The 2015 NDAA Mandates Open Architecture for Defense IT Systems

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Provisions in the annual National Defense Authorization Act legislation affect the Defense sector of the federal information technology market over many years. Consider, for example, the mandate in the FY 2012 NDAA calling for the Department of Defense to utilize cloud services provided by commercial partners. The DoD has been working ever since to find a viable way of implementing this mandate. The far-reaching impact of NDAA provisions thus make it imperative that federal contractors understand how the legislation will affect their business at the DoD in the future.

The FY 2015 NDAA promises to have a significant impact as it features an important provision calling for the DoD to adopt open architecture for all of its IT systems. Specifically, Section 801 calls for the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics to create a plan that "develops standards and defines architectures necessary to enable open systems approaches in the key mission areas." The discussion about using modular approaches to acquisitions has been evolving at the DoD for several years, resulting in a shift in the length and complexity of contracted efforts. Rather than procuring a single end-to-end solution, Defense customers tend increasingly to initiate program procurements in increments. These increments have shorter time spans and defined objectives that set parameters for the acquisition of the next increment. In Section 801, Congress gives this "modular" approach the weight of law, meaning vendors should expect to see even more short-duration, lower dollar value, limited objective procurements.

Equally important is the call for DoD to develop a strategy for using open architecture. The department is currently in the process of creating a unified transport network based on internet protocol. This may work well for newer systems, but thousands of legacy systems across the DoD remain locked in proprietary configurations. A clause in Section 801 mandates that the USD AT&L submit a report which "outlines a process for the potential conversion [of legacy systems] to an open systems approach." Engineering those systems to operate on an open architecture will unlock data, make the systems interoperable, and enable Defense customers to transition more easily from one IT support vendor to another.

If this sounds like the next, deeper level of the Joint Information Environment, you are right on target. IT vendors should take heed and get ahead of the curve because in all probability open architecture is going to be a requirement for every unclassified (classified too?) solution that the DoD procures in the future. If your solution isn't open, it won't be purchased. End of story.

The open architecture requirement will also compel Defense customers to take a hard look at commercial cloud as an alternative. Why spend money engineering an antiquated legacy system to operate on an open architecture when you can hire a vendor to host the data and implement a comparable, new interoperable system?

In short, the 2015 NDAA should stimulate business opportunity at the DoD as funding locked in Operations and Maintenance funding for legacy systems moves into new efforts to re-engineer and/or cloud-enable those systems for use in an open architecture.