



# Defense Primer: Personnel Tempo (PERSTEMPO)

United States military operations around the globe may lead to prolonged, recurrent deployments for some U.S. servicemembers. Those servicemembers and/or their families may face deployment-related stress. In addition, preparation for deployments (e.g., training, exercises, temporary duty assignments) can incur extended working hours or frequent travel away from a member’s home station. The pace of operations for individuals is commonly referred to as *personnel tempo* (PERSTEMPO) and can affect quality of life, work satisfaction, and overall morale.

Congress oversees PERSTEMPO management, policies and programs. In addition, congressional actions to authorize force size (i.e., end-strength) can affect the number of personnel available for deployment. Appropriated funds for military pay and benefits (including leave and morale programs) may compensate troops for time spent away.

## Background and Definitions

During the mid-1990s, though the nation was not engaged in major conflict, a combination of force drawdowns and increased deployments in support of peacetime missions (e.g., peacekeeping and humanitarian operations) put stress on some servicemembers, particularly those in high-deploying specialty units. A 1996 Government Accountability Office report (GAO/NSIAD-96-105) found that the Department of Defense (DOD) did not have consistent goals or policies for managing personnel tempo. (Note that DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation,” and the Secretary of Defense is using “Secretary of War” as a “secondary title” under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025.) Congress responded by taking steps to require tracking and reporting of PERSTEMPO data and to provide for compensating servicemembers who exceeded thresholds (see **Table 1**).

## Establishing Deployment Thresholds

To more accurately measure the pace of operations and its impacts on military personnel, in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2000 (FY2000 NDAA, P.L. 106-65), Congress added statutory definitions for *deployment* and *high-deployment* thresholds, and also authorized additional compensation for exceeding thresholds (10 U.S.C. §991 and 37 U.S.C. §436). This law also required the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to develop standardized terminology and policies for PERSTEMPO and operating tempo (OPTEMPO), and to track and report on these categories (10 U.S.C. §136(d)).

## Threshold Waiver Authority

Under 10 U.S.C. §991, the Secretaries of the military departments may waive thresholds for “national security” reasons. Shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, a Deputy Secretary of Defense memorandum invoked this waiver authority to indefinitely suspend high-deployment thresholds.

**Table 1. Statutory Definitions and Thresholds**

Term	Definition
<b>PERSTEMPO</b>	The amount of time <i>servicemembers</i> are engaged in their official duties at a location or under circumstances that make it infeasible for a member to spend off-duty time in the housing in which the member resides.
<b>OPTEMPO</b>	The rate at which <i>units</i> are involved in all military activities, including contingency operations, exercises, and training deployments.
<b>Deployed or in a deployment</b>	Any day on which, pursuant to orders, the member is performing service in a training exercise or operation at a location or under circumstances that make it impossible or infeasible for the member to spend off-duty time in the housing in which the member resides when on garrison duty at the member’s permanent duty station or homeport.
<b>High deployment threshold*</b>	One-year: 220 days deployed out of the previous 365 days (not in effect per national security waiver). Two-year: 400 days deployed out of the previous 730.
<b>Dwell time*</b>	The time a member of the Armed Forces or unit spends at the permanent duty station or home port after returning from deployment.

**Sources:** 10 U.S.C. §991 and 10 U.S.C. §136(d). Contingency operations are as defined in 10 U.S.C. §101(a)(13)(B). DOD policy (DODI 1336.07, Table 1) further defines PERSTEMPO events.

**Notes:** \*DODI 1336.07 notes that statutory thresholds have been waived since October 8, 2001 and establishes a force-wide threshold of 400 days deployed out of the preceding 730 days. DOD has also defined *dwell time* differently in policy documents for certain time periods or purposes.

## Establishing “Dwell” Times

As operations in Afghanistan and Iraq intensified in the early 2000s, many observers raised concerns that individuals within certain military occupational specialties were experiencing both lengthy and frequent deployments. While the PERSTEMPO measures captured deployment duration, they did not adequately capture the down time, or *dwell time*, servicemembers had between deployments.

In 2007, DOD established *deploy-to-dwell* and *mobilization-to-dwell* planning objectives for the active and reserve components, respectively. In the FY2012 NDAA

(P.L. 112-81), Congress established a statutory definition of *dwelt time* and provided the Secretary of Defense authority to modify this definition with congressional notification (see **Table 1**). DOD policy, as revised on August 25, 2025, established the following dwell time goals and thresholds:

- Active component (AC): goal deployment-to-dwell ratio of 1:3 or more, and a threshold ratio of 1:2.
- Reserve component (RC): mobilization-to-dwell ratio goal of 1:5 or more, and a threshold ratio of 1:4.

DOD policy requires Secretary approval to deploy a unit, detachment, or individual at ratios below the threshold.

### High-PERSTEMPO Compensation

Congress has sought to incentivize better DOD management of PERSTEMPO and to compensate affected troops by authorizing certain allowances. The FY2000 NDAA (P.L. 106-65), as amended, authorized a high-deployment monthly allowance of up to \$1,000 (at the discretion of the Secretary concerned) for each month that an active component servicemember is deployed for (1) 191 or more consecutive days, or (2) 401 or more days out of the preceding 730 days. RC members are eligible for the allowance when (1) under a call to active duty for more than 30 days that is the second (or later) such call for the same contingency operation; or (2) for a period of more than 30 days, if such period begins within one year after the date on which the member was released from previous service of more than 30 days on active duty (codified under 37 U.S.C. §436).

Deployed servicemembers may also receive hazardous duty and special duty compensation while deployed. Congress has authorized these pays under sections 351 and 352 of Title 37, U.S. Code. Eligibility largely depends on the geographic location of the operation and inherent risks in the servicemember’s duty assignment.

Beginning with the Uniformed Services Pay Act of 1963 (P.L. 88-132), Congress has authorized a Family Separation Allowance (FSA) to compensate for added expenses that result from family separation. This law entitles uniformed servicemembers who are separated from their families due to certain duty assignments for a period of 30 days or more to an FSA not less than \$300 per month and not more than \$400 per month (37 U.S.C. §427).

### PERSTEMPO Tracking and Reporting

Per DOD policy, the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) is to maintain a centralized database of all PERSTEMPO events. Secretaries of the Military Departments and the Commandant of the Coast Guard are responsible for reporting PERSTEMPO events to DMDC. A 2018 GAO study (GAO-18-253) found DOD did not have complete or reliable PERSTEMPO data, and recommended better quality control processes. GAO has since documented that DOD implemented these recommendations by issuing revised policy guidance.

### High-PERSTEMPO Impacts

In general, research has found associations between deployment frequency and duration, and decreased military

spouse well-being (e.g., depression and anxiety), increased child problematic behaviors, and negative effects on parent-child and member-spouse relationships. On the other hand, while several servicemembers express dissatisfaction with increased deployments, there is not a preponderance of evidence to suggest increased deployment has a significant effect on continuation and retention rates. There is some evidence that deployments increase military family savings, potentially due to their eligibility for additional compensation.

### Issues for Congress

During the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Trump Administration has initiated military operations overseas, including Operations Absolute Resolve in Venezuela and Epic Fury in Iran. There have been reports of extended deployments for certain units beyond initial planning parameters, particularly for Naval forces. For example, according to the U.S. Naval Institute, the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier, which was extended at sea in support of these operations, has seen the longest carrier deployment since the Vietnam War era. According to Vice Chief of Naval Operations testimony, the Ford’s deployment is expected to be 11 months – above the one-year high-deployment threshold specified in law. According to DOD policy (DODI 1336.07), this threshold has been suspended since October 8, 2001. A 2004 GAO report found that at the time, the Department viewed the high-deployment allowance as a “peacetime” authority and that it would seek its elimination. Congress has provided DOD with other flexible pay authorities to compensate servicemembers in deployed environments and might consider whether these pays—individually, or in combination—adequately compensate servicemembers for high PERSTEMPO.

Congress could request more information from the services to assess whether they are adequately tracking and managing PERSTEMPO across services, components and occupational specialties. For example, whether certain operators are consistently or more frequently exceeding deployment and dwell thresholds, and if there are any associated impacts on recruitment, retention, or personnel readiness. These factors could contribute to congressional consideration of end-strength figures for the services and components during the defense authorization and appropriation cycle.

### Relevant Statutes and Resources

10 U.S.C. §§136 & 991, 37 U.S.C. §§427 & 436

#### Department of Defense Instructions:

- DODI 1336.07, Management of Personnel Tempo
- DODI 1235.12, Accessing the Reserve Components
- DODI 1340.09, Hazard Pay Program
- DODI 1340.26, Assignment and Special Duty Pays

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