

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-520](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Nearly three decades ago, Congress enacted the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act. As GAO has found, the act sought to strengthen civilian control over the acquisition function in DOD and establish a more streamlined chain of command for developing and procuring weapon systems. The reporting chain, which remains in effect today, runs upward from a program manager, through a program executive officer, to a service acquisition executive, and to the defense acquisition executive.

Many acquisition reform studies have identified a need for increased accountability in DOD's acquisition management chain of command. The Senate Armed Services Committee Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 mandated that GAO review DOD's acquisition chain of command. This report examines (1) findings and recommendations made by studies that assessed the role of the military service chiefs; and (2) how current DOD and military department policies define the roles and responsibilities of the service chiefs in acquisition management.

To do this work, GAO analyzed the findings and recommendations of six studies that discuss DOD acquisition chain of command issues and interviewed authors from the three most recently published studies. GAO also analyzed DOD and military department acquisition and requirements policies and guidance, and interviewed DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations.

View [GAO-14-520](#). For more information, contact Michael J. Sullivan at (202) 512-4841 or sullivanm@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE ACQUISITIONS

Observations on Whether the Military Service Chiefs' Role in Managing and Overseeing Major Weapon Programs Should Be Expanded

What GAO Found

Five of the six studies GAO reviewed recommended an expanded role for the military service chiefs in acquisition management, often citing this as a means to improve the integration of the requirements and acquisition processes that support a weapon system's development. Three studies expressed concerns that the services have gone too far in their implementation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act and removed the service chiefs from the acquisition process. However, the studies provided little evidence or support that such a change would in fact improve program outcomes. Studies varied on the degree to which and ways in which service chiefs should be involved in the acquisition process. While two studies advocated strengthening service chief's roles and responsibilities within the current structure, three studies called for changing the current chain of command structure by making adjustments such as inserting the service chiefs above program executive officers. Authors GAO interviewed were uncertain what effect incorporating the chiefs of staff into the acquisition chain of command would have on individual programs. These authors noted that service chief involvement does not guarantee success for a weapon system program and, in fact, pointed to examples of past programs that had significant service chief involvement, but poor outcomes. Finally, the authors we interviewed agreed that strong leadership is essential to acquisition success, but all six studies identified other factors that need to be addressed in acquisition programs such as unrealistic and changing requirements, optimistic cost and schedule estimates, and issues with the current budgeting process.

DOD and military department policies provide the service chiefs multiple opportunities to be involved in the management and oversight of major defense acquisition programs. Although responsibility and authority differ for the two distinct processes of requirements and acquisitions, multiple reviews, milestone decision points, and mechanisms are in place for these two processes to work together in planning and executing programs. Within each military department, the service chiefs and their staffs lead the development of operational requirements and are supported by acquisition officials to help ensure that requirements are feasible and affordable. Similarly, as acquisition programs progress through key phases of planning, development, and production, opportunities exist for continued chief of staff involvement beyond requirements development. For example, the offices of the service chiefs participate in senior-level acquisition review boards that assess proposed programs and advise the service acquisition executive at key milestone decision points. Once a program has been established and development has begun, additional opportunities remain for service chiefs to monitor progress and help resolve any issues that may occur. For example, military departments are required to hold annual configuration steering board meetings to discuss tradeoffs between requirements and cost and schedule delays.