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Defense Primer: Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering

Advances in science and technology have long played a critical role in ensuring the technological preeminence of the United States military. For this reason, the Department of Defense (DOD) is the largest funder of federal research and development. The Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering (USD (R&E)) is a civilian official reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense. The USD (R&E) serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense for DOD research, engineering, and technology development activities and programs.

Over the last several years, policymakers and others have expressed concern that the long-held technological edge of the U.S. military is eroding due, in part, to the proliferation of technologies outside the defense sector, organizational and cultural barriers to DOD effectively incorporating and exploiting commercial innovations, and insufficient engagement with leading-edge companies that have not historically been a part of the DOD innovation system. The establishment of the USD (R&E) as the fourth highest ranking DOD official—behind the Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Chief Management Officer—was intended to promote faster innovation and to reduce risk-intolerance in the pursuit of new technologies.

Origin of the USD (R&E) Position

Leadership for DOD research, engineering, and technology development activities and functions within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has been realigned multiple times over the course of DOD's history. For example, there was a USD (R&E) from 1977 to 1986. Reestablishment of the position of the USD (R&E) in 2016 through the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (FY2017 NDAA, P.L. 114-328) represents the most recent realignment.

Specifically, P.L. 114-328 eliminated the position of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (USD (AT&L)) and established the positions of USD (R&E), the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD (A&S)), and chief management officer effective February 1, 2018.

In reestablishing the position of USD (R&E) the Senate Armed Services Committee stated (S.Rept. 114-255):

The committee expects that just as previous USD (R&E) incumbents led the so-called “Second Offset” strategy, which successfully enabled the United States to leap ahead of the Soviet Union in terms of military technology, the new USD (R&E) would be tasked with driving the key technologies that must encompass what defense leaders are now

calling a “Third Offset” strategy: cyber and space capabilities, unmanned systems, directed energy, undersea warfare, hypersonics, and robotics, among others.

Roles and Responsibilities of the USD (R&E)

The FY2017 NDAA outlines the powers and duties of the USD (R&E) to include:

- serving as the chief technology officer of DOD with the mission of advancing technology and innovation for the military services and DOD;
- establishing policies on, and supervising and coordinating DOD's research and engineering, technology development, technology transition, prototyping, experimentation, and developmental testing activities and programs, including through the allocation of resources for defense research and engineering; and
- serving as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense on all research, engineering, and technology development activities and programs in DOD.

Furthermore, in the conference report (H.Rept. 114-840) for the FY2017 NDAA, the conferees stated their expectation that the USD (R&E) “would take risks, press the technology envelope, test and experiment, and have the latitude to fail, as appropriate.”

On December 11, 2017, President Trump nominated Michael D. Griffin to be the USD (R&E). His nomination was confirmed by the Senate on February 15, 2018.

Office of the USD (R&E)

As required by P.L. 114-328, DOD submitted a report to Congress proposing an organizational and management structure for the office of the USD (R&E) (OUSD (R&E)). According to the 2017 report, the OUSD (R&E) is to be organized around three major components:

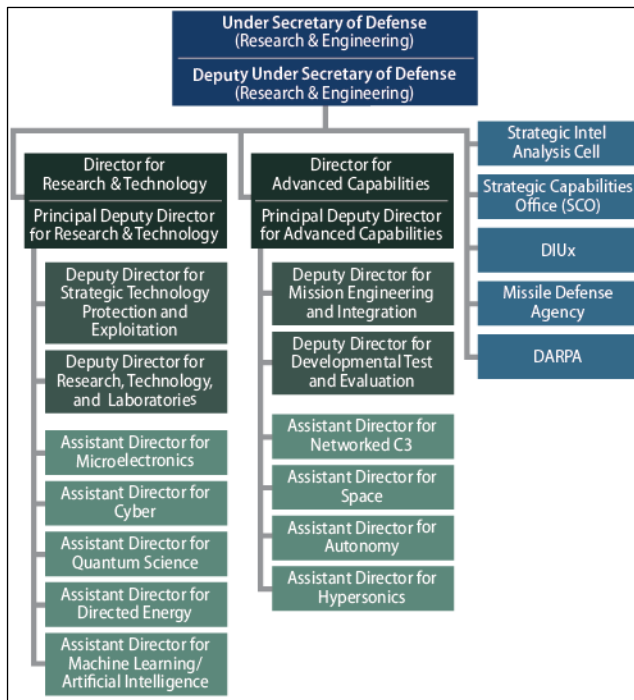
- A Strategic Intelligence Analysis Cell focused on understanding the capabilities and vulnerabilities of potential adversaries, assessing U.S. capabilities, tracking global technology trends, assessing emerging threats, and identifying potential opportunities that warrant action and merit investment.
- An Assistant Secretary of Defense (ASD) for Research and Technology responsible for setting the strategic technical direction and investment strategy for DOD to ensure technical dominance on the battlefield, integrating DOD's laboratory infrastructure, and

providing stewardship of the technical community that conducts defense research.

- An ASD for Advanced Capabilities responsible for prototyping and experimentation that is designed to increase understanding of a technology and its capabilities, drive down technical risk, and incorporate warfighter feedback to ensure concepts that transition to acquisition address the needed capability, and are timely and affordable.

On July 13, 2018, the Deputy Secretary of Defense signed a memorandum approving the organizational structure, roles, and responsibilities of the OUSD (R&E). The three major components described in the 2017 report to Congress are reflected in the final OUSD (R&E) except the assistant secretaries are now directors (and will not need Senate confirmation) and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Strategic Capabilities Office (SCO) and Defense Innovation Unit-Experimental (DIUx) report directly to the USD (R&E) through a new Deputy Under Secretary for Research and Engineering. The OUSD (R&E) also includes nine assistant directors focused on research and technical areas deemed critical to maintaining the advantage of the U.S. military (e.g., artificial intelligence, quantum science, space, and hypersonics).

Figure 1. Organizational Chart for Office of USD (R&E)



Source: Adapted from Attachment 1, Department of Defense, Memorandum from Deputy Secretary of Defense on Establishment of the Office of USD (R&E) and the Office of the USD (A&S), July 13, 2018.

According to DOD officials, it will take until 2019 to fully implement the new organizational and management structure of the OUSD (R&E).

USD (R&E) and USD (A&S) Relationship

A wide range of observers see a close and cooperative relationship between the USD (R&E) and the USD (A&S) as critical for the efficient and effective delivery of advanced technologies to the warfighter, especially at the fast pace many expect is needed to maintain the U.S. technological lead over potential adversaries.

Some have expressed concerns that dividing the roles and responsibilities of the USD (AT&L) into an USD (R&E) and an USD (A&S) will exacerbate the *valley of death* (i.e., the barriers and challenges that exist in bringing a new technology from the research laboratory to full scale deployment in the armed forces).

In the conference report (H.Rept. 114-840) for the FY2017 NDAA, the conferees acknowledged the potential challenges that exist in separating the roles and responsibilities of the USD (AT&L) into the positions of a USD (R&E) and a USD (A&S). However, the conference report asserts that elevating the missions of advancing technology and innovation within DOD, fostering distinct technology and acquisition cultures to better deliver superior capabilities, and providing greater oversight and management of DOD components outside the military services would best be addressed by the creation of two undersecretaries. Furthermore, the conferees indicated that any potential barriers or gaps could “be mitigated through effective leadership and management.”

In an effort to bridge gaps between the two offices, the July 13 memorandum requires the USD (R&E) to participate in Milestone Decisions through the lifecycle of a Major Defense Acquisition Program, and advise the USD (A&S) as appropriate, including serving on the Defense Acquisition Board for certain programs.

Relevant Statutes
Title 10, U.S. Code, Chapter 4—Office of the Secretary of Defense
CRS Products
CRS In Focus IF10553, <i>Defense Primer: RDT&E</i> . CRS Report R45403, <i>The Global Research and Development Landscape and Implications for the Department of Defense</i> . CRS Report R45068, <i>Acquisition Reform in the FY2016-FY2018 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAs)</i> .
Other Resources
William D. O’Neil and Gene H. Porter, <i>What to Buy? The Role of Director of Defense Research and Engineering (DDR&E) Lessons from the 1970s</i> , Institute for Defense Analyses, IDA Paper P-4675, Alexandria, VA, January 2011.

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