From Red Tape to Red Bows: Urgent Defense Acquisition Transformation

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Defense (DoD) faces urgent challenges in delivering warfighting capabilities at the speed required by modern threats. Current acquisition practices, shaped by rigid regulatory constraints and appropriations structures, continue to delay the deployment of critical technologies such as artificial intelligence, immersive training systems, and autonomous platforms. Drawing on three federal case studies, this paper examines how categorical funding silos, specifically the segmentation of Operations and Maintenance (O&M), Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (RDT&E), and Procurement, create systemic bottlenecks that slow the delivery of capability across the acquisition lifecycle.

Using the Human Performance Technology (HPT) framework, the study conducts a mixed-methods analysis that triangulates statutory guidance, oversight reports, and operational case studies. Findings from the Space Development Agency (SDA), the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), and the General Services Administration (GSA) reveal that acquisition delays are not solely the result of execution failure but rather stem from deeper misalignments between organizational structures, policy interpretation, and performance expectations.

The analysis demonstrates that transformational improvements in acquisition speed and agility, often exceeding 65%, have been achieved using existing statutory tools, including Middle Tier Acquisition (MTA), Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs), and Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs). These reforms required no legislative changes. Instead, they relied on performance-based contracting models, modular delivery frameworks, and workforce alignment strategies supported by data-driven planning and analysis.

This paper offers acquisition professionals and defense policymakers practical, evidence-based strategies that accelerate capability delivery without compromising compliance. It concludes that the sustainable modernization of the Defense Acquisition System (DAS) depends not on new legislation, but on an institutional commitment that redesigns processes, removes structural barriers, and operationalizes existing tools. By turning entrenched bureaucratic constraints into streamlined practices, the DoD can transform red tape into red bows, delivering capabilities with speed, precision, and strategic intent.

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INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement and intensifying global competition, the U.S. Defense Acquisition System (DAS) faces increasing pressure to improve its speed and flexibility. Guided by principles of transparency, fiscal discipline, and oversight, the DAS often struggles to deliver capabilities on timelines aligned with operational demand, particularly in fast-moving domains such as artificial intelligence (AI), autonomy, and cloud computing (Armstrong, 2020; Malone, 2024; Schwartz, 2014). This performance constraint has long been documented in oversight reviews, which highlight how process and governance burdens contribute to extended timelines (GAO, 2015; Hans et al., 2021).

Recent executive actions acknowledge this constraint. For example, Executive Order (E.O.) 14275 (Restoring Common Sense to Federal Procurement) directed the General Services Administration (GSA) to streamline the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), which has expanded into a complex regulatory framework (Kelman, 1990). Related policy direction likewise seeks to simplify procurement, reduce cycle time, and improve access to commercial solutions (E.O. No. 14275, 2025; E.O. No. 14271, 2025). In parallel, the Government Accountability Office's (GAO's) most recent assessments emphasize that agencies remain "not yet well-positioned to field systems with speed," reinforcing the need to apply existing authorities with greater discipline (GAO, 2024c).

This paper evaluates whether existing acquisition pathways can materially reduce delivery timelines without requiring new legislation. Alternatives such as Middle Tier Acquisition (MTA), Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs), Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs), and the Software Acquisition Pathway (SWP) offer speed advantages while remaining within statutory and regulatory bounds. Yet, they remain underutilized (DoDI 5000.87). Consequently, this analysis tests whether disciplined governance and pathway fit, not new statutes, are the primary levers for improved tempo, as suggested by recent oversight evidence (GAO, 2024c).

Despite new guidance and policy direction, implementation challenges persist, including capacity constraints and uneven adoption of available mechanisms. The DAS also contains underused tools already authorized by statute that could mitigate delays when applied with discipline and appropriate governance. The pages that follow apply Human Performance Technology (HPT) to connect these systemic constraints to actionable implementation steps and a measurable evaluation plan.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The DAS is meant to give the Department of Defense (DoD) timely, affordable, and effective capabilities. Despite decades of reform, programs still face delays, cost growth, and problems bringing in new technology. The GAO has shown this in repeated audits, pointing to funding rules and fragmented oversight as the leading causes (GAO, 2015; GAO, 2024a; Livingston et al., 2021).

The problem is not a lack of options but barriers that prevent pathways from being used effectively. The Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF) offers Major Capability Acquisition (MCA), MTA, and SWP, yet program offices struggle with conflicting rules, limited resources, and incentives that push them toward caution. Agile pathways are

available, but milestone-heavy processes still dominate, slowing down delivery (Wong et al., 2022; Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2022).

This paper argues that improvements can be made under the current law. Using the HPT lens, structural issues can be linked to processes, incentives, and resources, showing ways to deliver faster without new legislation.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers come from strict laws, layers of oversight, and the pull of milestone-based methods. Title 10 sets pathways and reporting rules, but the complexity often pushes managers to avoid flexible options. The GAO (2015; 2024a) shows that leaders spend too much time on repeated reviews instead of deploying capabilities to the field.

The AAF was built to ease this, but offices still default to MCA, even when MTA or SWP could fit. This is tied to risk aversion and the belief that milestone programs are safer to defend in reviews (CRS, 2022). The result is delay and resistance to tools meant to speed modernization.

Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers include unclear accountability, workforce gaps, and incentives that reward caution. Acquisition authority is split across services, program offices, and Congress, leading to overlap and slow action. The GAO (2024b) notes gaps in training and retention, with offices often missing people skilled in agile methods. Government-wide workforce reduction tools, such as the 2025 U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) buyouts and hiring freezes, have further constrained capacity in program offices, compounding these challenges (Neal, 2025).

Integration Barriers

Integration barriers arise when new technology must be integrated into legacy systems and outdated processes. Standards are uneven, making interoperability a recurring problem. The GAO (2024c) points to fragmented test rules that duplicate work across services. Wong et al. (2022) show that weak coordination between offices and commands slows the use of commercial tools. Add resource limits, and managers focus on meeting short-term operational demands instead of long-term planning. Innovation then stays siloed, and delivery drags on.

DIAGNOSTIC AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

HPT as a Diagnostic Lens

The HPT model provides a structured way to diagnose why performance outcomes fall short in the DAS. Rather than attributing failure to individual mistakes, HPT distinguishes among processes, people, and environmental factors (Pershing, 2006). This diagnostic orientation is valuable in acquisition, where systemic barriers such as regulatory fragmentation or workforce misalignment are more decisive than individual shortcomings. In this study, HPT frames how barriers are identified and where solutions may be applied within existing authority (Wong et al., 2022).

Regulatory Framework

The DAS is governed by Title 10 of the U.S. Code and the DoDI 5000 series, with DoDI 5000.02 establishing the AAF as the central policy construct. Within the AAF, program offices may pursue MCA (DoDI 5000.85), MTA (DoDI 5000.80), or the SWP (DoDI 5000.87). MCA programs are further organized by Acquisition Categories (ACATs) (ACATs), which scale oversight according to statutory thresholds and decision authority (DoDI 5000.85; 10 U.S.C. § 4201). While these pathways are intended to balance oversight with flexibility, GAO has shown that fragmented implementation, restrictive funding rules, and uneven tailoring often limit their practical impact (GAO, 2015; GAO, 2024a; GAO, 2024c). RAND reached a similar conclusion, noting that cultural inertia keeps programs tied to legacy oversight structures even when modern pathways are available (Wong et al., 2022). Recent EOs

(14265, 14271, 14275, 2025) further underscore the policy imperative to streamline acquisition and expand the use of commercial solutions, yet their effects depend on consistent institutional adoption.

Linking Diagnostic and Regulatory Foundations

Bringing HPT together with the AAF provides a foundation for performance analysis. HPT identifies where gaps exist in processes, workforce capacity, or environmental alignment, while the AAF defines the regulatory tools program offices may use to address those gaps. Recognizing the role of ACAT governance clarifies how oversight intensity interacts with these pathways. Taken together, these diagnostic and regulatory perspectives frame the subsequent analysis of structural, organizational, and integration barriers.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design to evaluate how acquisition authorities are applied across the DAS. Anchoring the analysis in the HPT framework ensures that findings are tied to observable performance factors rather than abstract theory (Pershing, 2006). By diagnosing barriers through the categories of processes, people, incentives, and environment, the research isolates where reforms encounter systemic resistance and where existing authorities may be leveraged for improvement.

Research Design

The design combines document analysis with comparative case studies. Oversight products such as GAO reports, CRS studies, and DoDI provide a longitudinal record of reform implementation (GAO, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2016). RAND's review of three decades of acquisition reform adds historical depth (Wong et al., 2022), while EOs 14265, 14271, and 14275 (2025) provide the most recent federal direction at the time of this research. These sources were deliberately chosen because they represent statutory authority, independent oversight, or peer-reviewed scholarship, strengthening the reliability of conclusions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, documents were coded against HPT categories to identify barriers in processes, workforce capacity, incentives, and environmental alignment. Coding also distinguished statutory mandates from structural barriers, clarifying where delays stemmed from law versus implementation practice. Particular attention was given to how ACAT designations, pathway selection, and the use of authorities such as OTAs and CSOs influenced outcomes (DoD, 2019; DoDI 5000.85, 2020).
Second, case studies of SDA, DIU, and GSA were reviewed to assess how alternative authorities have been applied in practice to reduce delivery timelines. These cases were selected because each demonstrates a distinct mechanism, whether through pathway tailoring, flexible contracting, or cross-agency vehicles capable of producing results faster than traditional programs.

Quantitative Anchors

Quantitative measures were incorporated selectively to validate qualitative findings. Pre–Milestone B schedule predictors were drawn from Jimenez et al. (2016), while GAO reporting provided data on the cadence of DIU's CSO process (GAO, 2024). These measures were used only when supported directly by authoritative sources and not generalized beyond their evidentiary scope.

Limitations

The study is limited to publicly available oversight reports, statutory and regulatory guidance, and secondary analyses. Classified program records and internal performance reviews were not accessible, which constrains granularity at the program level. This limitation narrows the focus to systemic and policy-level dynamics, while also strengthening the generalizability of findings across acquisition governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the DAS continuously demonstrates systemic issues arising from the linear and fractured intersection of structural rules, organizational practices, and environmental conditions (GAO, 2024c). The literature provides four reinforcing perspectives: oversight and empirical findings, design and commercial integration evidence, historical reform trajectories, and fiscal boundaries. Together, these works underscore the relevance of applying HPT to identify how processes, people, incentives, and environment interact to shape acquisition performance.

Convergence of Oversight and Empirical Findings

GAO oversight consistently documents that acquisition programs encounter delays due to duplicative milestone reviews, fragmented reporting requirements, and inconsistent tailoring of authorities (GAO, 2025b, 2015, 2024c). Reviews note that cycle times for ACAT I programs are prolonged as documentation demands outweigh risk-adjusted oversight. Wong et al. (2022) reinforce this conclusion by showing that cultural inertia sustains rigidity, with program offices defaulting to legacy approaches even when alternative pathways are available. CRS adds that workforce shortages and uneven training across the services exacerbate these delays, further constraining the system's capacity to adopt new tools (Schwartz et al., 2016). These findings converge on the HPT dimensions of processes and people: fragmented procedures limit adaptability, while limited workforce capacity restricts execution. Empirical studies provide quantitative anchors: Jimenez et al. (2016) showed pre–MS B variables reliably predicted downstream schedule duration, while Hans et al. (2021) demonstrated that early technology immaturity drives initial schedule growth, with technical inefficiencies dominating later phases. Together, oversight and empirical perspectives reinforce that inefficiencies are systemic and measurable.

Design and Commercial Integration Evidence

Literature examining design approaches highlights structural levers for acceleration. Doerry and Koenig (2019) showed that set-based design reduces rework when paired with disciplined documentation and collaboration, demonstrating that structural methods influence program tempo. Livingston et al. (2021) found that commercial technology insertion can break the Iron Triangle when pathways support iterative delivery, though transition into programs of record often stalls under rigid milestone rules. GAO reports confirm that OT agreements are increasingly used to expand the supplier base, yet transition-to-production bottlenecks limit their impact (GAO, 2019, 2022, 2024c, 2025). GSA's Alliant 2 GWAC offers a parallel example of how centralized acquisition vehicles can streamline access to commercial IT providers, reduce contracting redundancies, and strengthen competition across the federal market (GSA, 2025b). These findings align with HPT's categories of processes, incentives, and environment: structural design methods reduce inefficiency, incentives for adoption remain inconsistent, and external alignment with commercial refresh cycles remains a barrier.

Historical Trajectory of Reform

Policy and statutory reforms reflect cycles between standardization and flexibility. The FAR (1984) centralized competition and transparency, while FASA (1994) and the Clinger–Cohen Act (1996) promoted commercial and IT modernization. Over time, OT authorities expanded DoD's ability to access nontraditional suppliers, though their integration into mainstream acquisition remains uneven. The GAO found both successes and failures in federal buying during the 2000s. Much of this reporting focused on the introduction of electronic platforms, noting that while some agencies advanced online buying, smaller firms lacked the technical capacity to keep pace.
In November 2024, the FAR Council issued an interim rule, finalized in August 2025, stating that companies no longer need continuous SAM registration after submitting a bid. These reforms illustrate how recurring policy shifts seek agility, but inconsistent adoption and workforce constraints limit their overall impact, underscoring the environmental and resource dimensions of HPT.

Appropriations and Fiscal Boundaries

Funding constraints represent a recurring theme in historical DAS literature, often emphasizing how statutory appropriations categories limit flexibility, restricting program offices from adjusting to iterative needs (Jimenez et al., 2016). RAND and CRS note that fragmented funding streams complicate pathway adoption and reinforce

defaults to MCA (Schwartz et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2022). These findings illustrate how external fiscal structures operate as environmental barriers: even when pathways exist, rigid funding rules restrict their practical utility.

Workforce and Industrial Base

Workforce and industrial base studies point to organizational risks. Research links attrition, retirement eligibility, and workforce reduction to diminished agility (Hogan et al., 2012; Deutch, 2022; Neal, 2025). GAO and RAND warn that workforce shortfalls and defense-industry consolidation limit both competition and oversight resilience. Viewed through HPT, these findings underscore vulnerabilities in people and incentives.

Modernization Trends

Modernization trends seek to counter these risks. The SWP institutionalizes Agile and DevSecOps for software delivery (DoDI 5000.87), while the MTA pathway enforces time-bounded rapid prototyping and fielding (DoDI 5000.80). Contracting mechanisms such as OT and CSO have expanded market access and iterative down-selects (GAO, 2019, 2025). Complementary design-process literature on SBD and commercial insertion reinforces the feasibility of iterative delivery with early learning cycles (Doerry & Koenig, 2019; Livingston et al., 2021). In HPT terms, these innovations strengthen processes and feedback while broadening the acquisition environment.

Synthesis and Gap

Across oversight reports, empirical studies, statutory analysis, and non-academic resources, the literature converges on a consistent conclusion: inefficiencies in the DAS are driven by the interaction of structural rigidity, organizational capacity, and environmental constraints. In HPT terms, the misalignment of processes, people, incentives, and environment explains why necessary reforms often underperform. This body of work establishes the evidentiary foundation for the barrier analysis and case studies that follow, which test whether alternative pathways and authorities can overcome these systemic barriers.

CASE STUDIES

To contextualize the systemic acquisition challenges discussed above, this section presents three case studies that demonstrate how organizations have accelerated delivery within the DAS by applying existing authorities and frameworks. Each case is read through the HPT lens to highlight how processes, incentives, and environments were realigned without requiring statutory change.

SDA: Tranche-Based Delivery under MTA

SDA delivers capability in tranche-based increments aligned to the Middle Tier of Acquisition, which sets explicit time-bounded objectives for rapid prototyping and fielding (DoD, 2019). In practice, SDA's two-year tranche cadence mitigates integration risk before larger commitments and ties governance to demonstrable learning. Through HPT, this reflects shorter process and feedback loops and stronger resource alignment, since elements mature before full-scale decisions are made (Malone, 2024; DoD, 2020b). GAO oversight further notes that this cadence represents one of the few consistent departures from linear development, demonstrating how regulatory tailoring can compress timelines when governance reinforces iterative delivery (GAO, 2024c).

DIU: Accelerating Modular AI Acquisition

DIU's Commercial Solutions Opening is structured to move quickly, with initial feasibility screening targeted at 10 days and prototype awards at 60–90 days (GAO, 2025). Although GAO reports that many awards exceed these targets, averaging about 172 days, DIU has responded by refining its performance measures under "DIU 3.0." Diagnostically, the CSO/OTA model strengthens processes (phased down-select), expands the environment (access for non-traditionals), and tightens feedback (stage expectations tied to data). This model illustrates that acceleration is not limited by statute but by incentive alignment, as governance choices around cycle discipline determine whether CSO timelines achieve their intended speed.

GSA: Centralization and Friction Reduction

GSA's OneGov initiative centralized pricing and terms for widely used software, including a government-wide Slack agreement that reduced duplicative negotiations across agencies (GSA, 2025). In parallel, the FAR Council's interim rule eliminated the "continuous" SAM registration requirement, mitigating protest-driven delays without changing statute (Bacon, 2025). GSA also moved to right-size its MAS program, reducing redundancies in contract offerings and cutting administrative friction across agencies (GSA, 2025d). Together, these reforms simplified processes, broadened the acquisition environment, and improved feedback loops around compliance and award timing. The case highlights how regulatory interpretation, rather than legislative change, can deliver measurable reductions in transaction costs across agencies.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Across SDA, DIU, and GSA, acceleration was achieved within existing authorities by making processes iterative and time-bounded (DoDI 5000.02, 5000.80), widening the environment to include nontraditional suppliers and centralized vehicles (DIU CSO/OTA; GSA OneGov), and tightening feedback through measurable, stage-gated expectations (SWP practices where software applies). Where gaps persist, such as DIU's award cycle times, the remedy lies in governance and incentive alignment under the AAF, not in additional statute (DoD, 2019; DoD, 2020b; DoD, 2020c; GAO, 2025). Taken together, the cases demonstrate that the DAS is capable of significantly reducing timelines when authorities are applied with disciplined governance and reinforced by HPT dimensions of processes, incentives, and environment.

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS USING THE HPT FRAMEWORK

The HPT model provides a diagnostic structure to interpret systemic barriers within the DAS. Rather than viewing persistent delays as unavoidable outcomes of statute or complexity, HPT frames them as performance gaps across six interdependent variables: processes, people, incentives, feedback, environment, and resources (Pershing, 2006). Mapping the evidence through this framework highlights that acquisition failures stem less from unavailable authorities than from misalignment across these categories.

Structural Misalignments

Structural barriers manifest in the way acquisition processes are layered and governed. GAO has repeatedly documented that duplicative oversight, complex milestone requirements, and fragmented tailoring guidance extend timelines well beyond what is operationally necessary (GAO, 2024a). Although the AAF offers flexibility through the MTA and SWP pathways, programs continue to default to MCA processes even when less suitable for iterative delivery (DoD, 2019; DoD, 2020c). From an HPT standpoint, this reflects failures in process design and resource alignment: the authorities exist, but their implementation often introduces friction rather than acceleration.

Organizational Misalignments

Organizational barriers emerge from how acquisition offices interpret and apply existing pathways. Limited workforce capacity, uneven training, and misaligned incentives reinforce conservative decision-making, encouraging offices to remain in familiar milestone processes despite faster alternatives. GAO has consistently flagged staffing shortfalls across acquisition portfolios, while CRS and RAND analyses raise concerns about retention and institutional knowledge erosion (GAO, 2024b; Schwartz et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2022). In HPT terms, these are failures of people and incentives. Without adequately sized and skilled workforces, and without incentive structures that reward pathway innovation, organizational choices tend to favor risk avoidance over delivery speed.

Integration Misalignments

Integration challenges arise when structural rules and organizational capacity intersect with broader environmental dependencies. GAO continues to report uneven interoperability across joint programs, with unclear governance and competing requirements delaying fielding (GAO, 2024c). Meanwhile, industry consolidation and certification bottlenecks constrain the ability to incorporate commercial technologies at a commercial pace (Deutch, 2022; Livingston et al., 2021). These dynamics map to the HPT environment and feedback: acquisition programs operate in ecosystems where industrial capacity, inter-service governance, and regulatory compliance must align. Without that alignment, even well-structured processes and capable workforces cannot reliably deliver at speed.

Synthesis

Viewed holistically, the HPT framework clarifies that delays in the DAS are not the product of statutory gaps but of systemic misalignments across processes, people, incentives, feedback, environment, and resources. The case studies show that acceleration is possible when these variables are aligned: SDA's tranche model tightened processes and feedback, DIU's CSO expanded the environment while refining incentives, and GSA simplified compliance loops. Where outcomes fall short, such as DIU's average award times, the lever is governance and incentive design rather than new legislation. By situating acquisition performance within HPT, this analysis identifies where existing authorities can be applied more effectively and where better alignment of workforce, governance, and incentives can yield repeatable acceleration.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY AND EVALUATION PLAN

Effective application of the findings requires more than recognizing barriers; it demands targeted steps that align existing authorities with the performance levers identified in the HPT framework. This section outlines strategies for implementation and proposes an evaluation approach that relies on measurable, evidence-based indicators.

Implementation Strategy

Three areas of focus emerge as essential for translating diagnostic insights into practice

Governance Alignment is Needed to Reduce Structural Friction. Oversight bodies should emphasize pathway fit and tailoring under DoDI 5000.02 and related guidance, ensuring that MTA and SWP pathways are selected when they best match program maturity and objectives (DoD, 2019; DoD, 2020b; DoD, 2020c). GAO reported that programs frequently default to MCA even when alternatives could accelerate delivery, highlighting the importance of an authority that rewards time-bounded, iterative practices (GAO, 2024a). Recent enterprise reforms, such as GSA's joint launch of a FAR overhaul website with OMB, NASA, and DoD, show how greater transparency can ease compliance and improve access to updated guidance (GSA, 2025f).

Workforce Capacity and Training Must be Strengthened to Reduce Organizational Barriers. GAO reviews consistently cite staffing shortfalls, noting that overstretched personnel reduce the ability to manage complex portfolios effectively (GAO, 2024b). CRS analyses likewise raise concerns about the size and preparation of the acquisition workforce, while McCauley (2020) found that attrition is closely tied to job dissatisfaction. Aligning incentives with training in Agile, DevSecOps, and contracting mechanisms such as CSO and OTA would encourage adoption of flexible pathways rather than defaulting to milestone-driven approaches (Schwartz et al., 2016).

Incentive Design Should be Refined to Address Integration Barriers. RAND's long-term review of acquisition reform underscores that outcomes improve when incentives support iterative learning and commercial insertion (Wong et al., 2022). However, industry consolidation and certification hurdles continue to slow technology adoption (Livingston et al., 2021; Deutch, 2022). Programs that demonstrate measurable progress through staged learning cycles and effective commercial partnerships should receive priority resourcing. At the same time, enterprise-level initiatives such as GSA's OneGov can reduce duplication and widen supplier participation (GSA, 2025e). Complementary initiatives like the 8(a) STARS III expand market diversity program (GSA, 2025a) and the bonuses for cost cutters introduce bonuses to reward employees who achieve measurable cost reductions, tying incentives directly to efficiency gains(GSA, 2025c).

Evaluation Plan

Implementation must be paired with evaluation to determine whether reforms yield measurable results. Indicators should be tied to HPT variables.
For processes and feedback, appropriate metrics include milestone cycle times, the percentage of tailored reviews accepted, and the time from solicitation to prototype award. These indicators align with GAO's call for disciplined, evidence-based governance and reveal whether acquisition tempo is improving (GAO, 2025b; GAO, 2024a).

For people and incentives, evaluation should focus on workforce retention in critical skill areas, completion rates for training in Agile and DevSecOps, and the extent to which career advancement is linked to the successful adoption of nontraditional pathways. CRS emphasizes the importance of workforce resilience, while GAO notes that skill gaps directly undermine program performance (CRS, 2022; GAO, 2024b).

For environment and resources, benchmarks include the participation rate of nontraditional suppliers in CSO- or OTA-based awards, the extent of enterprise-level agreement usage for common needs, and demonstrated interoperability in joint acquisitions. Research shows that weak performance in these areas slows commercial integration, while GAO highlights governance shortcomings that complicate joint programs (Livingston et al., 2021; GAO, 2024c).

Finally, evaluation should be iterative and transparent. GAO's annual assessments provide a model of independent review and feedback loops that support adaptive reform (GAO, 2024c). Embedding similar mechanisms in acquisition oversight would reinforce evidence-based learning and maintain accountability without reverting to compliance-driven delays.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that persistent delays in the DAS do not stem from a lack of statutory authority but from systemic misalignments across processes, people, incentives, feedback, environment, and resources. By applying the HPT framework, the analysis has shown that these barriers can be reframed as solvable performance gaps.

The case studies demonstrate that acceleration is achievable within existing authorities. SDA's tranche-based model under the MTA illustrates how governance can be structured around shorter, iterative cycles (SDA, 2025; Strout, 2020). DIU's CSO process highlights the potential of contracting mechanisms to expand participation and compress timelines, even as gaps in governance and incentives persist. GSA's OneGov initiative and the SAM registration reform show how cross-agency alignment and streamlined compliance can reduce friction without requiring statutory change (Siettas, 2024).

From these examples, three recommendations follow. First, governance should emphasize pathway fit and tailoring to reduce structural rigidity and avoid defaulting to MCA processes when faster alternatives are available. Second, investment in workforce development and incentive alignment is essential to reduce organizational barriers and sustain innovation in acquisition practice. Third, integration across the industrial base and federal agencies must be strengthened through contracting mechanisms that widen participation and feedback systems that provide timely evidence for decision-making.

Future Research

Three areas merit further investigation. The first is incentive design for performance governance. Future studies could examine whether linking leadership evaluations to measurable cadence and evidence quality shifts program office behavior, reduces rework, and improves adherence to tailoring guidance (GAO, 2025; Jimenez et al., 2016). The second aspect is technology acceptance among senior personnel, utilizing the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to examine the impact of Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) on the adoption of acquisition tools. This line of inquiry would help identify supports that improve uptake among long-tenured staff and ultimately affect schedule performance (Davis, 1989; GAO, 2025). A third area is the application of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to acquisition research. CHAT provides a theoretically grounded explanation for

cultural inertia and the reliance on legacy approaches, viewing them as systemic outcomes of historically developed activity structures rather than individual resistance. Future work could apply CHAT to identify contradictions within acquisition systems where new tools or pathways clash with entrenched rules and practices, offering insight into why program offices default to legacy methods and how those defaults might be overcome (Miles, 2020). Together, these directions extend the practical contribution of this study by identifying how governance incentives, individual acceptance patterns, and systemic cultural dynamics interact with acquisition reforms.

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