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Bad Idea: Using the Phrase “Military Requirements”

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It’s a familiar military story: a new weapon system has certain “requirements”—say a range of X miles and a total quantity of Y. Later, when testing shows a range of less than X and fiscal pressures cut the procurement quantities, the service nevertheless goes ahead because this new system is better than what is currently available. So, is the “requirement” not actually required? The answer is no; military “requirements” are actually goals that can be changed. This might be chalked up to quirky military jargon, but the notion of “requirements” has two perverse effects. The first is that it encourages advocates to ask for maximum capabilities. The second is that it sets goals without a sense of trade-offs. The term should be abolished.

The notion of “requirements” is deeply embedded in military jargon and decision-making processes. For example, the Joint Staff runs the [Joint Requirements Oversight Council](#), which, not surprisingly, sets “requirements” for new systems. New systems are described in “Operational Requirements Documents.” The concept is not limited to acquisition. There is the [Manpower Requirements Report](#), which describes the numbers and organizational allocation of DOD personnel, and [operational matériel requirements documents](#), which set logistics demands, to name just a few.

This usage has leaked out into the broader national security community. Congress, for example, uses “requirement” routinely. Here’s one example from the [FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act](#) (sec. 1075), which directs a report on, among other things, “A specific requirement for the size and composition of each Armed Force... required total end strength and force structure by type for the Army, required fleet size for the Navy, etc.”

All this deeply confused me when I arrived at the Pentagon as a young military officer. Early on, I was told that the inventory requirement for a particular system was 100 but that my service was only going to buy 80. My response: “How can we buy only 80 if 100 are required?” The older and more experienced staff officers

patiently explained to me that “requirement” in Pentagon-ese did not mean what it did in regular English, that is, “necessity” or “something essential to the existence or occurrence of something else” ([according to Webster’s dictionary](#)). Rather, requirement meant goal or target and, sometimes, those were not achieved. (Oddly, [DOD’s own dictionary](#) does not define “requirement” but only associated terms like “requirements development” which, not very helpfully, is defined as “the process...that develops requirements”.)

The fact that the military uses language in nonstandard ways is not, in itself, a problem. What is a problem is that the use of “requirements” encourages program advocates to ask for maximum capabilities and then discourages trade-offs, so the nonstandard usage has adverse effects in the real world.

One illustration is the Marine Corps’ three-decade-long effort to produce a new ship-to-shore amphibious vehicle. The existing vehicle, called the AAV-7, was (and still is) a metal box that waddled through the water at about 8 mph. Speed was slow because the box had to be large enough to float and carry troops, but mechanical propulsion systems could not push such a box through the water very quickly. However, Marine Corps doctrine called for movement ashore as quickly as possible to reduce vulnerability, the value of which was seen during World War II landings. So, when Marine analysts were asked to develop “requirements” for a new vehicle, they naturally wanted a vehicle that traveled at much higher speed through the water plus reduced vulnerability, increased firepower, improved communications, etc. Unfortunately, the laws of physics inhibit pushing big boxes through the water at high speed and alternatives, like hydroplaning, were complicated and expensive. After three failed attempts to build a new vehicle, the last of which wasted \$3 billion, the Marine Corps finally started the process by exploring what was technologically achievable rather than what was desired.

Arguably, something similar is happening with the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), the follow-on to the Minuteman ICBM. The “requirements process” asked the strategic nuclear community what capabilities the GBSD should have. Not surprisingly, the result was [a long list of enhanced capabilities](#)—longer-range, greater accuracy, improved maintainability, faster response, etc.—which were sensible but potentially expensive. However, DOD in general and the Air Force in particular are facing a large bow wave of fiscal demands for the nuclear modernization effort, which includes not just the GBSD but also the Columbia-class

ballistic missile submarine, the B-21 Raider bomber, new command-and-control, and new nuclear weapons. Consequently, GBSB will face severe fiscal pressure.

GBSD is particularly vulnerable because many arms-control advocates see the ICBM force as inherently destabilizing because of its vulnerability, and as a result, many commentators have suggested that the United States move to a dyad by eliminating ICBMs. So, the requirements process may have set the Air Force up for failure, embarking on the development of an expensive system when fiscal pressures and strategic theorists will be pushing for that system's termination.

Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown is alleged to have said, "There is no such thing as a military requirement." That's not surprising for someone who earned the nickname "Dr. No." Indeed, [in his last annual report to the Congress](#), he stated, "Even the substantial defense resources committed thus far and those projected for the future cannot procure everything we might want or need" and noted, "the always incompletely fulfilled demands of force structure, modernization, readiness, and sustainability."

So, it is time to finally implement Secretary Brown's notion. To be fair, the department already does this in some places. For example, acquisition systems have "threshold" and "objective" capabilities to describe the minimum and desired levels of performance. The department just needs to apply this broadly. Instead of "requirements," DOD could use "target" or "goal." Indeed, it is possible to avoid the wording entirely by just noting "total inventory" or "funded program."

Secretary Jim Mattis, Brown's 12th successor, prides himself on his efforts to improve military thinking. Here's a chance for him to change a deep disfunction in his department's culture.

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