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Research Report

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Flagpole to Front Lines

A Warfighter-Driven Requirements Process

SUMMARY

The United States is facing the most complex and contested security environment in generations. The U.S. Department of War (DOW) will need to ensure that its requirements process supports national strategic priorities ranging from defending the homeland and protecting U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere to deterring aggression in the Indo-Pacific. Consistent with the 2025 National Security Strategy's emphasis on agility, industrial strength, and technological advantage, DOW will need a more coherent system for linking strategy to execution and fielding capabilities at the speed of relevance. Evolving threats, changing operational demands, and the accelerating pace of innovation have created an imperative to build a new framework that aligns emerging technologies and capability requirements with warfighter needs and national security objectives.

In November 2025, following the completion of analysis conducted by DOW in response to Section 811 of the fiscal year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth directed the DOW workforce to reform the joint requirements process to accelerate the fielding of warfighting capabilities. As part of the clean-sheet analysis conducted by RAND for the Section 811 modernization effort, RAND researchers developed the Flagpole to Front Lines (F2FL) concept to provide a vehicle for DOW to realign strategic intent with operational and acquisition realities. The F2FL framework includes several principles to guide such a transformation:

- DOW's vision of military transformation involves reconnecting strategic intent with battlefield realities, similar to how RAND's post–Cold War strategies-to-tasks (STT) framework established an audit trail from national objectives to operational objectives, operational tasks, and the forces needed to accomplish them.
- The history of military innovation suggests that successful armed forces focus on problem-solving rather than technologies. This problem-centric approach to innovation distinguishes meaningful military innovation from technological advances.
- Innovation is a dynamic and iterative process characterized by bargaining and compromise between strategic objectives and technological possibilities, operational requirements, and organizational realities.
- A transformed requirements system should eliminate extraneous complexity and cumbersome legacy bureaucratic processes, focusing instead on streamlining information flows, review, and approval. Equally important is making explicit the linkage of requirements to strategic objectives.
- A transformed requirements system needs to provide multiple opportunities for industry to inject ideas and innovations into the requirements system, ranging from early conceptualization of a requirement to finalization of the operational need and capability requirements, and recognize that solutions need not be single, monolithic systems. RAND's STT framework provides a foundational basis for F2FL through a structured yet flexible mechanism that strengthens coherence and adaptability in requirements development.

[a] The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

[b] Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

The U.S. Department of War (DOW)[1] is operating in one of the most complex and dangerous security environments the United States has ever faced. This environment demands a coherent, agile, and integrated approach to DOW requirements that links strategy with execution and provides warfighters with the capabilities they need to defend the homeland, protect U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, and deter China from threatening U.S. access to Indo-Pacific markets.[2]

For more than two decades, the department's requirements generation process has been structured around the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS), which was originally designed to align operational requirements with acquisition and drive innovation in military capabilities and concepts of operation to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.[3] JCIDS also sought to maintain the jointness of the services by structuring acquisition decisionmaking to consider interdependencies among service systems, minimize unnecessary duplication, and enhance interoperability across the force. JCIDS served to fulfill statutory responsibilities and enable "the [combatant commands], Services, and other components to facilitate timely and cost-effective development of capability solutions for the warfighter."[4]

Changing threats and operational problems, along with the need for more-rapid innovation, signaled that it was time to redesign and replace JCIDS with a system that will better enable DOW to exploit new technologies and commercial innovations and align them with strategic objectives.[5]

JCIDS Background

From its establishment in 2003 until its disestablishment in 2025, JCIDS was the interface among the DOW acquisition process, evolving operational requirements, and technological developments.[6] In recent years, increasing dissatisfaction among the many relevant stakeholders culminated in calls for reform. In RAND's analysis for DOW's Section 811 of the fiscal year (FY) 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) effort,[7] we found that there was broad consensus that JCIDS was cumbersome and slow to adapt to changing operational and technological contexts and that it needed to be reformed, which led to the current reform efforts. This conclusion was drawn from numerous interviews we conducted with stakeholders from across the acquisition, capabilities, and requirements communities.[8] The objective of such reform, as articulated in Section 811 of the FY 2024 NDAA, was to produce requirements processes that would be better able to serve the needs of acquisition programs supporting current and future operational requirements.[9]

JCIDS has not kept up with the pace at which strategic requirements are evolving in the changing security environment described in the 2025 National Security Strategy.[10] Lengthy timelines and inflexible procedures associated with JCIDS have impeded the department's ability to innovate and adapt in response to evolving operational challenges.[11] In a November 2025 memorandum, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth directed the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to "commence the disestablishment of JCIDS and direct the Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC) to cease validating Component-level requirement documents to the maximum extent permitted by law," adding, "[w]ithin 120 days, instructions and manuals governing JCIDS will be rescinded."[12]

The disestablishment of JCIDS is best understood as an attempt to improve the department's ability to innovate by moving from a sluggish, document-driven process to one that can identify and solve operational problems at the speed of strategic and technological change. This raises the question of what will determine whether the effort ultimately results in greater meaningful innovation, which is the focus of the discussion that follows.

Abbreviations

DOW	U.S. Department of War
F2FL	Flagpole to Front Lines
JCIDS	Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System
JROC	Joint Requirements Oversight Council
STT	strategies to tasks

Principles for Innovation

Meaningful military innovation is not necessarily technological innovation.[13] A problem-centric approach to innovation distinguishes technological advances from meaningful military innovation, which occurs when an operational problem that could be solved by innovation is identified and shaped.[14] This approach establishes an operational advantage by changing warfighting praxis.

The DOW vision of military transformation involves reconnecting strategic intent with battlefield realities from the "flagpole to the front lines."[15] This concept is analogous to the strategies-to-tasks (STT) framework, an analytical approach that establishes linkages between national objectives and military activities. RAND researchers developed the STT framework in the early 1990s as a means of providing greater precision to post–Cold War military planning.[16] This approach establishes an audit trail from national objectives to operational objectives, operational tasks, and the forces needed to accomplish them.

Innovation Begins with Strategy

The STT framework offers a conceptual structure for thinking about how strategic objectives can be linked to operational problems. The essential idea is that innovation is driven by how operational problems are identified and defined rather than by technological change. This approach is consistent with research on military innovation that suggests that "innovation begins with strategy" and that "it is the identification and framing of a strategically important operational problem," rather than technological changes alone, that drives innovation.[17] The history of military innovation suggests that successful armed forces focus on problem-solving rather than technologies.[18] This concept was integrated into DOW reform efforts and formally recognized in the November 2025 memorandum "Reforming the Joint Requirements Process to Accelerate Fielding of Warfighting Capabilities."[19] In that memorandum, the identification of strategically significant operational problems—referred to as *Key Operational Problems*—was established as a central element of the department's requirements process.

The process of innovation begins with the identification of strategically important problems, but it is rarely a straight path to solutions. Instead, innovation is a dynamic and iterative process characterized by bargaining and compromise between (on the one hand) strategic objectives and (on the other) technological possibilities, operational requirements, and organizational realities. Identification of a strategically important operational problem provides the impetus to examine the potential of existing technological capabilities and to consider how they might be aligned, adapted, or otherwise extended to contribute to meeting operational and strategic needs.

To translate these principles of problem-focused innovation into a practical requirements process, RAND researchers developed the Flagpole to Front Lines (F2FL) concept. This novel approach applies STT to contemporary requirements challenges by codifying operational problem identification as the key linkage between national objectives and capabilities provided to the warfighter.

Overview of Flagpole to Front Lines

The F2FL framework is a clean-sheet approach to aligning strategic objectives with operational capabilities to ensure that DOW delivers systems to the field when and where they are needed. As mentioned above, the framework builds on insights from RAND's earlier STT methodology, which links national objectives to operational tasks and codifies those linkages in requirements and acquisition processes that are characterized by clarity, adaptability, and innovation. This ensures that the connection between each dollar and strategic objective is evident, thereby supporting more-coherent and more–strategically aligned prioritization.

Streamlining and Modernizing Requirements Management

The F2FL framework maintains a tight coupling between operational capabilities and strategic objec-

tives. The clean-sheet approach eliminates extraneous complexity and cumbersome legacy bureaucratic processes, focusing instead on streamlining information flows, review, and approval. This enhances the adaptability of the process to shifting priorities or changes in the strategic context while maintaining traceability, transparency, and coherence. Although these efficiencies might come at a cost in terms of some perceived aspects of rigor, the result is a process that is more useful to senior-leader decisionmaking because it emphasizes clarity and cogent reasoning over analytical refinement.

Current requirements processes tend to produce lengthy documents that are more inclusive than they are illuminating. F2FL requirements modules, by contrast, are brief and place a premium on concision. Brevity enhances rigor by imposing a discipline of logic, coherence, traceability, and transparency. Concise documentation is less ambiguous, more effective in uncovering hidden assumptions, and more conducive to rapid decisionmaking.[20]

The F2FL framework also provides continuity across capabilities and over time. Once the prospective mission impact of a set of requirements has been analyzed, F2FL establishes an explicit linkage between strategic objectives and operational outcomes. Changing specifications do not necessarily invalidate requirements; rather, the technical approach can flex as long as the warfighting function continues to be fulfilled. This is radically different from the current, parameter-based requirements processes, in which failure to meet a parameter, even one that has no impact on the warfighter, can lead to program cancellation.[21]

In developing the F2FL framework, we built on the simplified foundation of the STT framework by layering in agility and collaboration to more closely connect strategic intent with rapid capability delivery. While STT research by RAND demonstrated how DOW could move from national objectives to operational needs and requirements, F2FL codifies a collaborative, iterative, and problem-focused process by which DOW and industry partners can move more rapidly and confidently from strategic priorities to innovation and systems.

The F2FL approach provides multiple opportunities for industry to inject ideas and innovations into the requirements process.

Accelerating Innovation Through Rapid Integration and Collaboration

The F2FL approach provides multiple opportunities for industry to inject ideas and innovations into the requirements process, ranging from early conceptualization of a requirement to finalization of the operational need and capability requirements. Industry partners and DOW science and technology organizations would collaborate to bring innovative solutions in software, artificial intelligence, data analytics, and other capabilities to the field more quickly.

F2FL provides industry with a clear statement of the operational problem that requires a solution. By maintaining focus on mission outcomes, this approach enables industry (including nontraditional contractors) to better understand DOW's needs and priorities. Describing the operational problem (rather than a proposed solution) provides industry with an opportunity to bring its capabilities to bear on DOW's mission.[22]

Synchronizing Capability Needs with the Adaptive Acquisition Framework

The F2FL framework can leverage the tailored pathways of the Adaptive Acquisition Framework—Urgent Capability Acquisition, Middle Tier of Acquisition, and Software Acquisition, among others—to better align the requirements and acquisition processes to the unique needs of capabilities.[23] Specifically, each acquisition pathway should be mapped to strategic objectives, urgency, complexity, and risk

tolerance as requirements are validated and then proceed into acquisition. This reduces delays, streamlines decisionmaking, and ensures that requirements are documented and traceable to mission outcomes.

The F2FL process recognizes that solutions need not be single, monolithic systems. Instead, it supports identifying one or more capability solutions of varying size and scope—from integrated hardware-and-software systems to a system of systems composed of smaller, complementary elements.[24] This flexible approach aligns acquisition strategies with the form, complexity, urgency, and risk of the needed situation.

Strategies-to-Tasks Framework

As mentioned earlier, RAND developed the STT framework during the post–Cold War era, when changing geopolitical priorities and constrained resources created a need for a rigorous approach to aligning military capabilities with national objectives. The framework established an analytical methodology for systematically tracing national strategy and goals down to specific operational tasks and activities.[25] By clearly connecting proposed capabilities to defined operational requirements and strategic imperatives, STT serves as a valuable tool for concept development and requirements processes, as depicted in Figure 1 (leftmost section).

In contrast, JCIDS, also depicted in Figure 1 (center section), is an example of a process-centric approach to requirements generation in which the procedure and documentation—for example, Key Performance Parameters—become ends in themselves, largely independent of the system's actual contribution to strategic or operational advantage. JCIDS is seldom employed as a true vehicle of strategic translation; instead, it primarily serves to produce and validate requirements-related documents, such as Capabilities-Based Assessments, Initial Capabilities Documents, and Analyses of Alternatives.

The F2FL approach, illustrated in the rightmost section of Figure 1, seeks to transform the STT framework from a static analytical exercise into a dynamic requirements architecture. It does this by linking strategic intent to tasking of operational units and specification of warfighter capability requirements. F2FL provides decisionmakers with a clear view of how proposed capabilities contribute to strategic advantage, closing the requirements loop from strategy to task.

At its core, STT provides a hierarchical decomposition of objectives and an audit trail from strategic policy to tactical activity. At the highest level are **national goals**, which are derived from the United States' founding documents and associated political traditions. These goals are the enduring purposes of the nation: to preserve sovereignty, secure liberty, promote general welfare, and provide for the common defense, all in service of the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

National security objectives translate broad national ideals into specific commitments to protect and advance U.S. interests in a given geopolitical situation. They encompass the entire range of instruments of national power. They are more specific than national ideals and goals, and, unlike those broader aspirations, they are variable rather than fixed. They respond to changes in the international environment, and they establish the parameters within which national efforts will be orchestrated and military objectives will be set.

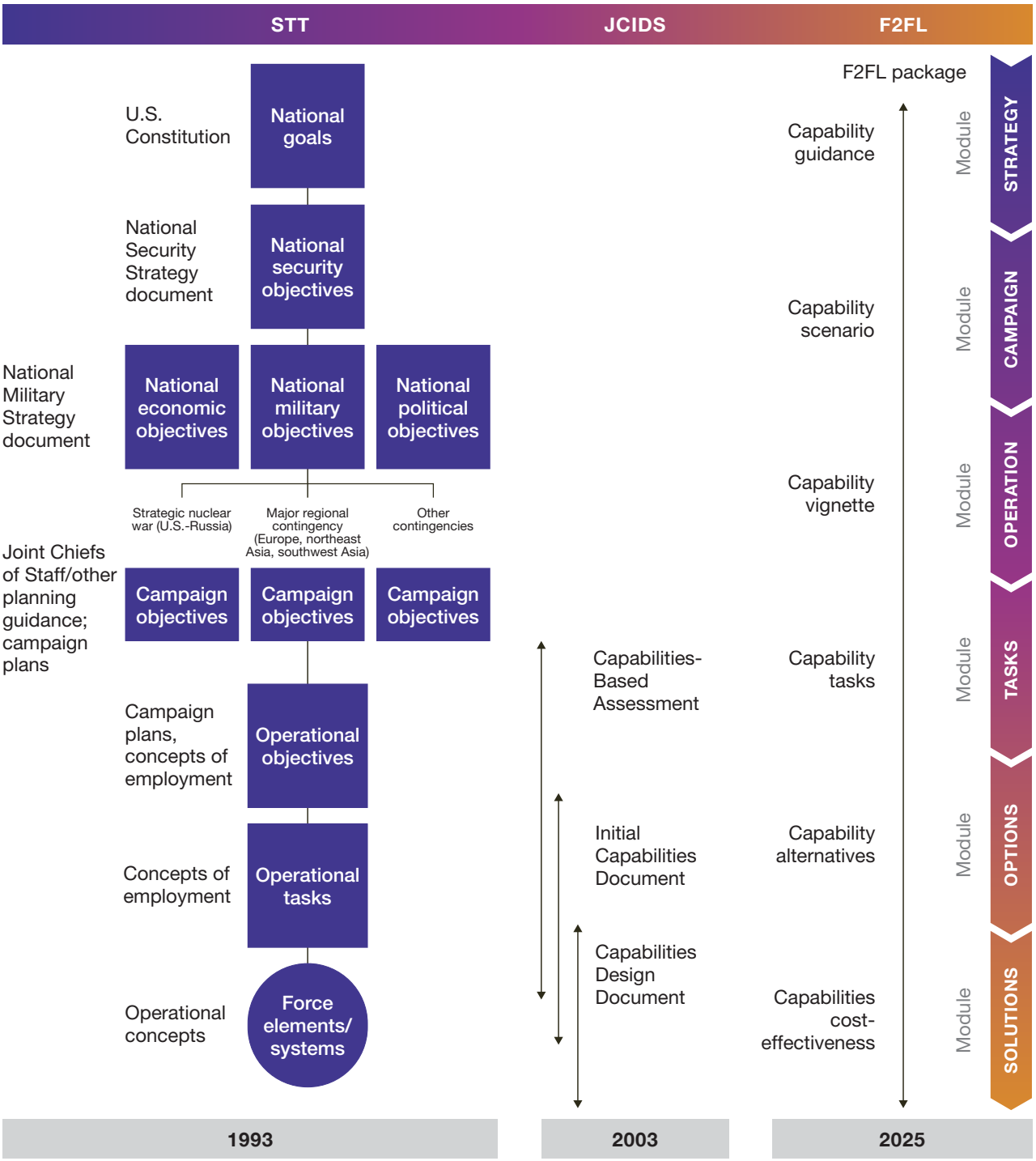
National military objectives specify the outcomes that the military must achieve in support of national security objectives. National military objectives provide for the development of military strategy, contingency planning, and decisions on force posture and readiness. They link the ends that national leaders pursue with the operational objectives that the military must be prepared to achieve.

Campaign objectives represent an inflection point between strategy and operations. They describe the desired end state of a conflict or operation in a given theater, taking into account geographical considerations, adversary characteristics, and the forces assigned to the theater. Campaign objectives determine how resources will be distributed among air, land, maritime, space, and cyber components.

Operational objectives represent intermediate conditions that must be achieved to accomplish the campaign objectives. At this level, objectives are further decomposed, while the coupling between operational outcomes and campaign outcomes is preserved. Operational objectives are typically assigned

FIGURE 1

Evolution of Requirements Processes



SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act*.

to component commands and are supported by concepts of employment that describe how capabilities will be employed in the theater.

Operational tasks are the specific and observable military actions taken to achieve operational objectives. Tasks are further decomposed through operational concepts into **functions**, such as surveillance, assessment, command and control, dynamic targeting, and execution. It is at the task level that the STT framework provides a powerful tool for linking operational and strategic objectives with specific actions.

A Brief Manual of Flagpole to Front Lines

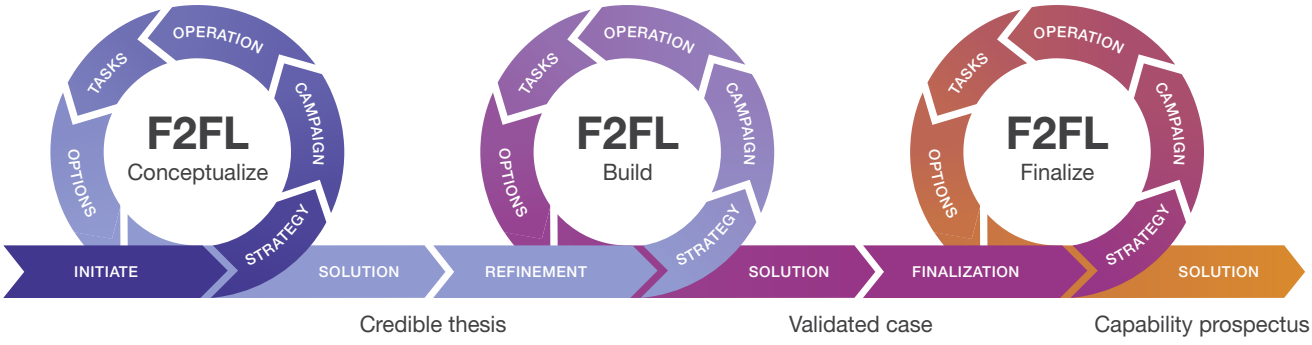
The F2FL requirements process employs the STT framework to ensure that capability development is closely tied to national security objectives and provides systems to warfighters when and where they need them. F2FL does not produce voluminous, static documents; instead, it gathers information on each requirement into a discrete, data-driven module that is transparent and readily analyzed for rationale, traceability, and operational impact. These modules are intended to be understandable to DOW military and civilian leaders and, as appropriate, National Security Council staffers, and defense contractors. This approach provides transparency, since the lineage of a capability can be audited, and enables incorporation of feedback and adaptation to changing requirements.[26]

Figure 2 depicts the F2FL process through the lens of agile methodologies, showing how the approach could be executed as iterative sprints. Each sprint provides an opportunity not only to further develop the analysis but also to make fundamental changes and adjustments as more information becomes available and deeper insights are gained. In this way, the process is adaptive to the operational environment and evolving strategic guidance.

The first step in the iterative process is the *conceptualize* sprint. The *conceptualize* sprint is a time-limited period of exploration in which the broad outlines of the capability requirement are sketched. During the sprint, practitioners establish the linkage between strategic objectives and tasks and characterize the solution space. The sprint provides an opportunity to fail early if the requirement is misaligned with physical, technological, or strategic reality.

Once the *conceptualize* sprint has demonstrated the potential for feasibility and strategic alignment, the process moves to the *build* sprint. In *build*, the conceptual outline is developed to a higher level of fidelity. Additional stakeholders are brought into the process, from operational warfighters to intelligence analysts and sustainment experts, to test and refine (or challenge) the assumptions. The *build* sprint may reveal, for example, that framing assumptions have unnecessarily constrained the solution space or that essential tasks have implicitly assumed a particular type of solution. Leadership and subject-matter

FIGURE 2
Flagpole to Front Lines Process Flow



SOURCE: Adapted from U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act*.

experts can contribute greater clarity regarding high-level guidance and desired strategic effects. Practical considerations, ranging from sustainment complexity to evolving threat assessments, can significantly alter cost estimates and timelines.

These insights often emerge incrementally, so the *build* sprint can be repeated as necessary. Because F2FL is intrinsically transparent, whether the team chooses to continue with another iteration or to move forward in the process, the decision point will be evident to senior decisionmakers. This transparency ensures that iteration is deliberate rather than reflexive.

The process concludes with a *finalize* sprint, in which a final documentation packet is produced for review by the JROC. The documentation must be accessible to diverse audiences, including senior officers, civilian leaders, and operational planners, so that they can easily grasp the essential logic. In other words, the packet must establish what the capability is intended to accomplish, how much it will cost, why it is needed, and how it provides an operational advantage to the warfighter. At this point, the requirement is ready to move forward to acquisition and further development within the defense planning system.

Structuring the F2FL process in three sprints aligns closely with agile methodologies. The primary benefit is early feedback and incremental development so that fatally flawed concepts can be detected and discarded while promising ideas receive additional rounds of stakeholder engagement and data collection. F2FL is based on the proposition that warfighters generate requirements to achieve the nation's strategic objectives. F2FL is designed to translate those objectives into capability requirements through a process that is fully transparent to senior decisionmakers. This transparency is the essential source of accountability; it compels coherence and logic in the development of requirements and ensures that outcomes serve the national interest rather than bureaucratic equities. By anchoring capability development in the STT methodology, F2FL makes clear how each requirement contributes to strategic objectives and operational effects. In doing so, it shifts the requirements process from procedural compliance to clarity of thought, transforming how the department conceives, evaluates, and delivers capability from the flagpole to the front lines.

F2FL is based on the proposition that warfighters generate requirements to achieve the nation's strategic objectives.

Implementing Flagpole to Front Lines Successfully

Changes to long-standing processes are inevitably accompanied by unintended consequences, but they also create opportunities for improvement. We believe that the department could apply the spirit of F2FL to F2FL's own adoption, treating modernization of the requirements process as a requirement in itself. The operational problem to be solved is slow and stovepiped requirements processes, and various adjustments to F2FL can be explored through iterative development, with feedback accumulated to make the process more effective and efficient over time. Robust senior-leader sponsorship and governance will be necessary to maintain jointness and coherence across the services, while metrics and indicators can be developed to measure the degree of alignment between strategy and capability delivery. In this sense, this report is the first iteration of the process it describes, an application of iterative development to requirements reform.

Notes

[1] The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

[2] Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

[3] U.S. Department of Defense, *Defense Acquisition Guidebook*.

[4] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Manual for the Operation of the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS)*.

[5] DOW, "Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Town Hall at the Pentagon."

[6] Defense Acquisition University, "Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS)."

[7] Public Law 118-31, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024.

[8] U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act*.

[9] Lofgren, "JCIDS Process Timelines and Impact on Software Acquisition Pathway."

[10] Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

[11] Lofgren, "JCIDS Process Timelines and Impact on Software Acquisition Pathway."

[12] Hegseth and Feinberg, "Reforming the Joint Requirements Process to Accelerate Fielding of Warfighting Capabilities."

[13] Grissom, "The Future of Military Innovation Studies."

[14] Grissom, Lee, and Mueller, *Innovation in the United States Air Force*.

[15] DOW, "Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Town Hall at the Pentagon."

[16] Thaler, *Strategies to Tasks*.

[17] Grissom, Lee, and Mueller, *Innovation in the United States Air Force*.

[18] Grissom, "The Future of Military Innovation Studies."

[19] Hegseth and Feinberg, "Reforming the Joint Requirements Process to Accelerate Fielding of Warfighting Capabilities."

[20] Moore, "How to Make Great Decisions, Quickly."

[21] U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, *To Consider the Nomination of Mr. Stephen A. Feinberg to Be Deputy Secretary of Defense*.

[22] Hegseth and Feinberg, "Reforming the Joint Requirements Process to Accelerate Fielding of Warfighting Capabilities."

[23] Defense Acquisition University, "Adaptive Acquisition Framework."

[24] Department of Defense Instruction 5000.02, *Operation of the Adaptive Acquisition Framework*.

[25] Thaler, *Strategies to Tasks*.

[26] DOW, "Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Town Hall at the Pentagon."

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About This Report

The U.S. Department of War (DOW) has struggled with a requirements process that has become increasingly mismatched with evolving technology, emerging threats, and demands to deliver capabilities to operational forces more rapidly. The Trump administration and Congress have directed sweeping acquisition reform through executive and legislative action, respectively. Requirements modernization—an essential part of this reform—is being pursued through what have been described as "generational changes" by policymakers and experts. DOW's decision to replace its legacy joint requirements process (the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System) provides an opportunity to better align technology and innovation with operational needs.

RAND assisted DOW in answering Congress's mandate in Section 811 of the fiscal year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act: Modernizing the Department of Defense Requirements Process. As part of that effort, RAND researchers developed the Flagpole to Front Lines (F2FL) concept, a warfighter-centric, strategies-to-tasks (STT) approach to linking national security objectives with operational requirements and acquisition decisions.

This report builds on that analysis and further develops the conceptual and methodological foundations of the F2FL framework. F2FL is a clean-sheet construct drawing on the military innovation literature and RAND's own STT methodology. The material presented in this report elaborates how F2FL adapts STT to provide concise and auditable requirements that can expedite the fielding of warfighting capabilities that are more closely aligned with national strategy and accomplish strategic objectives.

This report should be of interest to those concerned with defense requirements modernization. The intended audience is mostly government officials responsible for such processes and those in industry who need to interact with these processes.

RAND National Security Research Division

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