key contributions to this report. Marcus Oliver, Rich Geiger, Triana McNeil, Fred Lyles, Anthony Patterson, Susan Murphy, Benjamin T. Licht, and Sarah E. Veale also contributed.

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