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Defense Primer: United States Transportation Command

United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) is a Department of Defense (DOD) combatant command responsible for providing air, land, and sea transportation across the globe to meet national security needs.

History and Role

Established in 1987 and headquartered at Scott Air Force Base, IL, USTRANSCOM serves as the U.S. military's primary logistics command, conducting global mobility operations, enabling joint force projection and sustainment, and functioning as the lead DOD element for transportation, global patient movement, and bulk fuel management and delivery.

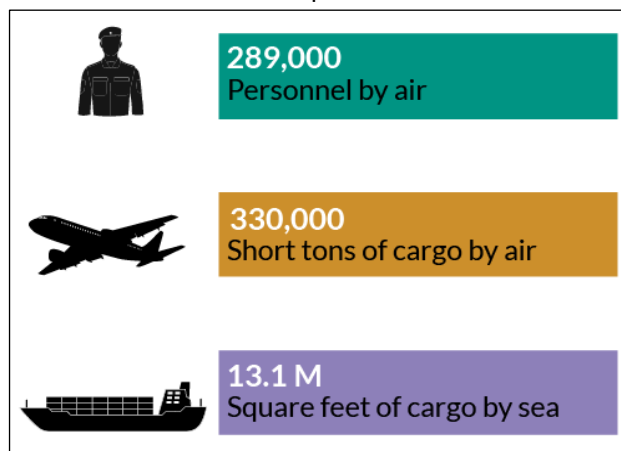
USTRANSCOM has provided strategic mobility in support of several major contingency operations, including Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The command has also played a central role in emergency operations, such as the 2021 Afghanistan noncombatant evacuation operation, and security assistance efforts, including the provision of materiel to Ukraine (following Russia's 2022 invasion) and Israel (following Hamas' 2023 attack on Israel).

Activities and Resources

USTRANSCOM uses a mix of military assets, commercial transportation providers, and foreign partnerships to move DOD personnel and materiel across the globe (see **Figure 1**). In a given year, USTRANSCOM also transports thousands of medical patients, and handles the shipment of personal property in support of hundreds of thousands of permanent change of station (PCS) moves.

Figure 1. USTRANSCOM Activities

In 2023, USTRANSCOM transported:



Source: General Jacqueline Van Ovost, "Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the State of the Command," April 11, 2024, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/van_ovost_statement.pdf.

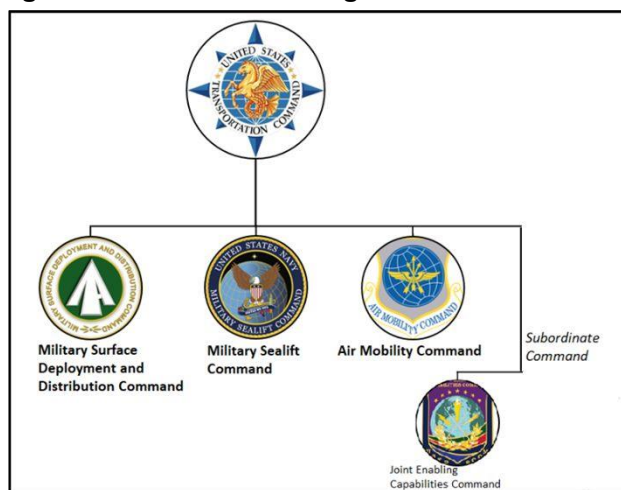
USTRANSCOM's workforce is approximately 73% military and 27% civilian, with a reported combined end strength of 17,120 for fiscal year (FY) 2024.

USTRANSCOM finances its activities through the Transportation Working Capital Fund (TWCF), a defense working capital fund. The TWCF allows USTRANSCOM to conduct activities with minimal need for annual appropriations: instead, DOD components and other federal agencies place orders for transportation services, paying into the TWCF out of their own appropriated funds. As of 2024, USTRANSCOM reported spending approximately \$9.5 billion on transportation annually.

Organization

USTRANSCOM is comprised of a headquarters element, three Transportation Component Commands (TCCs) assigned from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and one joint subordinate command (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. USTRANSCOM Organizational Chart



Source: CRS graphic.

Transportation Component Commands

Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC). SDDC is the USTRANSCOM Army component responsible for surface transportation. Headquartered at Scott Air Force Base, IL, SDDC uses DOD capabilities and commercial partnerships to move equipment and personnel by rail, road, and waterway. SDDC also provides ocean terminal services, traffic management, and transportation engineering globally. SDDC is a major subordinate command to Army Materiel Command.

Military Sealift Command (MSC). MSC is the USTRANSCOM Navy component responsible for sealift and ocean transportation, providing logistics support, moving equipment and cargo, and supplying U.S. and

partner forces. Headquartered at Naval Station Norfolk, VA, MSC operates a fleet of 125 civilian-crewed ships to provide a government-owned oceanic transport capability. When activated, MSC also commands the Ready Reserve Force (RRF), a fleet of 47 ships within the Department of Transportation's larger National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF) providing surge sealift capacity. Within the Navy, MSC reports to U.S. Fleet Forces Command, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition.

Air Mobility Command (AMC). AMC is the USTRANSCOM Air Force component responsible for airlift and aerial transportation across DOD. Headquartered at Scott Air Force Base, IL, AMC utilizes military aircraft and commercial partnerships to provide global support across its four core mission areas of airlift, aerial refueling, air mobility support, and aeromedical evacuation. AMC operates a fleet of more than 1,000 aircraft, including the C-5, C-17, C-130, KC-46, and KC-135. AMC is one of nine four-star level Air Force major commands.

Subordinate Command

In addition to the Transportation Component Commands, USTRANSCOM has one subordinate command: the Joint Enabling Capabilities Command (JECC). According to USTRANSCOM, the JECC “provides planners, public affairs specialists, and communications capabilities to [other] Combatant Commanders.”

Commercial Partnerships

USTRANSCOM develops and maintains a wide variety of contractual relationships between DOD and commercial carriers. In addition to its standard procurement and service contracts, USTRANSCOM is also responsible for two unique partnership programs with the transportation industry: the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) and the Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement (VISA) program.

Civil Reserve Air Fleet

The CRAF is comprised of selected aircraft from U.S. airlines that are contractually committed to support DOD in emergencies when the need for airlift exceeds the capability of military assets. In return, participating airlines receive priority consideration for other DOD airlift contracts. The CRAF is authorized by the Defense Production Act of 1950 (DPA; codified at 50 U.S.C. §4501 *et seq.*) and 10 U.S.C. §9511 *et seq.*

USTRANSCOM is responsible for activating the CRAF (when not activated, its coordination is handled by the Department of Transportation, or DOT). To date, the CRAF has been activated three times: for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm from 1990-91, for Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2002-2003, and for noncombatant evacuation operations in Afghanistan in 2021.

Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement

The VISA program is a partnership between DOD, DOT's Maritime Administration (MARAD), and maritime industry. Like the CRAF, the VISA program is intended to

supplement DOD's logistical capacity during national emergencies. Participating commercial shippers agree to provide oceanic and intermodal capacity in the event VISA is activated; in return, the U.S. government provides these firms with a per-ship annual stipend and preference for the carriage of certain cargoes. The authorities for VISA are the DPA and the Maritime Security Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-239).

As with the CRAF, USTRANSCOM is responsible for activation, while DOT coordinates the program under normal conditions. VISA has never been activated.

Considerations for Congress

- **Contested logistics.** Sustained high-intensity conflict with a great power competitor could create a contested logistics environment unlike any in which the command has previously operated. Congress could consider assessing the degree to which USTRANSCOM is prepared to conduct its operations in such an environment.
- **Sealift capacity.** USTRANSCOM has claimed that the RRF suffers from a “reduction in capacity and readiness,” partly as a result of aging vessels and underinvestment. Some Members of Congress have also contended that the United States lacks sufficient sealift capacity more generally. Congress could consider assessing whether or not the current sealift fleet is sufficient to provide for U.S. needs. If it were to determine that additional capacity is needed, Congress could consider what the most effective blend of acquisition strategies might be, as well as the appropriate level of investment.
- **Aerial refueling capacity.** Under wartime conditions, USTRANSCOM has assessed that the aerial refueling fleet of KC-135 and the new KC-46 tanker aircraft would be subject to considerable stress, especially given the age of the KC-135 platform. Congress may consider assessing how the Air Force's tanker fleet may be optimally managed, including considering the potential development of a Next-Generation Air Refueling System and resourcing for KC-135 recapitalization.
- **Global Household Goods Contract.** In 2024, USTRANSCOM began implementing a new Global Household Goods Contract (GHC) as part of its privatization and reform of the PCS move process. Particularly given that some stakeholders have publicly raised concerns regarding GHC rollout, Congress could consider whether or not to review, modify, or pause GHC implementation.

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