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LaPlante: Let New Acquisition Reforms Play Out Before Implementing More

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—RACHEL S. COHEN

Defense stakeholders need to hold off on further reforming the acquisition system while the military services learn to use their new buying authorities and processes, according to the Air Force's former assistant secretary for acquisition.

Bill LaPlante, one of 16 members of the congressionally commissioned Section 809 Panel for acquisition reform, told Air Force Magazine in a Jan. 17 interview people need to "take a breather" as this era of intense acquisition reform comes to an end. The panel released the last of its three reports on overhauling the acquisition enterprise on Jan. 15 after launching in 2016.

"When you add up everything that's happened, going back to the 2015 NDAA, on acquisition reform, there's been a lot and the system can only accept so much, so fast," said LaPlante, who is now senior vice president for MITRE's National Security Sector. "We tried to make sure that the recommendations would either be something that were already being largely supported but maybe done on a small scale, and something that would be welcomed."

Building a 21st-century, software-focused defense acquisition enterprise will require the Pentagon to streamline its buying practices, move away from program-specific requirements, and embrace what the commercial sector has to offer, the panel's new report argues.

The group's 58 recommendations reflect shifts already underway within the Defense Department, but the authors warn that without further progress, the acquisition system's ability to address current threats is "questionable."

“If implemented, these recommendations would reduce barriers that deny DOD timely access to innovative technology and creative solutions from nontraditional companies and bridge the technical superiority gap that is beginning to develop today between the United States and near-peer competitors and nonstate actors,” the report said.

The sprawling report focuses on ways to facilitate a “dynamic marketplace” that splits Pentagon purchases into three categories: products that are developed with government funding to meet unique military needs, products that are readily available and don’t need customization, and commercially available products that do require military customization.

Modern acquisition practices also give the services more power to control their own programs and spread decision-making authorities among program officials.

But in an appearance last March at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson indicated the service needs time to fine-tune and implement the slew of policy changes. She urged Congress to focus on personnel reform instead of organizational issues.

LaPlante believes that’s a legitimate concern, and that it’s time to start collecting data on whether the changes work. But he still expects lawmakers will incorporate the recommendations into the fiscal 2020 defense policy bill as it takes shape in the coming months.

“If it’s accepted, it should be in the next [National Defense Authorization Act],” LaPlante said. “The House [Armed Services Committee] has changed leadership, ... but I’m pretty confident that there was consensus across both the majority and ranking on what we were doing.”

Andrew Hunter, director of the defense-industrial initiatives group at CSIS, said in a Jan. 17 interview that while the service may want Congress to “put the pen down,” lawmakers may not be sympathetic.

“I hear from folks on the Hill that there has been so much legislation on acquisition in the last several years that they want to take a little bit of a wait-and-see approach ... and correcting and amending as necessary,” he said. “The cross-cutting current to that is, at least on the House side, you’ve gotten into the majority, so you’ve got members who have been wanting to do things in the system for the last eight years.”

Congress may not be on board with certain recommendations, such as one to allow all new-start programs to begin without congressional approval, Hunter added. Democrats may also be wary about findings that could place fewer restrictions on defense contractors, he said.

In a Jan. 15 statement, the Aerospace Industries Association expressed optimism that industry can work with lawmakers and the executive branch to incorporate the panel's recommendations into future legislation and policy.

“Congress has already enacted past recommendations from the panel that streamline DOD's procurement of commercial items and modernize oversight measures to better protect taxpayer dollars,” AIA said. “The Trump administration has also emphasized the panel's important contributions to improve government business and procurement practices. We are pleased to see the Volume III report dive further into opportunities for greater government-industry collaboration, and the report's call for a ‘dynamic marketplace framework’—a central component of its recommendations to streamline the acquisition system.”

The recommendations come as the Air Force pursues a range of new acquisition strategies, including rapid prototyping, networked systems for battle management and other missions, and iterative development and operations.

Funding flexibility is critical to efficient acquisition, particularly when it comes to Air Force Acquisition Executive Will Roper's push to field new capabilities faster, Hunter said. He believes the Section 809 Panel's recommendations are consistent with the service's current acquisition goals but that the services have more work to do to embrace commercial products and adopt a “dynamic marketplace.”

“I think there's real power in the idea of the dynamic marketplace,” Hunter said. “To me, the power there is really opening up the dialogue between the government and industry, between DOD and industry, and ultimately, between military users and industry, about what it is we're looking for, what are the capabilities we really need.”