DEFENSE ACQUISITIONS

An Analysis of Special Operations Command’s Management of Weapon System Programs

What GAO Found

SOM has undertaken a diverse set of acquisition programs that are consistent with the command’s mission to provide equipment that addresses the unique needs of the Special Operations Forces. SOM has committed to spend about $6 billion on these programs. About 88 percent of the programs are relatively small, have short acquisition cycles, and use modified commercial off-the-shelf and nondevelopmental items or modify existing service equipment and assets. SOM’s acquisition plans—as reflected in its current 5-year plan—continue to focus on relatively small-scale, short-cycle programs with modest development efforts.

Overall, SOM’s acquisition program performance has been mixed. About 60 percent of the acquisition programs SOM has undertaken since 2001 have progressed as planned, staying within the original cost and schedule estimates. Included in this grouping are programs that had cost increases because of the need to buy additional quantities of equipment for ongoing combat operations. The other 40 percent of SOM’s acquisition programs have not progressed as planned and experienced modest to, in a small number of cases, significant cost increases and schedule delays because of a range of technical and programmatic issues. Although fewer in number, the programs that experienced problems comprise about 50 percent of acquisition funding because they tend to be the larger and costlier, platform-based programs that SOM is acquiring and those where SOM depends on one of the military departments for equipment and program management support.

SOM faces management and workforce challenges to ensure its acquisition programs are consistently completed on time and within budget. Urgent requirements to support SOM’s ongoing combat missions have and will continue to challenge SOM’s ability to balance near- and long-term needs against available funding resources. In addition, SOM has difficulty tracking progress on programs where it has delegated management authority to one of the military departments and has not consistently applied a knowledge-based acquisition approach in executing programs, particularly the larger and more complex programs. Furthermore, SOM has encountered challenges ensuring it has the workforce size and composition to carry out its acquisition work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense take steps to ensure SOM (1) establishes sound business cases when starting programs, particularly its more complex and department-managed programs; (2) has the workforce size and composition to match its acquisition workload; and (3) improves its acquisition management information system. DOD generally concurred with these recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Paul Francis at (202) 512-4841 or francisp@gao.gov.