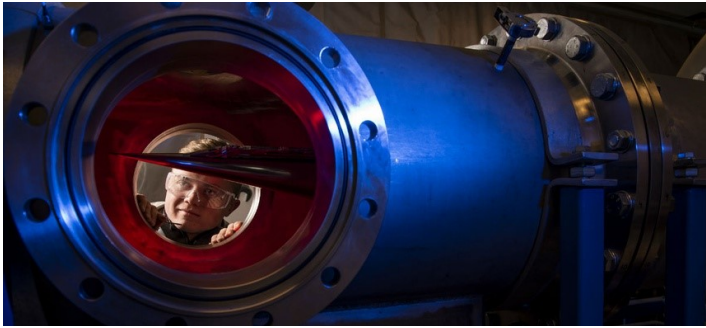


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## The U.S. Military Must Win the Battle for Innovation



A cadet measures the pressures, temperatures, and flow field of various basic geometric and hypersonic research vehicles at Mach 6. Joshua Armstrong/Air Force

Threats facing the United States are both known and unknown, dynamic and significant. China and Russia, competitors for global military and technological dominance, no longer trail the United States in developing and acquiring military capabilities. They are beginning to take the lead in strategic domains such as hypersonics, space and cyber warfare.

In 2017, for example, China became the first country to develop a strategic national plan for artificial intelligence. The United States cannot afford to be surpassed by its competitors in AI or any other innovations that give battlefield advantages. These threats are amplified in a permissive global marketplace, where state or nonstate actors can buy innovative solutions and employ them tactically against the United States.

The Defense Department currently develops and procures military products and services to meet global threats through inefficient bureaucratic processes developed in the 1950s. The Defense acquisition system does not value time in delivering capabilities and innovation to warfighters who must operate in an increasingly fast-paced threat environment. The U.S. military is falling behind, taxpayer dollars are being wasted, and both state and nonstate competitors are gaining advantages that jeopardize American security.

In 2016, Congress responded to the gap developing between such threats and the ability of the defense acquisition system to counteract them by establishing a panel of experts known as the Section 809 Panel. Over the past two and a half years, this panel developed 98 recommendations—many with multiple elements—for improving Defense’s ability to deliver innovative solutions, fundamental capabilities, and enhanced lethality to warfighters. The panel delivered its final volume to Congress and the department this January.

Defense’s acquisition system must be put on a war footing and adopt a mission-first approach. The nation’s competitors are not burdened by the same kind of complex rules that hinder how Defense buys in the marketplace. China, for instance, readily procures technologies that give it a competitive edge, while Defense remains bound by procedures, laws and regulations that either delay the ability to procure these same technologies or deny Defense access to the market altogether.

The United States cannot afford to continue with a system that makes U.S. innovation inaccessible to the department. Technology is embedded in every product or service that supports warfighters, not just high-cost items like fighter jets and nuclear submarines. Uniforms contain sensors and wearable technologies that monitor the environment and wellbeing of the wearer. Advanced communication technologies provide medical care at a distance and coordinate remote deliveries of food and shelter. The average American can order transportation, food and basic commodities with a few swipes or clicks. America’s warfighters deserve the same ease of access to the global marketplace of products, services and ideas.

Defense must be able to take full advantage of emerging innovation. The panel’s many recommendations create new ways of doing business that break down existing barriers and eliminate many of the redundant, time-consuming processes that fetter the acquisition system. The panel proposes a radically simplified contracting process for products and services that already exist in the marketplace. When defense-unique development is the best approach, the panel proposes use of existing rapid acquisition procedures, improvement to other procedures, and implementation of strategic portfolio management. These streamlining efforts support the department’s acquisition workforce members, encourage them to innovate, and treat them as part of the warfighting team.

Putting the defense acquisition system on a war footing does not mean jettisoning America's ideals of competition, transparency, and integrity. On the contrary, modernizing the system in the context of a changed market can renew Defense's commitment to these ideals. Competition can be simplified and more closely mirror how the private sector does business. Transparency may be increased to provide every citizen with a more complete picture of how DoD spends taxpayer dollars. The integrity of the process will improve as the department values time and delivers capability to warfighters inside the turn of competitors.

The United States military has led the world for decades as a champion of innovation, integrity, and effectiveness. Defense needs to modernize its processes to remain the world's superior fighting force, maintain America's technological advantage, and defend the nation from diverse threats. The Section 809 Panel has provided not only the recommendations for change but the tools needed to

enact that change. Now it is time for Congress and the Secretary of Defense to act.

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