

**GAO**

Report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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September 2009

**DEPARTMENT OF  
STATE**

**Comprehensive Plan  
Needed to Address  
Persistent Foreign  
Language Shortfalls**



**GAO**

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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-955](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Proficiency in foreign languages is a key skill for U.S. diplomats to advance U.S. interests overseas. GAO has issued several reports highlighting the Department of State's (State) persistent foreign language shortages. In 2006, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to improve the language proficiency of its staff. State responded by providing examples of activities it believed addressed our recommendation. In this report, which updates the 2006 report, GAO (1) examined the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfall, (2) assessed State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and described the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assessed the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements. GAO analyzed data on State's overseas language-designated positions; reviewed strategic planning and budgetary documents; interviewed State officials; and conducted fieldwork in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey.

## What GAO Recommends

To address State's persistent foreign language shortfalls, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, strategic plan that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. State generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-955](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## DEPARTMENT OF STATE

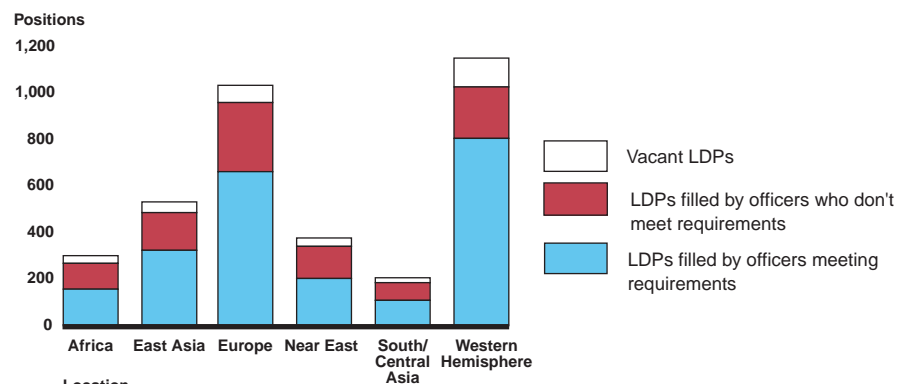
### Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls

#### What GAO Found

As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of Foreign Service officers in overseas language-designated positions (LDP) did not meet both the foreign languages speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions. State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in regions of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in LDPs did not meet requirements. Despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in critical languages, shortfalls in supercritical languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent. Past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, and others have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. activities overseas. Overseas fieldwork for this report reaffirmed this conclusion.

State's approach to meeting its foreign language requirements includes an annual review of all LDPs, language training, recruitment of language-proficient staff, and pay incentives for language skills. For example, State trains staff in about 70 languages in Washington and overseas, and has reported a training success rate of 86 percent. Moreover, State offers bonus points for language-proficient applicants who have passed the Foreign Service exam and has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004. However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, a primary challenge is overall staffing shortages, which limit the number of staff available for language training, as well as the recent increase in LDPs.

State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements have yielded some results but have not closed persistent gaps and reflect, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach. State officials have said that the department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these needs; however these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, or milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. Because these gaps have persisted over several years despite staffing increases, we believe that a more comprehensive, strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide its efforts and assess its progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

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## Abbreviations

FSI	Foreign Service Institute
FSO	Foreign Service officer
HR	Bureau of Human Resources
ILR	Interagency Language Roundtable
LDP	language-designated position
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

September 17, 2009

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Chairman  
The Honorable George V. Voinovich  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government  
Management, the Federal Workforce,  
and the District of Columbia  
Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

Proficiency in foreign languages is a key skill for U.S. Foreign Service officers (FSO) to advance U.S. foreign policy and economic interests overseas. The Department of State (State) seeks to develop employees who are able to competently and credibly convey America's message to foreign audiences and understand the perspectives of our interlocutors in foreign languages and requires foreign language proficiency for thousands of positions overseas. In 2008, approximately 45 percent of all Foreign Service positions overseas were designated as requiring foreign language skills. Over the years, we have issued several reports highlighting State's persistent shortages in staff with critical foreign language skills,<sup>1</sup> including most recently in 2006, when we reported that almost one-third of staff in language-designated positions did not meet the language requirements of their positions despite a number of initiatives to improve the department's foreign language capabilities. We recommended that State systematically evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to increase the language proficiency of its officers. State responded by providing examples of activities it believed addressed our recommendation. In fiscal year 2009, State received funding for 300 additional positions to rebuild its training

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<sup>1</sup>See GAO, *State Department: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, [GAO-07-1154T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 1, 2007); *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, [GAO-06-894](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2006); *State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages*, [GAO-04-139](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 19, 2003);, *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, [GAO-02-375](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002); and, *More Competence In Foreign Languages Needed By Federal Personnel Working Overseas*, ID-80-31 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 15, 1980).

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capacity, or “float,” to limit the number of overseas positions that are vacant while employees are in language training.<sup>2</sup>

You asked us to build on and update our previous studies on State’s foreign language proficiency challenges and measures to address them. Specifically, this report (1) examines the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, (2) assesses State’s efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and describes the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assesses the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements.

To identify the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements, we analyzed data provided by State that listed all overseas language-designated positions and the language skills of the incumbents filling the positions as of October 31, 2008.<sup>3</sup> To describe the potential impact of language proficiency shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, we reviewed previous GAO reports, as well as reports by State’s Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks, and interviewed several current and former senior State officials. To assess State’s efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and related challenges, and the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet its foreign language requirements, we reviewed State’s planning documents, including strategic plans, performance reports, and budget justifications and compared these documents with guidance on comprehensive workforce planning developed by GAO and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). For all three objectives, we interviewed officials from State’s Bureaus of Human Resources (HR), Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, and the geographic bureaus; the Foreign Service Institute (FSI); and officials at overseas posts in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey. Appendix I provides a detailed description of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2008 to September 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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<sup>2</sup>“Float” is an informal term to describe having additional staff on hand to cover the workload given a percentage of staff not present because of training or transition.

<sup>3</sup>A large number of Foreign Service officers transfer from one post to another over the summer. Most officers have arrived at post by October; thus, according to State officials, data as of October 31 provide the best snapshot available.

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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.

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## Results in Brief

State continues to have notable gaps in its foreign language capabilities, which could hinder U.S. overseas operations. As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of officers in all worldwide language-designated positions did not meet both the foreign language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions, up slightly from 29 percent in 2005. In particular, State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions did not meet requirements. Gaps were notably high in Afghanistan, where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, with 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacking sufficient language skills. Shortfalls in supercritical needs languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent, despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in these languages. Past reports by GAO, State’s Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, and intelligence-gathering efforts. Our fieldwork for this report indicates these conclusions are still relevant. For example, consular officers at a post we visited said that because of a lack of language skills, they make adjudication decisions based on what they “hope” they heard in visa interviews, consistent with findings of State’s Office of the Inspector General and our 2006 report, altogether covering seven posts.

State’s current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements involves an annual review process, training, recruitment, and incentives; however, the department faces several challenges to these efforts, particularly staffing shortages. State’s annual language designation process results in a list of positions requiring language skills. State primarily uses language training to meet its foreign language requirements, and does so mostly at FSI in Arlington, Virginia, but also at field schools and post language training overseas. In 2008, the department reported a training success rate of 86 percent. In addition, the department recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program, and pays bonuses to encourage staff to study and maintain a level of proficiency in certain languages. The

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department has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004. However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, two main challenges are overall staffing shortages, which limit the number of staff available for language training, and the recent increase in language-designated positions. The staffing shortages are exacerbated by officers curtailing their tours at posts, for example to staff the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has led to a decrease in the number of officers in the language training pipeline. These departures often force their successors to arrive at post early without having completed language training. As part of its effort to address these staffing shortfalls, in fiscal year 2009 State requested and received funding for 300 new positions to build a training capacity, intended to reduce gaps at post while staff are in language training. State officials said that if the department's fiscal year 2010 request for 200 additional positions is approved, the department's language gaps will begin to close in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met. Another challenge is the widely held perception among Foreign Service officers that State's promotion system does not consider time spent in language training when evaluating officers for promotion, which may discourage officers from investing the time required to achieve proficiency in certain languages. Although HR officials dispute this perception, the department has not conducted a statistically significant assessment of the impact of language training on promotions.

State's current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements has not closed the department's persistent language proficiency gaps and reflects, in part, a lack of a comprehensive strategic direction. Common elements of comprehensive workforce planning—described by GAO as part of a large body of work on human capital management—include setting strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals.<sup>4</sup> In the past, State officials have asserted that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed. More recently, State officials have said that the department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is

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<sup>4</sup>GAO *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).



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spread throughout a number of documents that address these requirements, including the department's Five-Year Workforce Plan. However, these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. We believe that a more comprehensive strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide and assess progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.

To address State's long-standing foreign language proficiency shortfalls, this report recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

State generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In addition, State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations. State also provided technical comments, which we have included throughout this report as appropriate.

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## Background

State is the lead agency for the conduct of American diplomacy, and its foreign affairs activities seek to promote and protect the interests of American citizens. State requires that Foreign Service officers assigned to certain positions worldwide meet a specified level of proficiency in the language or languages of the host country. As of October 31, 2008, State had about 3,600 positions worldwide that required language proficiency and 530 positions where such proficiency was preferred but not required (language-preferred positions). (See table 1.) State categorizes these languages as "world" (for example, Spanish or French), "hard" (for example, Urdu), or "superhard" (for example, Arabic or Chinese) based on the time it generally takes individuals to learn them. State has also defined its need for staff proficient in some languages as "supercritical" or "critical," based on criteria such as the difficulty of the language and the number of language-designated positions in that language, particularly at

hard-to-staff posts.<sup>5</sup> About 970, or 27 percent of, language-designated positions are for supercritical or critical needs languages.

**Table 1: Overseas Language-Designated Positions, by Language Type and Region as of October 31, 2008**

	Number of language-designated positions
<b>Language type</b>	
Critical	373
Supercritical	600
Other	2,626
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,599</b>
<b>Region</b>	
Africa	301
East Asia/Pacific	532
Europe	1,033
Near East	377
South/Central Asia	206
Western Hemisphere	1,150
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,599</b>

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

## Proficiency Scale

State uses the foreign language proficiency scale established by the federal Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) to rank an individual's language skills.<sup>6</sup> The scale has six levels, from 0 to 5—with 5 being the most proficient—to assess an individual's ability to speak, read, listen, and write in another language. State sets proficiency requirements only for speaking and reading, and these requirements tend to congregate at proficiency

<sup>5</sup>Currently, supercritical needs languages are Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Chinese (Mandarin), Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Critical needs languages are Arabic (forms other than Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese (Cantonese), Kazakh, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek.

<sup>6</sup>The ILR is an unfunded federal interagency organization established for the coordination and sharing of information about language-related activities at the federal level. State is a member of ILR's steering committee, and FSI officials said that they occasionally host ILR meetings. According to ILR, its guidelines are accepted by all agencies of the federal government and are used as a primary reference in the different government tests of language ability.

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levels 2 and 3.<sup>7</sup> Table 2 shows the language skill requirements for each proficiency level.

**Table 2: Proficiency and Language Capability Requirements**

<b>Proficiency level</b>	<b>Language capability requirements</b>
0–None	No practical capability in the language.
1–Elementary	Sufficient capability to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy and travel requirements.
2–Limited working	Sufficient capability to meet routine social demands and limited job requirements. Can deal with concrete topics in past, present, and future tense.
3–General professional	Able to use the language with sufficient ability to participate in most formal and informal discussion on practical, social, and professional topics. Can conceptualize and hypothesize.
4–Advanced professional	Able to use the language fluently and accurately in all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Has range of language skills necessary for persuasion, negotiation, and counseling.
5–Functionally native	Able to use the language at a functional level equivalent to that of a highly articulate, well-educated native speaker.

Source: Compiled by GAO from Interagency Language Roundtable documents.

The difference between the second and the third proficiency levels—the ability to interact effectively with native speakers—is significant in terms of training costs and productivity. For example, State provides about 44 weeks of training to bring a new speaker of a so-called superhard language such as Arabic up to the second level. Moving to level-3 proficiency usually requires another 44 weeks of training, which is generally conducted at field schools overseas.

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<sup>7</sup>Proficiency levels are often abbreviated. For example “S-3/R-3” or “3/3” refers to level-3 proficiency in speaking and reading.

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## State Continues to Face Shortfalls in Meeting Its Foreign Language Requirements, with Potentially Adverse Effects on Department Operations

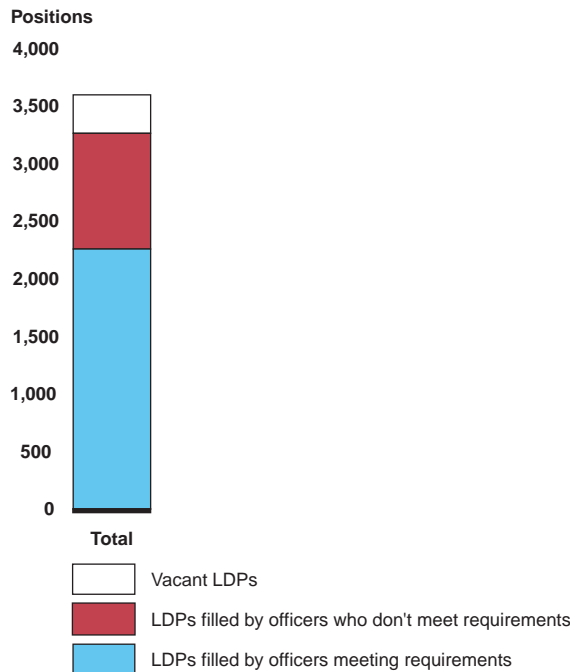
State faces notable shortfalls in meeting its foreign language requirements for overseas language-designated positions. Overall, 31 percent of Foreign Service generalists and specialists in language-designated positions worldwide did not meet the speaking and reading proficiency requirements of their positions as of October 31, 2008. While the extent of these shortfalls varies, they are found in all regions, in all languages, and in all types of positions. These shortfalls may have adverse impacts on security, public diplomacy, consular operations, economic and political affairs, and other aspects of U.S. diplomacy.

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## Some Foreign Service Officers Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions

As of October 2008, 31 percent of Foreign Service generalists and specialists in language-designated positions worldwide did not meet both of the speaking and reading proficiency requirements of their positions, up from 29 percent in 2005. The percentage decreases to 25 percent if officers who meet at least one of the requirements are included. Overall, 1,005 officers in language-designated positions did not meet both of the requirements of their positions, and an additional 334 language-designated positions were vacant (see fig. 1). The persistence of these shortfalls is partially attributable to an overall increase of 332 overseas language-designated positions between 2005 and 2008, many of which are in hard and superhard languages. At the same time, State increased the overall number of language-proficient officers who meet the requirements for their positions by about 240 officers between 2005 and 2008.

**Figure 1: Number of Overseas LDPs Filled by Officers Meeting the Requirements, Filled by Officers Who Do Not Meet the Requirements, and Vacant, as of October 31, 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

State reports annually to Congress on foreign language proficiency in the department; however, its methodology for calculating the percentage of officers who meet the requirements is potentially misleading and overstates the actual language proficiency of FSOs in language-designated positions. For example, State has reported that over 80 percent of employees assigned to vacant language-designated positions met or exceeded the proficiency requirement in each year since fiscal year 2005. According to HR officials responsible for compiling and analyzing these data, however, this figure is not the percentage of officers currently in language-designated positions who have tested scores at or above the requirements for the position; rather, it measures the percentage of officers assigned to language-designated positions who are enrolled in language training, regardless of the outcome of that training. Because several officers do not complete the entire training, while others do not achieve the level of proficiency required even after taking the training, the actual percentage of officers meeting the requirements for their positions is likely lower.

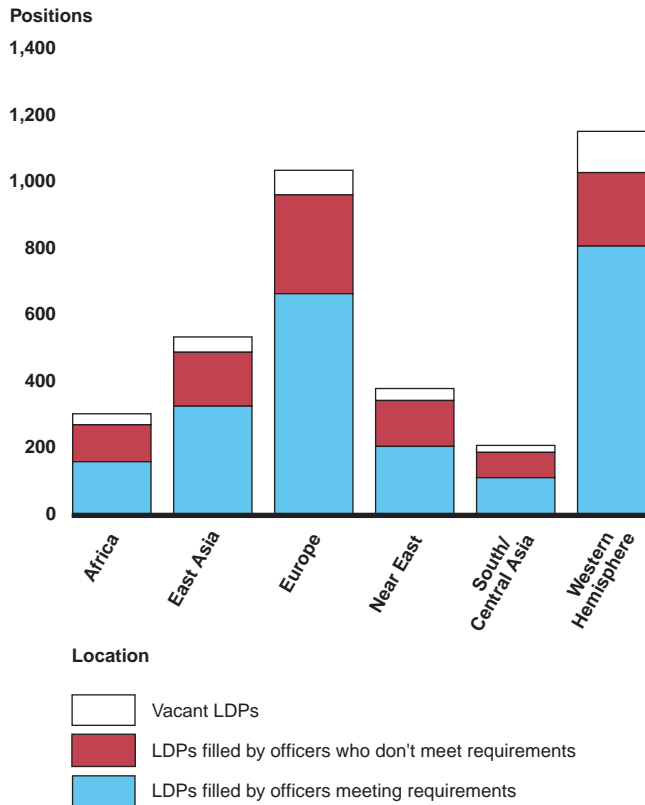
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While the extent of language deficiencies varies from post to post, some of the greatest deficiencies exist in regions of strategic interest to the United States (see fig. 2). For example, about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions in the Middle East and South and Central Asia did not meet the requirements for their positions. Further, 57 percent (or 8 officers) and 73 percent (or 33 officers) of officers in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, did not meet the requirements for their positions.<sup>8</sup> Other missions with notable gaps include Pakistan (45 percent/5 officers), Egypt (43 percent/13 officers), India (43 percent/12 officers), and Saudi Arabia (38 percent/12 officers).

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<sup>8</sup>Staffing has increased at posts in these countries. For example, positions in Baghdad increased from 216 in 2006 to 329 in 2009 and positions in Afghanistan increased from 100 in 2006 to 170 in 2009.

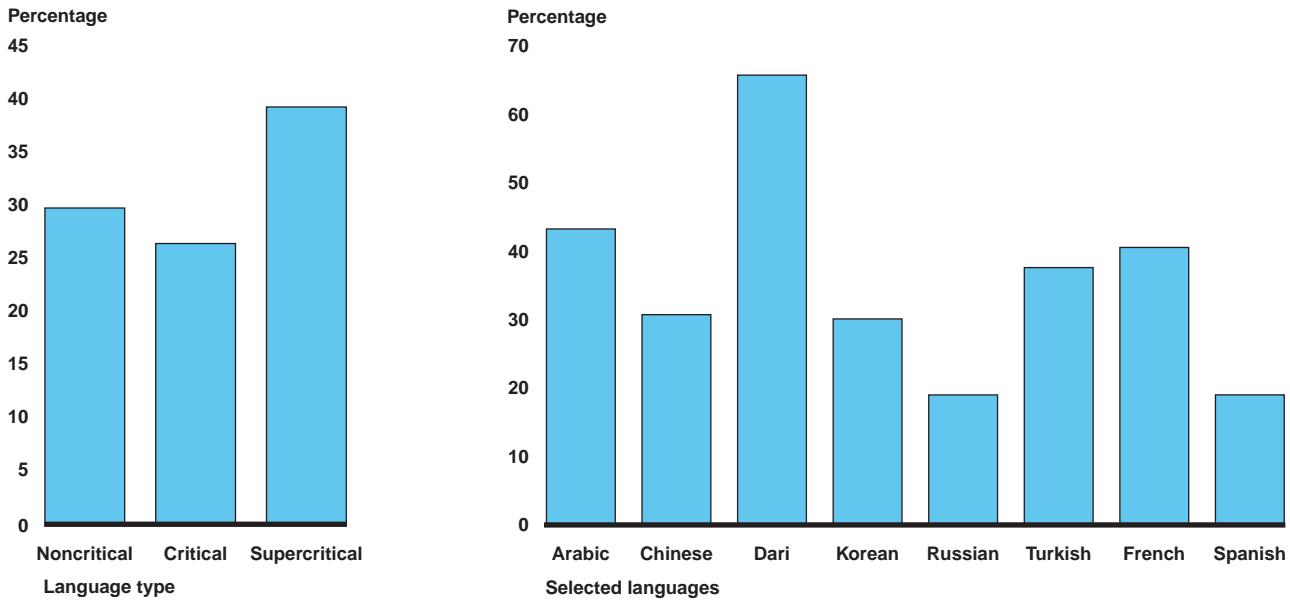
**Figure 2: Number of Overseas LDPs, by Region, Filled by Officers Meeting the Requirements, Filled by Officers Who Do Not Meet the Requirements, and Vacant, as of October 31, 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Despite State’s recent efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in supercritical and critical languages, and some improvement in filling language-designated positions in certain critical languages since 2005, the department continues to experience notable gaps in these languages (see fig. 3). In 2008, 73 more positions in supercritical needs languages were filled by officers meeting the requirements than in 2005. However, 39 percent of officers assigned to LDPs in supercritical languages still do not meet the requirements for their positions, compared with 26 percent in critical languages and 30 percent in all other languages. Specifically, 43 percent of officers in Arabic language-designated positions do not meet the requirements of their positions (107 officers in 248 filled positions), nor do 66 percent of officers in Dari positions (21 officers in 32 positions), 38 percent in Farsi (5 officers in 13 positions), or 50 percent in Urdu (5 officers in 10 positions).

**Figure 3: Percentage of Foreign Service Officers Who Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions, by Language Type and Selected Languages**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Shortfalls vary by position type. Foreign Service specialists—staff who perform security, technical, and other support functions—are less likely to meet the language requirements of their position than Foreign Service generalists. More than half of the 739 specialists in language-designated positions do not meet the requirements, compared with 24 percent of the 2,526 generalists. For example, 53 percent of regional security officers do not speak and read at the level required by their positions.<sup>9</sup> According to officials in Diplomatic Security, language training for security officers is often cut short because many ambassadors are unwilling to leave security positions vacant. Further, among Foreign Service generalists, 58 percent of officers in management positions do not meet the language requirements, compared with 16 percent of officers in consular positions and 23 percent of officers in public diplomacy positions.

<sup>9</sup>Regional security officers are special agents operating out of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security assigned to U.S. diplomatic missions overseas, responsible for the protection of personnel and their families, facilities, and classified information.



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When posts are unable to fill language-designated positions with language-qualified officers, they must decide whether to request a language waiver and staff the position with an officer who does not meet the language requirements or to leave the position unstaffed until an officer with the requisite skills is available. In some cases, a post chooses to leave a language-designated position vacant for a period of time while an officer is getting language training. In other cases, when a post has requested repeated language waivers for a specific position, it may request that the language requirement be eliminated for the position. According to State, in 2008 the department granted 282 such waivers—covering about 8 percent of all language-designated positions—down from 354 in 2006. State granted a disproportionate number of waivers for South and Central Asia, where the language requirement for about 18 percent of the region’s 206 language-designated positions was waived in 2008, compared with 5 percent in both East Asia and the Western Hemisphere.

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### Language Shortfalls May Negatively Affect Aspects of U.S. Diplomacy

Our fieldwork for this report, in addition to past reports by GAO, State’s Office of the Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks, has indicated that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting several aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including consular operations, security, public diplomacy, economic and political affairs, the development of relationships with foreign counterparts and audiences, and staff morale. It is sometimes difficult to link foreign language shortfalls to a specific negative outcome or event, and senior officials at State have noted that language shortfalls neither prevent officers from doing their jobs nor have catastrophic consequences. However, these officials acknowledged that the cumulative effects of these gaps do present a problem, and the department has not assessed their impact on the conduct of foreign policy. Table 3 presents some examples of such impacts from our current fieldwork, previous GAO reports, and reports by State’s Inspector General, the National Research Council, and the Department of Defense.

**Table 3. Examples of the Potential Impact of Language Shortfalls from GAO Fieldwork, Previous GAO Reports, and Reports by Other Organizations**

	<b>GAO (2009)</b>	<b>Previous GAO reports</b>	<b>Other reports</b>
Consular operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consular officers in Cairo said that because of a lack of language skills, they make decisions based on what they “hope” they have heard and, as a result, may be incorrectly adjudicating visa decisions.</li> <li>• A consular officer in Istanbul proficient in Turkish said she has seen cases where adjudicating officers have refused visa applications because they did not fully understand the applicant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Officials at one high-fraud visa post stated that, because of language skill deficiencies, consular officers sometimes adjudicate visas without fully understanding everything visa applicants tell them during visa interviews (2006).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State’s Inspector General found that the ability of consular officers in at least two Arabic-speaking posts to conduct in-depth interviews necessary for homeland security is limited (2005).</li> <li>• State’s Inspector General found that insufficient Chinese language skills were a serious weakness in the U.S. Mission to China’s consular operations (2004).</li> </ul>
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A security officer in Istanbul said that inability to speak the local language hinders one’s ability to get embedded in the society and develop personal relationships, which limits officers’ effectiveness.</li> <li>• A security officer in Cairo said that without language skills, officers do not have any “juice”—that is, the ability to influence people they are trying to elicit information from.</li> <li>• An officer at a post of strategic interest said because she did not speak the language, she had transferred a sensitive telephone call from a local informant to a local employee, which could have compromised the informant’s identity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to one regional security officer, the lack of foreign language skills may hinder intelligence gathering because local informants are reluctant to speak through locally hired interpreters (2006).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A study commissioned by the Department of Defense concluded that gaps in governmentwide language capabilities have undermined cross-cultural communication and threatened national security (2005).</li> </ul>
Public diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A public affairs officer in one post we visited said that the local media does not always translate embassy statements accurately, complicating efforts to communicate with audiences in the host country. For example, he said the local press translated a statement by the ambassador in a more pejorative sense than was intended, which damaged the ambassador’s reputation and took several weeks to correct.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to an information officer in Cairo, the embassy did not have enough Arabic-speaking staff to engage the Egyptian media effectively (2006).</li> <li>• Foreign officials we met with noted that speaking the host country’s language demonstrates respect for its people and culture; thus fluency in the local language is important for effectively conducting public diplomacy (2003).</li> </ul>	

	GAO (2009)	Previous GAO reports	Other reports
Economic and political affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Shenyang, a Chinese city close to the border with North Korea, the consul general told us that reporting about issues along the border had suffered because of language shortfalls.</li> <li>In Tunis, officers told us that Arabic-speaking staff sometimes work outside of their portfolio to cover for colleagues without Arabic skills, which places a larger burden on officers with language skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An economics officer at one post said that months-long negotiations with foreign government officials were making little progress until American officers began speaking the host country language and a local official who did not speak English could convey valuable information (2006).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Vladivostok, State's Inspector General reported that lack of proficiency in Russian limited the political/economic officer's reporting (2007).</li> </ul>
Developing relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The U.S. ambassador to Egypt said that officers who do not have language skills cannot reach out to broader, deeper audiences and gain insight into the country.</li> <li>Other officials in Cairo noted that the officers in Egypt who do not speak the language tend to inherit the contacts of their predecessor, leading to a perpetually limited pool of contacts.</li> <li>In China, officials told us that the officers in China with insufficient language skills get only half the story on issues of interest, as they receive only the official party line and are unable to communicate with researchers and academics, many of whom do not speak English.</li> <li>The deputy chief of mission in Ankara said that officers who do not have sufficient Turkish skills are reading English-language newspapers rather than what Turks are reading, further limiting their insight into what is happening in the country.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Afghanistan, State's Inspector General reported that less than one-third of political and economic officers were proficient in a national language, which has led to difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with Afghan contacts (2006).</li> <li>The Inspector General has also reported that in Lebanon, political, economic, and public diplomacy officers went to post without sufficient language skills, limiting their efforts to expand their contacts among audiences that do not speak English (2005).</li> </ul>
Morale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several officers noted that life in Turkey without any Turkish language skills is very inhibiting, particularly for family members who are out in the city every day.</li> <li>The head of the Political/Economic Section in Shenyang said that families are very isolated without Chinese language skills.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State's Inspector General found the lack of Russian language skills inhibits social interaction by many new arrivals in Moscow and by some other community members, many of whom rarely venture out of the embassy compound (2007).</li> </ul>

Source: GAO.

Furthermore, as a result of these language shortfalls, officers must rely on their locally engaged staff to translate for them. Officers at each post we visited said that they frequently take local staff with them to meetings to

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help translate. For example, a security officer in Cairo said that this tendency makes him feel irrelevant in meetings he should be leading. In Tunis, some officers said that they must use local staff to translate meetings outside of the embassy, but some contacts are reluctant to speak freely in front of other Tunisians. In addition, State's Inspector General has noted that sections in several embassies rely on local staff to translate, monitor the local media, and judge what the section needs to know. The Inspector General also noted problems with this tendency, as overreliance on local translators can make conversations less productive and imposes a significant overhead cost that adequate language training could reduce. Furthermore, in its 2004 inspection of the U.S. embassy in Seoul, the Inspector General found that visa adjudications may be based on incorrect information if a consular officer who does not understand basic Korean must rely on translations from locally engaged staff.

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## State Efforts to Meet Foreign Language Requirements, Which Include Training, Recruitment, and Incentives, Face Several Challenges

State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements include an annual review process to determine the number of language-designated positions, providing language training, recruiting staff with skills in certain languages, and offering pay incentives to officers to continue learning and maintaining language skills. However, several challenges—such as staffing shortages, the recent increase in language-designated positions, and perceptions about the value of language training in State's promotion system—limit State's ability to meet these requirements.

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## State Determines Its Foreign Language Requirements through an Annual Review Process, but These Requirements May Not Reflect Actual Needs

State determines its foreign language requirements through an annual review process that results in incremental changes but does not necessarily reflect posts' actual needs. Every year, HR directs posts to review all language-designated positions and to submit requests for any changes in the number of positions or level of proficiency. Headquarters officials from HR, FSI, and the regional bureaus then review and discuss these requests and develop a list of positions identified as requiring foreign language skills. However, the views expressed by officials from HR and FSI, and FSOs at overseas posts during our meetings with these officials, and our findings in previous work on this issue, suggest that State's designated language proficiency requirements do not necessarily reflect the actual language needs of the posts. State's current instructions to the posts suggest the language designation review be tempered by budgetary and staffing realities. Consequently, some overseas posts tend to request only the positions they think they will receive. For example, a senior

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official at one of the overseas posts we visited said that although he would like several positions at the 4/4 proficiency level in his section, he knows the positions will not be designated at that level, so he does not request them. A senior official at another post we visited said he does not request language-designated positions at a higher proficiency level because he knows that ultimately the post will not get enough applicants for the positions. This view was echoed by HR officials who stated that overseas posts must often weigh the desire to attract a large number of applicants against a desire to draw bidders with a higher level of language proficiency. The public affairs officer at one of the overseas posts we visited said he tried to have some language-designated positions in his section downgraded to language-preferred because he had a hard time filling them. Further, HR officials told us that State should conduct a more thorough assessment of language requirements regardless of resource requirements.

Concerns about the process have been a long-standing issue at State. A 1986 State report noted that the language designation system needed to be overhauled on a worldwide basis and recommended that posts carefully review their language-designated positions with the geographic bureaus, eliminating positions that seem unnecessary, adding more if required, deciding how many positions at the 4 proficiency level are needed, and defining what kind of fluency each language-designated position requires.<sup>10</sup> For example, one senior official said there should be a systematic review of which positions need language proficiency and which do not, and then the department should decide whether it gives some language training to a lot of people or extensive language training to a select few.

Moreover, officers at the posts we visited questioned the validity of the relatively low proficiency level required for certain positions, citing the need for a higher proficiency level. Officials at most of the posts we visited said that a 3/3 in certain critical languages is not always enough for officers to do their jobs, although they acknowledged the difficulty State would have filling positions at a higher proficiency level. For example, an economics officer at one of the posts we visited said that she could start meetings and read the newspaper with her 3/3 in Arabic, but that level of proficiency did not provide her with language skills needed to discuss technical issues, and the officers in the public affairs section of the same

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<sup>10</sup>Monteagle Stearns, *Report on Hard Language Proficiency in the Foreign Service* (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 1986).

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post said that a 3/3 was not sufficient to effectively explain U.S. positions in the local media. Officers in the public affairs section of another post we visited said that they were not comfortable making statements on U.S. foreign policy with a 3/3 proficiency level. Senior officials at a third post said 3/3 is adequate to ask and answer questions but not to conduct business. An officer with a 4/4 in Chinese said officers in his section did the best job they could but a 3/3 was not enough. He said he sometimes had difficulty at his level, for example, when participating in radio interviews broadcast to local audiences. In addition, consular officers at some of the posts we visited questioned whether a proficiency level of 2 in speaking was sufficient for conducting visa interviews. They said they could ask questions but did not always understand the answers and sometimes had to rely on locally engaged staff to translate. HR officials explained that a position may be classified at 2 when, in reality, a higher level of proficiency is needed. For example, proficiency requirements for untenured positions in certain languages cannot be higher than 2 because of the limits on training for untenured officers.

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## State Uses Language Training and Other Means in Its Effort to Meet Language Requirements

### Training

State uses a combination of language training—at FSI, at advanced language institutes overseas, and through each post’s language program—recruitment of officers fluent in foreign languages, and incentive pay to meet its language requirements.

State primarily uses language training, typically at FSI, to meet its foreign language requirements. FSI’s School of Language Studies offers training in about 70 languages. State also offers full-time advanced training in superhard languages at a few overseas locations, including Beijing, China; Cairo, Egypt; Seoul, South Korea; Taipei, Taiwan; Yokohama, Japan; and Tunis, Tunisia. In addition, overseas posts offer part-time language training through post language programs and FSI offers distance learning courses to officers overseas. Finally, FSI offers overseas and domestic mid-course opportunities in many languages, including programs in countries such as Turkey, Russia, and Israel, including activities such as classroom study overseas, field trips, and home visits with local families. These immersions serve either as a substitute for some portion of the Washington training or as a complement or refresher to enhance the learner’s ability to achieve a higher degree of facility in dealing with the local community and to increase the return on the department’s training investment.

State measures the effectiveness of its training in a variety of ways; however, concerns about several aspects of FSI training persist. State collects data and reports on the percentage of students who attain the

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intended proficiency level in all critical languages when they are enrolled in language training for at least the recommended length of training as an indicator of the success of FSI training. For 2008, State reported a language training success rate of 86 percent.<sup>11</sup> State also tracks overall satisfaction with all training at FSI and reported a 94 percent satisfaction rate for fiscal year 2008. Officials we met with overseas, however, expressed mixed experiences with FSI language training. For example, consular officers in Istanbul described the FSI training as outstanding. Entry-level officers in Cairo said that instruction at the beginning levels at FSI is very good, but that FSI is not well equipped for beyond-3 training. However, FSI officials explained that because there are only 2 4/4 language-designated positions in the department, there is almost no formal requirement for FSI to provide such training. FSI officials also stated that without a mandate or the necessary resources, FSI provides beyond-3 training on an ad hoc basis. A few officers questioned the relevance of the foreign language training that they received to their jobs. Several officers also stated that they were not aware of a formal mechanism for them to provide feedback on this issue to FSI. A few officers said that they provided feedback to FSI, but they were not sure if their concerns were addressed. FSI officials stated that FSI provides several opportunities for feedback. For example, the institute administers a training impact survey eliciting the respondent's opinion of the effectiveness of the training for the respondent's job several months after it is completed. However, the response rate for this survey has been low: for 2005, State received 603 of 1,476 possible responses; for 2006, 404 of 1,450 possible responses; and for 2007, 226 of 1,503 possible responses. FSI officials said that another opportunity for feedback is the evaluation students complete at the end of every class.

## Recruitment

State also recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program; however, some officials noted the department believes it is easier to train individuals with good diplomatic skills to speak a language than it is to recruit linguists and train them to be good diplomats. Under the critical needs program, State offers bonus points for applicants who have passed the Foreign Service exam and demonstrate mastery in a foreign language. The additional points can raise the applicant's ranking on the Foreign Service registry, improving the chances of being hired. Officers recruited

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<sup>11</sup>State defined this measure as the percentage of students who attain the intended proficiency level when they are enrolled for at least the recommended length of training.

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for their proficiency in supercritical and critical needs languages are obligated to serve at an overseas post where they can use the language during their first or second tour. Officers recruited since 2008 are also required to serve at a post where they can use the language a second time as a midlevel officer.

The effects of this program on State's language proficiency gaps are unclear, in part because State has not established numerical targets for its critical needs hiring and has not yet performed an assessment of its effectiveness. An Office of Recruitment official, who was involved in the development of the list, stated that the department could not yet assess the program's effectiveness because the program, which started in 2004, is still new and the department does not have sufficient data to perform such an assessment. The official pointed out that there have been only about five hiring cycles since it started. However, State data show the department has recruited 445 officers under the program since 2004, and about 94 percent of these officers who have had at least two assignments have completed their obligation to serve at an overseas post where they were able to use the language. A total of 19 officers that have either served two tours or at least have the second tour onward assignment arranged have definitively not filled the obligation and most of those were due to medical or security reasons. The Office of Recruitment official said that since the requirement for the second tour for midlevel officers is still new, there are few, if any, officers recruited under the critical needs program who have reached the middle level.

State also does not have a formal schedule for reviewing and adding or removing languages from the list of critical needs languages. Officials from the Office of Recruitment said the list has been reviewed informally and Japanese was removed because State is hiring sufficient numbers of Japanese-speaking officers and there are few entry-level language-designated positions at Japanese posts.<sup>12</sup>

## Incentive Pay

State also offers bonus pay to members of the Foreign Service with proficiency in certain languages under the Language Incentive Pay program. To qualify for language incentive pay, officers must

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<sup>12</sup>Five of the 19 officers who did not complete their critical needs language obligation were Japanese speakers.



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- have a proficiency of at least a 3/3 (for generalists) or 2/2 (for specialists) in selected languages and
  - be serving in any position (either language designated or non-language designated) at a post abroad where a language currently on the list of incentive languages is a primary or primary-alternate language, or in any language-designated position requiring an incentive language.

The incentive pay varies according to the officer's salary and tested scores. For example, an officer with a 3/3 in Turkish in a language-designated position in Istanbul would be eligible for a bonus of 10 percent of the base salary abroad of an FS-01/step 1 member of the Foreign Service.<sup>13</sup>

State has not measured the impact of the pay incentive on increasing foreign language proficiency, and the officers we met with expressed mixed opinions on the effectiveness of the program. For example, a few officers said it is difficult and takes a long time to advance from a 2 to a 3 to qualify for the incentive, while others said the pay was a very good incentive. Others offered suggestions for improvement. For example, one officer said the requirements for the language incentive program discourage some people from participating and that State should provide incentives for people in increments, for example, for going from a 2 to 2-plus. He also suggested that State provide incentives separately for speaking and reading, because it takes time to increase proficiency in reading, which is often not needed for the officer to perform his or her job. HR and FSI officials said that State is considering proposals to improve the incentive pay program.

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## Staffing Shortages and Other Challenges Have Limited State's Ability to Reduce Its Language Shortfalls

According to senior State officials, the primary challenge State faces in meeting its foreign language requirements is the department's continued staffing shortages. Specifically, State's lack of a sufficient training float has limited the number of officers available for language training. As a result, State has had to choose between assigning an officer to post who may not have the requisite language skills or allowing the position to remain empty while the incoming officer is in language training. As noted above, in October 2008, 334 language-designated positions (9 percent of all language-designated positions) were vacant in addition to 1,005 positions that were filled by officers who did not meet the language requirement for

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<sup>13</sup>In the Foreign Service grade structure, an FS-01 is equivalent to the civil service GS-15.

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the position. For example, in fiscal year 2006, State's Director General was unable to fill a request by the embassy in Riyadh for two additional language-proficient officers, as recommended by the Inspector General, because of overall staffing shortages. Furthermore, a 2008 report on State resource issues noted that personnel shortages result in training lags, and that ongoing tension over whether staff should complete training assignments or fill positions complicate efforts to create a well-trained workforce.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these overall staffing shortages, State has doubled the number of language-designated positions overseas since 2001. Department officials noted that the recent increase in positions requiring a superhard language—that is, one that requires 2 years of training to reach the 3 level—and the number of 1-year tours in these positions have compounded these shortages. For example, State must budget three people for a 3/3 Arabic language-designated position in Riyadh, which is typically a 1-year tour: one to fill the position, one in the second year of language training to arrive at post the next year, and one in the first year of training to arrive the following year.

Other staffing-related challenges include the following:

- *Staff time.* In some cases, Foreign Service officers lack the time necessary for maintaining their language skills upon arriving at post. Officers we spoke to in Tunis, Ankara, and Cairo said that they do not have enough time in their schedule to fully utilize the post language program. In addition, in 2006, State's Inspector General reported that most political and economic officers in Kabul find that a routine 6-day workweek precludes rigorous language training.
- *Curtailments.* When officers cut short their tours in a language-designated position, there is often no officer with the requisite language skills available to fill the position. Some officers we spoke to said that in some cases, they had to cut short their language training to come to post earlier than expected in order to fill a position vacated by an officer who had curtailed. For example, the regional security officers in Ankara and Tunis said that they left language training after only a few months in order to

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<sup>14</sup>American Academy of Diplomacy and Stimson Center, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future* (Washington, D.C.: October 2008).

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replace officers who had curtailed to Iraq or elsewhere. In addition, several officers in Shenyang said that they had to leave language training early in order to fill gaps at post.<sup>15</sup>

- *Position freeze.* In recent years, State has left dozens of positions vacant—or “frozen” them—in order to fully staff missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Officers at several posts we visited said that in order to avoid further shortages at post, the geographic bureaus, at times, have chosen to freeze training positions, rather than overseas positions. Consequently, there is no officer currently in language training for these positions, and posts will either have to request a language waiver or hope that the incumbent already has language skills when filling the position.

In 2009, State received funding for an additional 450 positions, including 300 dedicated to language training. According to the department, these positions will help to increase the training float and reduce gaps at post while officers are in language training. State officials have said that if their fiscal year 2010 request for an additional 200 training positions is approved, they expect to see language gaps close starting in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met, and previous staffing increases have been consumed by higher priorities. For example, in 2003, State officials stated that the increased hiring under the department’s Diplomatic Readiness Initiative would create a training float to help eliminate the foreign language gaps at overseas posts within several years. Although the initiative enabled State to hire more than 1,000 employees above attrition, it did not reduce the language gaps, as most of this increase was absorbed by the demand for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus the training reserve was not achieved.

Another challenge to State’s efforts to address its language shortfalls is the persistent perception among Foreign Service officers that State’s promotion system undervalues language training; however, while HR officials told us that the system values language training, the department has not conducted a systematic assessment to refute the perceptions. Officers at several posts we visited stated a belief that long-term training, specifically advanced training in hard languages, hinders their promotion

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<sup>15</sup>A forthcoming GAO report discusses challenges of staffing hardship posts in further detail. See GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts Continue to Compromise Diplomatic Readiness*, GAO-09-874 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

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chances. For example, officers in Beijing said that some officers are reluctant to study a foreign language that requires a 1- or 2-year commitment because they believe it makes them less competitive for promotion, and one officer said that she would not have bid on her current position if she had had to take Chinese first. A former ambassador told us that many officers feel that language training is a “net minus” to their careers, as the department views this as a drain on the staffing system. We reported similar sentiments in 2006, when several officers said they believed that State’s promotion system might hinder officers’ ability to enhance and maintain their language skills over time.<sup>16</sup> Although senior HR officials told us that the promotion system weighs time in training as equal to time at post, they acknowledged that officers applying for promotion while in long-term training were at a disadvantage compared with officers assigned to an overseas post. Although promotion boards are required by law to weigh end-of-training reports for employees in full-time language training as heavily as the annual employee evaluation reports,<sup>17</sup> officers in Beijing, Shenyang, Istanbul, and Washington expressed concern that evaluations for time in training were discounted. State officials said they have reviewed the results of one promotion board and found a slightly lower rate of promotions for officers in long-term training at the time of the review. However, these officials were not sure if these results were statistically significant and said that the department has not conducted a more systematic assessment of the issue.

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<sup>16</sup>This challenge dates to at least 1986, when a report on hard language proficiency in the Foreign Service identified several bureaucratic biases adversely affecting hard language training, including State’s promotion system, which, according to the report, “convinced many Foreign Service officers that they cannot afford to take time out for training, especially in hard languages which require two years or more to achieve even limited proficiency.” See Monteagle Stearns, *Report on Hard Language Proficiency in the Foreign Service*.

<sup>17</sup>Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, Pub. L. No. 102-138, §.155, 105 Stat. 647, 675 (1991).

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## State Lacks a Comprehensive Strategic Plan to Address Foreign Language Requirements

State's approach to addressing its foreign language proficiency requirements does not reflect a comprehensive strategic approach. As we previously mentioned, State considers staffing shortfalls and the lack of a training float to be the primary challenges to achieving the department's language proficiency requirements. However, prior work by GAO and others has shown that addressing a critical human capital challenge—such as closing or reducing the long-running foreign language proficiency gaps within State's Foreign Service corps—requires a comprehensive strategic plan or set of linked plans that sets a clear direction for addressing the challenge.

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## Prior Work by GAO and Others Could Guide State's Strategic Plan for Addressing Foreign Language Requirements

GAO, OPM, and others have developed a variety of strategic workforce planning models that can serve as a guide for State to develop a comprehensive plan to address its language proficiency gaps. Common elements of these models include setting a strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals. In 2002, we reported that State had not prepared a separate strategic plan for developing its foreign language skills or a related action plan to correct long-standing proficiency shortfalls and recommended that the department do so. State responded by noting that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed.<sup>18</sup> During this review, State officials told us that a comprehensive strategic approach to reducing foreign language gaps would be useful. The officials mentioned a number of documents where the department has addressed State's foreign language proficiency requirements in various forms, including the Foreign Language Continuum, the Strategic Plan, a 2007 training needs assessment, and the Five-Year Workforce Plan, but acknowledged that these documents are not linked to each other and no one document contains measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gap.

We reviewed these documents and found that while some include a few of the aforementioned elements of a strategic plan, none of the documents present a comprehensive plan for State to address its foreign language

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<sup>18</sup>[GAO-02-375](#).

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proficiency requirements. For example, the Foreign Language Continuum—a document developed by FSI for FSOs—describes foreign language training opportunities provided by State and, according to FSI officials, was meant to serve as a guide for FSOs and not a plan for reducing language gaps. The joint State-U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Strategic Plan contains seven priority goals for achieving State's and USAID's overall mission but only tangentially addresses the issue of foreign languages by stating that the department will expand opportunities for classroom training and distance learning in a number of areas, including foreign languages. It does not discuss if and how expanding this training will contribute to reducing the department's language proficiency gaps, or establish measurable goals, objectives, or time frames for its performance. The training assessment—a 2007 training study conducted by HR and FSI to assess State's current and future training needs—identified additional positions to be requested in future budget justifications to increase the training float.

State's Five-Year Workforce Plan, which describes the department's overall workforce planning, including hiring, training, and assignment plans, is a step in the right direction. The plan addresses language gaps in the Foreign Service workforce to a greater extent than any of the other documents. However, the plan falls short in several respects. First, the document states that State has established an ongoing monitoring process to identify and set goals for reducing language skill gaps in the Foreign Service. This process resulted in the development of an officer-to-position ratio target of at least 2.5 officers with the required language proficiency for each language-designated position at the 3/3 proficiency level. State reports this ratio as a target for meeting its critical needs language requirements; however, the ratio is not based on quantitative analysis but on the consensus of a working group consisting of HR and FSI officials. In developing the ratio, State assumed that the 2.5 officers already have the required languages and did not link the ratio to the number of officers that should be in language training and the size of the training float needed to achieve the 2.5 ratio. Further, State assumed that 3/3 is the appropriate skill level for the positions, although, as we discussed earlier, some officers have questioned the validity of that level for certain positions. Moreover, an HR official responsible for workforce planning at State said that the 2.5 ratio is very broad and not sufficiently detailed or specific. For example, the ratio does not take into account the different tour lengths. More Arabic-speaking officers would be needed for 1-year tours than Russian speakers for 3-year tours, so the languages should not have the same target ratio. Also, the assessment treats Foreign Service officers at all levels equally, even though more senior officers would not fill lower-

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graded positions. Therefore, even if State achieved the 2.5 ratio for each language-designated position, not all of the language-designated positions would be filled. The HR official explained that State is in the process of improving its methodology for critical needs language assessment.

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## Conclusions

Despite the various measures that State uses to determine and fill its language-designated positions, it continues to experience persistent gaps in its foreign language skills at many posts around the world, and questions remain about the adequacy of the proficiency requirements. State recognizes the importance of staffing language-designated positions with FSOs who possess the requisite language skills to perform their duties, and has taken some measures intended to address its foreign language shortfalls, including requesting and receiving funding in 2009 to build a training capacity, establishing a career development program that requires FSOs to have sustained professional language proficiency for consideration for promotion into the senior ranks, and offering special incentives to attract speakers of foreign languages under its critical needs language program. However, these individual actions, which State has relied on for several years to address its language proficiency requirements, do not constitute a comprehensive strategic approach to addressing the department's persistent gaps in language proficiency within the Foreign Service, and they are not linked to any targets, goals, or time frames for reducing State's language gaps. Also, State is not fully assessing the progress of its efforts toward closing the language gaps. Actions described in State's Five-Year Workforce Plan, such as the department's attempt to establish an ongoing monitoring process to identify and set goals for reducing the language skill gaps, are a step in the right direction that could be built upon to develop a more comprehensive plan. Given the importance of foreign language competency to the mission of the Foreign Service, any measures taken to address State's language proficiency shortfalls should be part of a comprehensive strategic plan that takes a long-term view and incorporates the key elements of strategic workforce planning. Such a plan will help State guide its efforts to monitor and assess its progress toward closing its persistent foreign language gaps.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To address State's persistent foreign language proficiency shortfalls in the U.S. Foreign Service, this report is making two recommendations. We recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan consistent with GAO and OPM workforce planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. Such a plan should include, but not be limited to, the following elements:

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- clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives of the department's language proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy;
  - a transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based on objective criteria, that goes beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language designated and the proficiency level needed to enable officers to effectively perform their duties; and
  - a more effective mechanism that allows State to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of the foreign language skills that they acquired at FSI to their jobs, and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical needs foreign language speakers, and language incentive payments, as well as future efforts toward closing the department's language proficiency gaps.

To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, we also recommend that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its Congressional Budget Justifications and annual reports to Congress on foreign language proficiency. Specifically, we recommend that the department measure and report on the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to language training but who have not yet completed this training.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

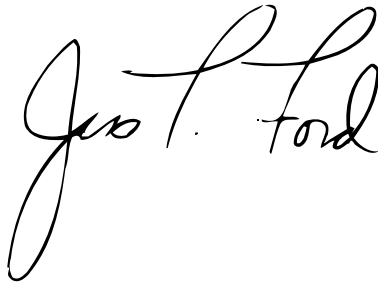
State provided written comments on a draft of this report. The comments are reprinted in Appendix II. State generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In further discussions with State to clarify its response, an official of HR's Office of Policy Coordination stated that State agrees with GAO that it needs some type of plan or process to pull together its efforts to meet its foreign language requirements, but that it has not yet determined what form this action will take. The official further explained that State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations. State also provided technical comments, which we have included throughout this report as appropriate.



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As we agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution of it until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State and interested congressional committees. The report also is available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@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 major contributions to this report are listed in Appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jess T. Ford, Director  
International Affairs and Trade

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# Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

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In this report, we (1) examine the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, (2) assess State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and describe the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assess the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements.

To analyze the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements, we obtained data from State on all overseas language-designated positions and the language skills of the incumbent filling the position as of October 31, 2008. We compared the incumbent's reading and speaking scores with the reading and speaking levels designated for the position, and determined that the incumbent met the requirements for the position only if his or her scores equaled or exceeded both the speaking and reading requirements. A limited number of positions are designated in two languages. We determined that the officer met the requirements of such positions if he or she met the speaking and reading requirements for at least one of the designated languages. We also interviewed State officials responsible for compiling and maintaining these data and reviewed data maintained by some of the posts we visited on their language-designated positions, and determined the data to be sufficiently reliable for identifying the number of language-designated positions filled by officers who met the requirements of the position.

To assess the potential impact of foreign language shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, we reviewed previous GAO reports, as well as reports by State's Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks. We interviewed officials from State's Bureaus of African Affairs, Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, European Affairs, Human Resources, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Near Eastern/South and Central Asian Affairs, Public Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs, and the Foreign Service Institute. We also interviewed officials at overseas posts in Beijing and Shenyang, China; Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt; New Delhi, India; Tunis, Tunisia; and Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey. We selected these posts based on the number of language-designated positions in supercritical (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi) or critical needs (e.g., Turkish) languages, the extent of language gaps, and the location of FSI field schools. We also met with former senior State officials, including former ambassadors to Russia, Afghanistan, and Armenia; a former dean of FSI's School of Language Studies; and the former acting Director General of the Foreign Service to gain their insights on the consequences

of language shortfalls at overseas missions. In total, we interviewed about 60 officials in Washington, D.C., and over 130 officers overseas.

To assess how State determines and meets its foreign language requirements, we reviewed past GAO reports; State planning documents, including the strategic plan, the performance report, and budget justification; State cables on the language designation process; and workforce planning guidance. We also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and at overseas posts.

To describe the challenges that State faces in meeting its foreign language requirements, we reviewed State department budget and planning documents. We analyzed State's promotion precepts, Career Development Program, and instructions provided to Foreign Service promotion boards.<sup>1</sup> We also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and at overseas posts.

To assess the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet its foreign language requirements, we reviewed prior GAO reports on strategic workforce planning and State planning documents, including the department's strategic plan, the Language Continuum, and the Five-Year Workforce Plan. We compared State's planning efforts to reduce foreign language gaps with guidance on comprehensive workforce planning developed by GAO and the Office of Personnel Management. We also interviewed officials from the Bureau of Human Resources and others.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2008 to September 2009 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.

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<sup>1</sup>State's promotion precepts are guidelines by which the department determines the tenure and promotability of Foreign Service employees.

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



**United States Department of State**

*Assistant Secretary for Resource Management  
and Chief Financial Officer*

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

SEP - 1 2009

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "DEPARTMENT OF STATE: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls," GAO Job Code 320621.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Bert Curtis, HR Specialist, Bureau of Human Resources at (202) 647-2655.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Kaplan".

Sid Kaplan (Acting)

cc: GAO – Goodwin Agbara  
DGHR – Nancy Powell  
State/OIG – Mark Duda

**Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report**

**Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language  
Shortfalls**  
(GAO-09-955, GAO Code 320621)

The Department thanks GAO for its evaluation of the Department's efforts to fill language designated positions. The Department appreciates GAO's recognition of our efforts to prepare staff to be proficient communicators at posts where foreign languages are required. We would also like to assure Congress that effective identification and staffing of language designated positions is a serious priority within the Department of State. However, such staffing goals are tempered by overall Foreign Service staffing shortages, driven largely by the competing demands of increased language expertise (and thus substantial staff time devoted to training) and an expanding mission.

It will take time to increase hiring and to fill the gaps created by opening more language positions at FSI, training the officers and deploying them to the field. The additional hiring in 2009 is an essential first step but we will need successive years of funding to close the gap. The new hires (above attrition) funded for 2009 will not be on board until January 2010. Furthermore, it will not be until 2011 that we begin to deploy additionally trained language officers to the field.

**Recommendation for Executive Action**

To address State's persistent foreign language proficiency shortfalls in the U.S. Foreign Service, we recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, strategic plan consistent with GAO and OPM workforce planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. Such a plan should include, but not be limited to the following elements:

- Clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives of the department's language proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy;
- A transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based upon objective criteria, that goes beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language-designated

and the proficiency level needed to enable officers to effectively perform their duties; and

- A more effective mechanism that allows State to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of foreign language training to their jobs, and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical needs foreign language speakers, and language incentive payments, as well as future efforts towards closing the department's language proficiency gaps.

To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, we also recommend that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its Congressional Budget Justifications and annual reports to Congress on Foreign language proficiency. Specifically, we recommend that the department measure and report on the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to language training but who have not yet completed this training.

**Department Response**

We concur with the GAO conclusion that the Department should link all of its efforts to meet foreign language requirements. We believe the areas noted below will allow us to begin to address both the individual and the strategic elements mentioned in the GAO recommendations. We welcome GAO's recommendations regarding the need for thorough planning, just as we begin to take a comprehensive look at the full range of foreign language requirements and how best to fulfill our mission. The Department appreciates the opportunity to respond to the recommendation presented in this draft and thanks GAO for its team's assistance in determining where we might focus our efforts.

**Enhance the Department's Ability to Project Its Language Requirements:**

The Bureau of Human Resources is in the process of developing a "trained personnel" simulation model utilizing data on language designated positions, competency requirements, tour lengths, and assignment rules. Such a model would allow State to more accurately determine:

- a) How many Foreign Service employees we need trained in each languages
- b) How many positions are required for a training float to avoid staffing gaps

- c) How changes in assignment rules impact the number of trained personnel needed

**Assessing the Language Incentives Program:** The Department also agrees that we must overcome the challenges inherent in fully assessing the effectiveness of the bonus payments offered under the Language Incentives Program. Such assessment would require both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the recruitment and language incentive program.

**Convening Language Issues Working Group:** The Bureau of Human Resources has convened an inter-bureau language working group with members from the Foreign Service Institute and several regional bureaus with key language interests to further department-wide communication and collaboration on all language-related issues, including language proficiency and incentivized languages. This working group held its inaugural meeting on August 31, 2009. A discussion of GAO's recommendation was the first agenda item and will shape a significant portion of the work of this group in the coming months.

**Department Methodology on Foreign Language Proficiency:** To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, the Department agrees with the GAO's recommendation that it measure and report the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to a full course of language training but who have not yet completed the training.

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jess T. Ford, Director, (202) 512-4128, [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov)

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## Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Godwin Agbara, Assistant Director; Robert Ball; Joseph Carney; and La Verne Tharpes made key contributions to this report. Martin de Alteriis and Elizabeth Singer provided technical assistance.



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