



Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected (MRAP) Vehicles: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Congress has played a central role in the MRAP program by suggesting to defense and service officials that MRAPs would provide far superior protection for troops than did the up-armored High Mobility, Multi-Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs). Congressional support for MRAPs, as well as fully funding the program, has been credited with getting these vehicles to Iraq and Afghanistan in a relatively short timeframe, thereby helping to reduce casualties. Congress will likely continue to be interested in the MRAP program to ensure that the appropriate types and numbers of these vehicles are fielded, as well as to monitor the post-conflict disposition of these vehicles, as they represent a significant investment.

In late 2007, the Department of Defense (DOD) launched a major procurement initiative to replace most up-armored HMMWVs in Iraq with Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected (MRAP) vehicles. MRAPs have been described as providing significantly more protection against Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) than up-armored HMMWVs. Currently, DOD has approved an acquisition objective of 25,700 vehicles, of which 8,100 are the newer Military-All-Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV) version, designed to meet the challenges of Afghanistan's rugged terrain. DOD officials have indicated that this total may be increased depending on operational needs in Afghanistan. As of June 28, 2010, more than 8,500 MRAPs had reportedly been shipped to Afghanistan, with over 3,500 of those being the newer M-ATVs. The Army has recently said that it will begin development of yet another MRAP version—the “Ultra-Lite MRAP”—which raises questions about possible vehicle redundancies. The Marines, although voicing support for the M-ATV program, have retrofitted a number of MRAPs with new suspension systems and reportedly are satisfied with the results. This apparent success calls into question not only if the Marines need all of the M-ATVs allocated to them by DOD but also if the Marines' retrofitted suspension system might be a more cost-effective alternative for the other services.

Through FY2010, Congress appropriated \$34.95 billion for all versions of the MRAP. In March 2010, DOD reprogrammed an additional \$3.9 billion from the Overseas Contingency Operations fund to MRAP procurement. Congress approved an additional \$1.2 billion for MRAP procurement, included in the FY2010 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-212). The full FY2011 DOD budget request of \$3.4 billion for the MRAP Vehicle Fund has been authorized by the House (H.R. 5136). The Senate Armed Services Committee has recommended approval of DOD's request, though floor action has not yet occurred. The DOD budget request remains under consideration by both House and Senate Appropriations Committees.

Among potential issues for congressional consideration are the status of almost 5,000 MRAPs in Afghanistan that are reportedly not being used because of their size and weight; possible redundancies with the MRAP, M-ATV, and the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle programs; and actual Marine M-ATV requirements.

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Background

Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected (MRAP) vehicles are a family of vehicles produced by a variety of domestic and international companies. They generally incorporate a “V”-shaped hull and armor plating designed to provide protection against mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). DOD originally intended to procure three types of MRAPs.¹ These included Category I vehicles, capable of carrying up to 7 personnel and intended for urban operations; Category II vehicles, capable of carrying up to 11 personnel and intended for a variety of missions such as supporting security, convoy escort, troop or cargo transport, medical, explosive ordnance disposal, or combat engineer operations; and Category III vehicles, intended to be used primarily to clear mines and IEDs, capable of carrying up to 13 personnel. The Army and Marines first employed MRAPs in limited numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003, primarily for route clearance and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) operations. These route clearance MRAPs quickly gained a reputation for providing superior protection for their crews, and some suggested that MRAPs might be a better alternative for transporting troops in combat than up-armored HMMWVs. DOD officials have stated that the casualty rate for MRAPs is 6%, making it “the most survivable vehicle we have in our arsenal.” By comparison, the M-1 Abrams main battle tank was said to have a casualty rate of 15%, and the up-armored HMMWV, a 22% casualty rate.²

DOD’s MRAP Requirement³

Ashton Carter, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, has approved an acquisition objective⁴ of 25,700 MRAP vehicles for all services. Of this total, 8,100 will be the new MRAP-All Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV) designed to better handle the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. DOD officials have indicated that this requirement may increase depending upon the operational needs in Afghanistan.

MRAPs Deployment and Disposition

As of June 28, 2010, more than 8,500 MRAPs had reportedly been shipped to Afghanistan, with over 3,500 of those being the newer M-ATVs.⁵ Of the more than 5,000 older model MRAPs deployed to Afghanistan, most are reportedly not used, as they are considered too large and bulky for tactical missions.⁶

As U.S. forces began drawing down in Iraq, the Army and Marines had planned to put the majority of the earlier versions of the MRAPs into prepositioned stocks at various overseas

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report, Subject: Rapid Acquisition of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles, July 15, 2008.

² Information in this section is taken from DOD Press Transcripts, “DOD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell,” May 15, 2008.

³ “DOD Spends Nearly \$1.1 Billion on More MRAPs,” *Inside the Army*, February 22, 2010.

⁴ An acquisition objective is a Department of Defense approved total number of vehicles/systems/items of equipment that are to be produced as part of a program.

⁵ Tony Bertuca, “Officials Look to Future of MRAPs as M-ATVs Are Deployed to Afghanistan,” *InsideDefense.com*, June 28, 2010.

⁶ *Ibid.*

locations, ship a number back to the United States for training, and place a number into logistics and route clearance units. However, with the increase of U.S. forces deploying to Afghanistan and Secretary of Defense requirements to make better use of MRAPs, these plans have been adjusted. Currently, of the almost 15,000 Army MRAPs, according to a June 2010 Army briefing, about 5,750 will be assigned to infantry brigade combat teams, 1,700 to heavy brigade combat teams, and about 165 to Stryker brigades.⁷ Support units will be assigned about 5,350 vehicles, about 1,000 MRAPs will be used for home station and institutional training, and approximately 1,000 MRAPs will be assigned to war reserve stocks and be used to replace damaged or destroyed MRAPs.⁸ The Marines are reportedly still developing their ground vehicle strategy and have previously suggested that MRAPs have deployability limitations under the concept of a sea-based, expeditionary Marine force.⁹

In June 2010, DOD announced that it would shift about \$20 million into Army research accounts to develop an “ultra-lite prototype” MRAP.¹⁰ If successful, an ultra-lite MRAP version could undermine DOD’s Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV)¹¹ program, which could be worth tens of billions of dollars and is intended to replace the HMMWV.

Growing Need for MRAPs in Afghanistan¹²

The Pentagon’s Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) reports that roadside bomb incidents in Afghanistan through June 2010 have increased 22% since June 2009. During this year-long period, effective IED attacks increased by 45% and from January to June 2010, there had been 648 effective IED attacks resulting in 182 coalition forces deaths while wounding 1,303. The most common IEDs are pressure plate, or victim-operated, IEDs, followed by command wire and remote control IEDs. Attacks are expected to increase over the summer and fall as more troops are deployed to Afghanistan, but IED attacks could decrease over the winter months because of harder ground and difficult weather conditions.

A New MRAP Version for Afghanistan: The M-ATV

In the summer of 2008, DOD began to examine the possibility of developing and procuring a lighter-weight, all-terrain capable MRAP variant to address the poor roads and extreme terrain of Afghanistan. This new vehicle—designated the MRAP-All-Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV)—weighs 12 tons (as opposed to the 14 to 24 tons of the earlier MRAP variants) and has better off-road mobility, while providing adequate armor protection.¹³ Despite early concerns over whether one company could fulfill the M-ATV requirement in a timely manner and provide the logistical

⁷ Information in this section is taken from an Army Briefing given to CRS, “Operational Adaptability Through Affordable Force Modernization,” June 17, 2010.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Kate Brannen, “Mobility vs. Survivability,” *Defense News*, June 7, 2010.

¹⁰ Jason Sherman, “DOD Boosts Army FY-10 Research Accounts in Bid to Develop “Ultra-Lite” MRAP Prototype,” *InsideDefense.com*, July 6, 2010.

¹¹ For information on the JLTV see CRS Report RS22942, *Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV): Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew Feickert, August 3, 2009.

¹² Information in this section is taken from a JIEDDO Fact Sheet dated August 2010.

¹³ “M-ATV: MRAP All-Terrain Vehicle,” Oshkosh Defense, August 2009.

support for the vehicles' maintenance, Oshkosh Defense has experienced no reported difficulties meeting DOD delivery expectations. Furthermore, the Defense Logistics Agency maintains that owing to a design emphasizing "commonality of parts," many of the necessary spare parts and maintenance items are already within the supply system, thereby allowing the vehicles to be repaired in theater.¹⁴

Marines May Not Want All of the M-ATVs Allocated to Them¹⁵

Marine Corps leadership has indicated that they are not willing to wait for M-ATVs and have instead taken measures to retro-fit Category I and II MRAPs that they already have with a new suspension system at a fraction of the cost of newer M-ATVs. The Marines are apparently satisfied with the performance of these retro-fitted MRAPs and are considering procuring fewer M-ATVs as a result. The Marines have said that "we're going to get it [retrofitted MRAPs] there faster than waiting for the development of the MRAP series designated for Afghan use [M-ATVs] and we're going to do it at a fraction of the price."¹⁶ Because of the Marines' statements regarding their acquisition of M-ATVs, the recent JROC allocation of M-ATVs might not accurately represent actual Marine Corps needs.

Status of M-ATV Effort

In January 2009, Navistar, a Force Protection and Michigan-based General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) team, Oshkosh, General Dynamics Land Systems-Canada (GDLS-C), and BAE Systems were said to have submitted written bids and armor samples. In late February 2009, prototypes were delivered to Aberdeen Proving Grounds for evaluation with a contract award scheduled for June 2009. On March 30, 2009, Navistar filed a protest citing an "unspecified technicality in the government's evaluation of its proposal" and GDLS-C announced that they were dropping out of the M-ATV competition.¹⁷ Navistar withdrew its protest in early April after the contract was amended by program officials, and sole-source contracts have since been awarded to Oshkosh Defense. Oshkosh was awarded \$1 billion to develop up to 10,000 M-ATVs.¹⁸

MRAP Funding

Prior year MRAP funding, including wartime supplemental and reprogramming, in billions:

- FY2006 and prior: \$0.173
- FY2007: \$5.411

¹⁴ "Agencies Work to Field, Support M-ATVs," American Forces Press Service, October 16, 2009.

¹⁵ Emelie Rutherford, "Conway: Marine Corps May Buy Limited Number of M-ATVs," *Defense Daily*, June 3, 2009, and Bettina H. Chavanne, "U.S. Marine Corps Reconsiders JLTV," *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, April 30, 2009.

¹⁶ Michael Bruno, "U.S. Marine Commandant Promises Osprey, MRAP Developments," *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, June 12, 2009.

¹⁷ Marjorie Censer, "Navistar Files Protest in MRAP ATV Competition; GDLS-C Out," *InsideDefense.com*, April 2, 2009.

¹⁸ Dan Lamothe, "Engine, Door-Handle Problems Continue to Plague M-ATVs," *Marine Corps Times*, May 31, 2010, p. 20.

- FY2008: \$16.838
- FY2009: \$6.243
- FY2010: \$6.281
- TOTAL: \$34.946

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Potential Issues for Congress

Status of Unused MRAPs in Afghanistan

As previously noted, as many as 5,000 MRAPs shipped to Afghanistan are reportedly not being used because their size and weight severely limit their effectiveness.¹⁹ If a large number of MRAPs are, in fact, not being used then a fundamental question is, why were they shipped to Afghanistan in the first place? Were these vehicles shipped to Afghanistan, as some say, for symbolic as opposed to operational reasons and, if so, what is the total cost for these 5,000 or so vehicles to be shipped and maintained in theater? If these vehicles are not being used, is there a better use for them elsewhere or are they to be left in country after the eventual departure of U.S. forces?

Are the M-ATV, Ultra-Lite MRAP, and JLTV Redundant Programs?

In August 2009 briefings to the House Armed Services Committee Air and Land Forces, and Seapower and Expeditionary Forces Subcommittees, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted that “the introduction of MRAP, M-ATV and eventually the JLTV creates a potential risk of unplanned overlap in capabilities; a risk that needs to be managed.”²⁰ Defense officials have also been asked if there is a need for the MRAP/M-ATV and JLTV programs, as these programs share as many as 250 requirements.²¹ While DOD leadership notes that there are 450 additional requirements that the MRAPs and M-ATVs cannot meet, thereby justifying the JLTV program,²² the Army's intent to develop a fourth type of vehicle—the Ultra-Lite MRAP—

¹⁹ Tony Bertuca, “Officials Look to Future of MRAPs as M-ATVs Are Deployed to Afghanistan,” *InsideDefense.com*, June 28, 2010.

²⁰ GAO Briefing to the House Armed Services Committee Air and Land Forces, and Seapower and Expeditionary Forces Subcommittees, “Status of DOD Tactical Wheeled Vehicle Strategy,” August 13, 2009, p. 3.

²¹ Cid Standifer, “Taylor: JLTV Absolutely Needed, Regardless of MRAP and M-ATV,” *Inside the Navy*, November 9, 2009.

²² *Ibid.*

calls into question all four programs. Despite calls from Congress for DOD and the services to develop comprehensive tactical wheeled vehicle strategies, it appears that with the emergence of the Ultra-Light MRAP initiative, there is no consensus on what types of vehicles are needed. If the services continue to look for “the next best thing” in terms of tactical wheeled vehicles instead of committing to the M-ATV and JLTV programs, they could run the risk of significant redundancies and not being able to afford recapitalizing and replacing the HMMWV fleet.

The Marines and the M-ATV

The Marines appear to be aggressively pursuing the retrofitting of Category I and II MRAPs with an enhanced suspension system in lieu of a large-scale M-ATV acquisition. The Marines claim that this is also a more cost-effective approach (reportedly \$160,000 per vehicle²³) to the operational need for lighter and more maneuverable MRAPs for Afghanistan. The Marines’ approach raises a number of questions for possible consideration. What are the cost savings associated with the Marines’ retrofitting effort? Given retrofitting, do the Marines require the JROC-mandated 1,565 M-ATVs, or do the Marines actually require fewer vehicles? Have the other services—particularly the Army—considered the Marine approach to retrofitting Class I and II MRAPs? If the other services have examined the Marines’ approach and rejected it, what was their operational rationale for doing so?

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²³ Scott Calvert, “Aberdeen Tests Military’s Cougar,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 12, 2009.