DOD CRITICAL TECHNOLOGIES

Plans for Communicating, Assessing, and Overseeing Protection Efforts Should Be Completed

What GAO Found

Critical technologies—such as elements of artificial intelligence and biotechnology—are those necessary to maintain U.S. technological superiority. As such, they are frequently the target of theft, espionage, and illegal export by adversaries. The Department of Defense (DOD) has outlined a revised process (see figure) to better identify and protect its critical technologies including those associated with acquisition programs throughout their lifecycle or those early in development. Prior DOD efforts to identify these technologies were considered by some military officials to be too broad to adequately guide protection. The revised process is expected to address this by offering more specificity about what elements of an acquisition program or technology need to be protected and the protection measures DOD is expected to implement. It is also expected to support DOD’s annual input to the National Strategy for Critical and Emerging Technologies, which was first published in October 2020.

Overview of DOD’s Revised Process to Identify and Protect Critical Acquisition Programs and Technologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Identify</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Communicate</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Protect</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>Assess and Oversee</th>
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| Identify and prioritize specific elements of critical acquisition programs and technologies that need to be protected and compile them into a DOD-wide list | Communicate the final list to relevant entities | Protect items on the list by implementing assigned protection measures | Assess protection measures using identified metrics and oversee future protection efforts.

DOD began implementing this process in February 2020, and officials expect to complete all steps for the first time by September 2021. DOD has focused on identifying critical acquisition programs and technologies that need to be protected and how they should be protected. It has not yet determined

- how it will communicate the list internally and to other agencies,
- which metrics it will use to assess protection measures, and
- which organization will oversee future protection efforts.

By determining the approach for completing these tasks, DOD can better ensure its revised process will support the protection of critical acquisition programs and technologies consistently across the department.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOD specify how it will communicate its critical programs and technologies list, develop metrics to assess protection measures, and select the DOD organization that will oversee protection efforts beyond 2020. DOD concurred with the first recommendation and partially concurred with the second and third. GAO maintains the importance of all recommendations in this report.

View GAO-21-158. For more information, contact William Russell at (202) 512-4841 or russellw@gao.gov.