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The Army's New M-1E3 Abrams Tank Modernization Program

Background

The M-1 Abrams Tank (**Figure 1**) is designed to maneuver under fire and destroy enemy armored forces on the battlefield by means of mobility, survivability, and firepower. The M-1 is named for General Creighton Abrams, a noted World War II armored battalion commander who later served as Army Chief of Staff from 1972 to 1974. M-1 Abrams tanks are the primary major weapon system in Armored Brigade Combat Teams (ABCTs). At present, the Active Army has 11 ABCTs, and the Army National Guard has 5 ABCTs. Each ABCT has 87 M-1 Abrams tanks.

Figure 1. M-1A2 Abrams Tank



Source: U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center, <https://asc.army.mil/web/portfolio-item/abrams-main-battle-tank/>, accessed September 8, 2023.

The M-1 program began in December 1971. In June 1973, two contracts were awarded by the Army for prototype development to the Defense Division of Chrysler Corporation (which in 1982 became General Dynamics Land Systems [GDLS]) and the Detroit Diesel Allison Division of General Motors (GM). In 1988, GDLS was awarded a contract for the M-1A2 version, and the first M-1A2s began to enter service in late 1992. The M-1A2 is the baseline export version of this tank. Export versions feature a variety of armor and communications packages. The United States has sold M-1A1 and M-1A2 variants to Australia, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia via Foreign Military Sales (FMS). On January 25, 2023, President Biden announced that the United States would provide Ukraine with 31 M-1 Abrams tanks.

Ongoing M-1 Abrams Modernization Efforts

M-1 Abrams modernization efforts are focused on fielding a M-1A2 System Enhancement Package (SEP) Version 3 (v3) and developing a new M-1A2 SEPv4 variant. According to the Army, both M-1A2 SEPv3 production and

M-1A2 SEPv4 development began in FY2018. In FY2020, the first unit was equipped with M-1A2 SEPv3. In December 2020, GDLS received a \$4.6 billion contract for SEPv3 upgrades, which were expected to be completed by June 2028. For FY2024, the Army requested \$698 million for the Abrams Upgrade Program.

The New M-1E3 Abrams Modernization Program

On September 6, 2023, the Army announced it would “close out the M-1A2 SEPv4 effort and develop the M-1E3 Abrams.” The Army’s announcement quoted Major General (MG) Glenn Dean, Program Executive Officer for Ground Combat Systems, describing the rationale for the decision:

The Abrams Tank can no longer grow its capabilities without adding weight, and we need to reduce its logistical footprint. The war in Ukraine has highlighted a critical need for integrated protections for soldiers, built from within instead of adding on.

The Army announcement elaborated that the new platform:

Will include the best features of the M-1A2 SEPv4 and will comply with the latest modular open systems architecture standards, allowing quicker technology upgrades and requiring fewer resources. This will enable the Army and its commercial partners to design a more survivable, lighter tank that will be more effective on the battlefield at initial fielding, and easier to upgrade in the future.

Regarding M-1A2 SEPv3 production, the Army noted that:

The Army will continue to produce the M-1A2 SEPv3 at a reduced rate until production transitions to the M-1E3 Abrams.

The Army projects achieving Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in 2030. The Army’s FY2025 budget proposal submitted to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) reportedly includes request for funds to begin M-1E3 design work.

Possible Features and Capabilities of the M-1E3

While the Army has not made public the new M-1E3 requirements, reportedly a 2019 Army Science Board study on a future tank influenced senior Army leadership to establish the M-1E3 program. The Army Science Board study reportedly recommended a \$2.9 billion, seven-year program to develop a “fifth generation combat vehicle,” with proposed capabilities including

- a hybrid electric drive;

- an autoloader and new main gun;
- advanced munitions, such as maneuvering hypersonic and gun-launched anti-tank guided missiles;
- integrated armor protection;
- improved command, control, and networking capabilities;
- artificial intelligence (AI) applications;
- ability to pair with robotic vehicles; and
- masking capabilities to reduce the vehicle's thermal and electromagnetic signatures.

Although, as noted, the Army has not articulated formal M-1E3 program requirements, reportedly both weight reduction and a hybrid-electric power drive are seen by the Army as essential features and are being prioritized in order to reduce logistical requirements.

In October 2022, GDLS reportedly unveiled the Abrams X Technology Demonstrator (**Figure 2**). Some Abrams X features reportedly include

- reduced weight (10 tons less than the current M-1 Abrams);
- a hybrid electric diesel engine 50% more fuel-efficient than the current Abrams;
- an unmanned turret which would reduce the crew from four to three soldiers;
- enhanced armor to protect against bombs dropped by drones;
- ability to communicate with unmanned aerial vehicles; and
- an onboard AI system that could both alert the crew to long-range threats and prioritize fires against multiple threats.

While the Abrams X might not meet all of the Army's eventual requirements for a M-1E3 candidate for procurement, it is seen as demonstrating current tank design capabilities.

Figure 2. General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) Abrams X



Source: Breaking Defense, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/03/armys-fy24-budget-request-doesnt-include-funding-for-new-abrams-prototype/>, accessed September 8, 2023.

Considerations for Congress

Potential oversight considerations for Congress could include the following:

- What is the Army's detailed program plan for reduced M-1A2 SEPv3 production?
- How will funds appropriated for M-1A2 SEPv3 production be reallocated?
- What is the economic impact on the defense industrial base participating in M-1A2 SEPv3 production, in particular, the smaller companies involved in the program?
- Will the M-1E3 replace current M-1 Abrams tanks in service on a one-for-one basis, or will the Army maintain a mixed fleet of tanks?
- Will Army National Guard ABCTs receive M-1E3s?
- How many years will it take to field M-1E3s to all of the Army's ABCTs?
- Will M-1E3s be authorized for Foreign Military Sales (FMS)?
- In terms of competition, other than GDLS's Abrams X, have other defense firms designed technology demonstrators or prototypes that might be candidates for a future Army M-1E3 competition?
- Will the M-1E3 incorporate active defense features to counter anti-tank guided missiles (including top attack munitions) and loitering munitions, which have proven effective in the current Ukraine conflict?

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