

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-469](#), a report to the Honorable James Inhofe, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO has reported extensively on problems in cost, schedule, and performance for major defense acquisition programs. According to some acquisition reform advocates, expanding the role of the military service chiefs in the process to acquire weapon systems may improve acquisition outcomes.

Following a 2014 GAO report on the service chiefs' role in the acquisition chain of command, GAO was asked to review further related issues and concerns the service chiefs have with the acquisition process and its outcomes. This report examines: (1) the views of current and former military service chiefs on the acquisition process, and (2) key problems or factors the service chiefs identified with the acquisition process and GAO's assessment of these issues.

GAO conducted interviews with 12 current and former military service chiefs and vice chiefs, and with other current and former DOD leadership to discuss the acquisition process. GAO also drew upon its extensive body of work on defense acquisitions and best practices. To assess key problems with the current process, GAO reviewed program execution information on all 78 current major defense programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD ensure sufficient systems engineering is conducted to better define requirements and assess resource trade-offs before a program starts. DOD concurred with the recommendations, citing recent policy changes. GAO believes more focus is needed on implementing actions.

View [GAO-15-469](#). For more information, contact Michael J. Sullivan at (202) 512-4841 or sullivanm@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE ACQUISITION PROCESS

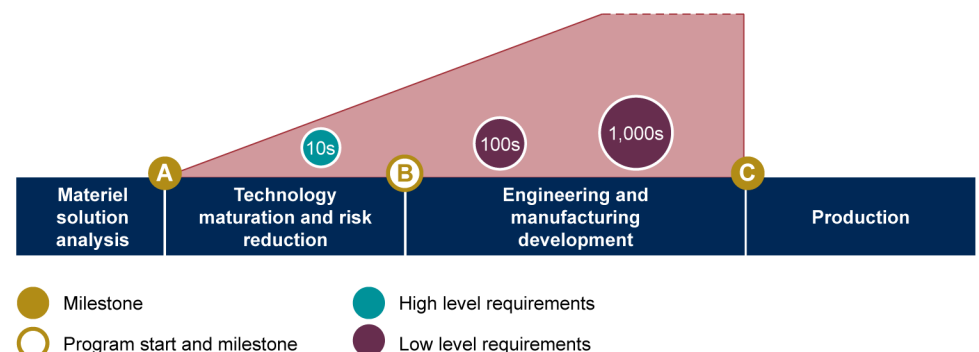
Military Service Chiefs' Concerns Reflect Need to Better Define Requirements before Programs Start

What GAO Found

Most current and former military service chiefs and vice chiefs GAO interviewed from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps collectively expressed dissatisfaction with acquisition program outcomes and believed that the Department of Defense's (DOD) requirements development and acquisition processes need to be better integrated. The service chiefs are largely responsible for developing the services' requirements for weapon systems, while the service acquisition executives are responsible for overseeing programs to plan and develop systems. Most service chiefs told GAO they were concerned that after weapon system requirements are handed to the acquisition process, requirements are changed or added by the acquisition community (sometimes referred to as "creep"), increasing the capabilities and cost of the system. Some service chiefs stated that they are not always involved in the acquisition process and are frequently caught by surprise when cost, schedule, and performance problems emerge in programs. Current and former chiefs agreed that the chiefs should be more involved in programs, but their views varied on how best to achieve this.

GAO analyzed requirements for all 78 major defense acquisition programs and found that creep—or growth—in the high-level requirements is rare. Instead, it is after a program has formally started development that the myriad lower-level, technical requirements needed to complete a weapon system's design are defined (see figure). It is the definition of these requirements—most of which occurs after the service chiefs' primary involvement—that leads to the realization that much more time and resources are needed to build the weapon system.

Thousands of Lower-Level Requirements Are Defined after Program Start (Notional)



Source: GAO analysis of DOD policy and selected programs. | GAO-15-469

The process of systems engineering translates high-level requirements, such as range, into specifics, like fuel tank size. GAO has previously reported on the importance of conducting systems engineering early so that the consequences of high-level requirements can be confronted before a program starts. When GAO presented its analysis of the problem to the service chiefs, they generally agreed with it. Several noted that trade-offs informed by systems engineering must take place before programs start so that requirements are better defined and more realistic cost, schedule, and performance commitments can be made.