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The Implications of "Service Common" for DoD Acquisitions

June 2025

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Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Defense (DoD) promotes acquisition commonality to reduce redundancy, enhance interoperability, and streamline logistics. Yet, no formal mechanism enables the Services to adopt capabilities developed by United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), resulting in persistent integration failures. This thesis examines the institutional, procedural, and cultural barriers that hinder the transition of Special Operations Forces (SOF)-peculiar systems into Service portfolios. Through comparative analysis of USSOCOM's Major Force Program (MFP)-11 acquisition authority against Service-based pathways—Major Capability Acquisition (MCA), Middle Tier Acquisition (MTA), and Urgent Capability Acquisition (UCA)—this study identifies friction points in requirements generation, funding alignment, and sustainment ownership. Case studies such as the F-35, MH-47G, MC-130J, RQ-11B Raven, and the Army's TITAN program reveal how structural mismatches and fragmented oversight delay fielding and erode joint effectiveness. Regulatory reviews and visual models reinforce that promising SOF innovations remain stovepiped without formal adjudication processes and shared sustainment planning. The findings highlight the urgent need for coordinated policy reform to enable scalable integration, protect warfighter readiness, and prevent duplication across the Joint Force.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACAT	Acquisition Category
ASDS	Advanced SEAL Delivery System
COTS	Commercial Off the Shelf
CRS	Congressional Research Service
DAG	Defense Acquisition Guidebook
DFARS	Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement
DoD	Department of Defense
DoDI	Department of Defense Directive
DoDI	Department of Defense Instruction
ECM	Electronic Countermeasures
FAR	Federal Acquisition Regulation
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GSE	Ground Support Equipment
HERO	Hazard of Electromagnetic Radiation to Ordnance
JCIDS	Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System
JEONs	Joint Emergent Operational Needs
JROC	Joint Requirements Oversight Council
JUONs	Joint Urgent Operational Needs
MBSE	Model-Based Systems Engineering
MFP	Major Force Program
SERVICES	Military Department
MCA	Major Capability Acquisition
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MTA	Middle Tier Acquisition
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OEF	Operational Enduring Freedom
OIF	Operational Iraqi Freedom
OTA	Other Transaction Authorities
POM	Program Objective Memorandum

PPBE	Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution
R&D	Research and Development
RDT&E	Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation
SINCGARS	Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOFARS	Special Operations Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Acquisition Regulation Supplement
SOF AT&L	Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics
SOPGM	Stand-Off Precision Guided Munitions
SUAS	Small Unmanned Aircraft System
SYSCOM	Systems Command
TIE	Training Impact Estimation
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UCA	Urgent Capability Acquisition
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DoD has long valued the concept of "commonality," using standardized equipment and systems across its military branches to enhance interoperability, streamline logistics, and reduce procurement redundancy. Nonetheless, that vision remains unevenly realized, particularly in the interaction between the Armed Services and the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). This capstone examines the institutional, procedural, and cultural barriers that hinder the effective integration of USSOCOM-developed acquisition solutions into Service-Common use and vice versa.

No formalized or widely understood process allows Services to adopt USSOCOM's acquisition efforts efficiently. Although USSOCOM must utilize Service-Common equipment when appropriate, the reverse scenario, Services adopting Special Operations Forces (SOF) developed solutions, is rare and often met with resistance. A lack of incentive, formal adjudication, and cohesive policy hampers cooperation. Services are frequently reluctant to assume the cost and logistical burden, while USSOCOM prioritizes speed and agility in its acquisitions and remains cautious of Service-level bureaucracy.

Limited instances of collaboration do exist. Programs like the MC-130J and MH-47G illustrate cases where the Services assist with platform sustainment while allowing SOF-specific modifications. However, these examples rely on informal agreements rather than scalable policy, making them the exception rather than the rule (USSOCOM, 2023a).

Upgrades to the MH-47G, including extended-range fuel systems, advanced avionics, and specialized communications, support SOF's deep-penetration missions. Likewise, the MC-130J, derived from the C-130J platform, incorporates unique capabilities for refueling, targeting, and joint integration. In both instances, USSOCOM collaborates with the Services on sustainment and modernization; however, without a formal framework, these examples remain isolated.

Joint programs like the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter demonstrate the potential of structured acquisition alignment. The program's unified structure has facilitated shared logistics, simplified training, and improved interoperability. Despite the frequent use of

shared systems, there is no clear transition policy to transfer fiscal or sustainment responsibility from USSOCOM to the Services. Additionally, no similar mechanism is in place to integrate SOF-developed capabilities into Service-Common portfolios, even when their broader applicability is evident. Despite the frequency of shared system usage, no clear transition policy exists to shift fiscal or sustainment responsibility from USSOCOM to the Services.

Inefficiencies will persist without a policy-driven mandate for cooperation. Formalizing a transition framework through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) would represent a meaningful step. A designated adjudication authority should be empowered to resolve funding and sustainment disputes. Additionally, reviving structured venues such as joint acquisition summits and Service/SOF warfighter talks can help build trust and realign priorities early in the acquisition cycle.

Future research should examine how allied nations tackle similar interoperability challenges and assess how emerging technologies, like modular open systems architecture, could better facilitate joint capability adoption. With greater transparency in governance and encouraged collaboration, the DoD can progress toward its strategic vision of integration, interoperability, and mission readiness across the Joint Force.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since its creation under the 1987 National Defense Authorization Act, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has operated under a distinct acquisition and funding authority: Major Force Program–11 (MFP-11). This framework empowered USSOCOM to rapidly field capabilities tailored to Special Operations Forces (SOF), operating outside the constraints of Service-run processes. While this agility accelerated delivery capability, it also introduced lasting friction across the Department of Defense (DoD). No formal mechanism exists for the Services to adopt SOF-developed systems, even when those capabilities demonstrate broad utility. In contrast, USSOCOM is expected to adopt Service-Common items, creating an asymmetric acquisition relationship where collaboration flows in only one direction.

Failures highlight the disconnect and the challenges this has posed in providing the warfighter with the capabilities needed for success. The Advanced SEAL Delivery System (ASDS), a next-generation submersible, consumed over $677.5 million before being canceled, mainly due to fragmented sustainment planning and a lack of integration with Service-led oversight structures (Castelli, 2011). Similar challenges influenced the Joint Multi-Mission Submersible, underscoring that the failure was not isolated but structural. RAND's 2008 assessment argued that the core issue was not capability but governance (Held et al., 2008).

From 2001 to 2006, USSOCOM initiated 86 acquisition programs, of which 40 percent encountered significant cost and schedule overruns, representing nearly half of SOF acquisition spending during that period (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2007). Many of these programs depended on the Service infrastructure for sustainment or integration but lacked a framework for formal coordination. As Duncan (2012) observed, even when SOF capabilities are adopted more broadly, USSOCOM often remains responsible for their long-term support, simply because no mechanism exists to transfer ownership.

Operational challenges continue to emerge. Program offices work around overlapping timelines and unaligned funding streams. Logistics planners manage mismatched components across organizational boundaries. Units encounter delays in training, upgrades, and replacements, even when their equipment mirrors another Service's. Warfighters absorb these delays and readiness gaps.

Reform requires clarifying the institutional, cultural, and policy barriers that prevent SOF-developed capabilities from entering Service portfolios. Deconstructing these obstacles sets the foundation for broader recommendations around sustainment ownership, governance transformation, and scalable integration (Held et al., 2008; GAO, 2007).

B. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Despite decades of reform efforts, the asymmetrical relationships between USSOCOM and the Services impede meaningful integration across the DoD. USSOCOM is required to adopt Service-Common equipment when appropriate; however, no equivalent obligation or formal mechanism exists for the Services to embrace SOF-developed capabilities. This structural imbalance has resulted in duplicative procurement, fragmented sustainment responsibilities, and uneven life cycle support for capabilities that ultimately serve the entire Joint Force (GAO, 2007; Duncan, 2012).

Multiple institutional and cultural factors reinforce this divide. Divergent funding sources, particularly MFP-11 versus MFP-2, create budgetary silos. Classification practices, inconsistent sustainment ownership, and differences in risk tolerance further complicate transitions. While oversight agencies like GAO (2007) and studies such as RAND's acquisition commonality report (Held et al., 2008) have highlighted these issues, meaningful progress has remained elusive. Decision-making environments within each organization exacerbate the challenge: USSOCOM prioritizes operational speed and mission specificity, while the Services emphasize governance, interoperability, and long-term cost control (Apte & Rendon, 2007).

Examples from various programs highlight these differences. The RQ-11B Raven struggled to scale across conventional forces due to mismatches in sustainment and training systems (Duncan, 2012). The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, intended as a unified solution,

fractured under differing Service requirements and sustainment planning (Held et al., 2008). The JLTV encountered balancing pressures between SOF needs and joint mandates. Meanwhile, SOF-specific platforms like the MH-47G and MC-130J demonstrate USSOCOM's capability to tailor solutions independently of broader Service integration. Even basic systems, such as night vision devices and ground support equipment, experience transition friction caused by cultural resistance and policy ambiguity (GAO, 2007).

At the heart of this disconnect lies a framework that is consistent and enforceable, enabling Services to adopt USSOCOM-developed capabilities while sharing ownership for sustainment, life cycle management, and funding responsibility. Tackling this challenge is central to the primary inquiry of this thesis.

1. Primary Research Question: What prevents the Services and USSOCOM from leveraging acquisition and contracting efforts from each other?
2. Secondary Research Question: What current policies and/or regulations need to change so that the Services and USSOCOM can take advantage of each other's acquisition efforts?

To help answer these questions, the thesis pursues the following research objectives:

- Establish the current state of acquisition coordination and capability adoption between the Services and USSOCOM.
- Identify disconnects in policy, organizational culture, or interpretation that hinder cross-Service adoption of capabilities.
- Develop recommendations for regulatory or procedural changes to improve acquisition alignment and interoperability.
- Highlight areas for further research, particularly where policy ambiguity, cultural resistance, or sustainment constraints continue to inhibit joint solutions.

Accurately assessing these gaps requires comparing USSOCOM's acquisition framework to the most relevant and comparable models. Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs) and Major Capability Acquisition (MCA) are referenced primarily to illustrate scale and structure. However, emphasis is placed on comparing USSOCOM's acquisition with Middle Tier Acquisition (MTA), Urgent Capability Acquisition (UCA), and rapid efforts led by Service-level Rapid Capability Offices (RCOs). These offer the clearest insight into how speed, flexibility, and oversight intersect across the acquisition enterprise. The Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) system is also analyzed to determine how fiscal structures constrain transitions from SOF development into Service-managed sustainment.

C. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, comparative case study methodology underpins this analysis of acquisition misalignment between USSOCOM and the Services. The persistent divide between "Service-Common" and SOF Peculiar acquisition pathways is central to the inquiry, especially regarding how institutional separation complicates the transition of capabilities across organizational boundaries. Real-world program analysis and doctrinal review illuminate how policy interpretation, structural incentives, and process design ultimately determine whether relevant capabilities are delivered or remain confined to their originators.

DoD acquisition policies and decision support systems provide the backbone of the analytical framework. These include the Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF), the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS), the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), the PPBE system, and USSOCOM's MFP-11-driven model. JCIDS and PPBE prioritize life cycle cost control, interoperability, and deliberative governance (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021), while USSOCOM's model emphasizes agility and immediate mission responsiveness. The tension between these approaches becomes increasingly problematic as emerging threats demand faster fielding, dynamic sustainment, and cross-Service integration. Comparative evaluation

focuses on UCA, MTA, and select Service RCO models to identify structural alignment and highlight routine breakdowns.

Comparisons with MDAPs using MCA pathway are intentionally limited. USSOCOM's projects differ significantly in scope, scale, category, funding, and statutory oversight, making MDAPs an unsuitable benchmark. Instead, the focus is on acquisition efforts that reflect USSOCOM's lean structures, such as the Army and Air Force RCOs and urgent capability pathways enabled by the AAF. These serve as realistic points of comparison regarding agility, speed, and reduced bureaucratic layering.

All data is sourced from publicly available, unclassified materials, including policy documents such as SOCOM-D 700–8, GAO reports, DAU publications, Service guidance, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Case studies provide context for key challenges and illustrate recurring points of friction. The RQ-11B Raven is examined for its sustainment and interoperability issues during the adoption of conventional forces. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program highlights governance and integration failures within a nominally joint framework, despite being an MDAP utilizing the MCA pathway. The JLTV program, also an MDAP that uses the MCA pathway, provides an example of balancing SOF-specific requirements against joint commonality. Meanwhile, the MH-47G and MC-130J illustrate how SOF-dedicated platforms often struggle to transition, despite shared mission overlap. Finally, inconsistencies in ground support equipment (GSE) and night vision devices (NVDs) underscore how even low-complexity systems face integration resistance.

Theoretical framing draws from defense acquisition policy analysis and military strategic theory. Clausewitz's "Remarkable Trinity" is used to interpret acquisition as a complex interaction between operational urgency, bureaucratic sustainment, and policy oversight, with added friction from cultural resistance and organizational ambiguity (Clausewitz, 1976). Sun Tzu's emphasis on adaptability, terrain awareness, and timing further strengthens the lens through which agility, responsiveness, and organizational behavior are assessed (Sun Tzu, 2009). These frameworks provide deeper insight into why some programs succeed while others stagnate in the face of institutional inertia.

Due to restrictions from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), no interviews or classified data were utilized. While this limits direct insight into proprietary or sensitive programs, it ensures full transparency and broad replicability. The data reflects the same policy frameworks and program experiences that shape current acquisition outcomes across USSOCOM and the Services.

Focusing the methodology on the Service-Common versus SOF Peculiar divide enables targeted exploration of how structural and cultural misalignment undermines acquisition performance. With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, autonomous platforms, advanced sensors, and real-time data fusion technologies, organizational separation poses not just a barrier; it represents a risk to strategic agility. This methodology aids in formulating policy-informed recommendations that reduce duplication, close integration gaps, and enhance the warfighter's ability to receive timely, mission-ready solutions.

D. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The boundaries of this research are intentionally focused on the overlap between acquisition execution, contracting authorities, and capability transition mechanisms involving USSOCOM and the Services. Instead of conducting a comprehensive acquisition review, the analysis emphasizes the structural and behavioral factors influencing whether SOF-developed capabilities can be scaled, sustained, or shared. This distinction narrows the focus to programs, policies, and processes that occur in the middle of the life cycle, between development and enterprise-level sustainment.

Findings are derived solely from unclassified, publicly available material. The source documents include GAO reports, DoD and Service acquisition guidance, SOCOM directives, and peer-reviewed literature. Due to IRB constraints, firsthand accounts and classified program data were not utilized. Although this limits internal programmatic insight, the available data captures the operational and policy-level frictions that consistently emerge during joint integration attempts.

Limitations also arise from the scope of selected case studies. Each was chosen to illustrate systemic acquisition dynamics, not to critique individual program outcomes.

Although examples such as the RQ-11B, JLTV, and MC-130J inform the analysis, their inclusion reflects recurring patterns of institutional misalignment rather than isolated failings. No single system defines the broader issue, but they demonstrate a consistent lack of life cycle alignment across capability categories.

What falls outside this research includes statutory reform proposals, Service-specific acquisition reform agendas, and the broader politics of defense budgeting. The intent is to clarify how current acquisition structures either enable or inhibit integrations specifically regarding program adoption, sustainment ownership, and cross-component coordination. In this context, the gap between USSOCOM's model and traditional Service processes presents one of the most persistent and least understood challenges in defense acquisition today.

E. ORGANIZATION

Content is presented across five chapters, each building toward a detailed comparison between USSOCOM's acquisition structure and the Service frameworks it often fails to align with.

Chapter I introduces the problems driving this research, the research objectives and associated research questions, the methodology used to achieve the end objectives, and the scope and limitations.

Chapter II describes the background of USSOCOM and Service acquisitions, and the conflict between "Service-Common" and "SOF-peculiar." Chapter 2 also addresses the rationale that forms the specific objectives of this research, as differentiated from other studies on USSOCOM/Services "conflicts."

Chapter III reviews literature on acquisition strategies, policies, and procedures regarding USSOCOM and Services programs to provide context for further analysis into this persistent concern between the two entities.

Chapter IV reviews our methodology and how we gathered the data and analyzes the findings.

Chapter IV serves as the analytical center of gravity. It compares SOCOM's acquisition model to relevant DoD acquisition pathways, specifically UCA and MTA, and explores mismatches in requirements generation, funding alignment, and documentation oversight by examining JCIDS, PPBE, and FAR/DFARS compliance.

II. BACKGROUND

A. PROGRAM BACKGROUND

USSOCOM was created under the 1987 NDAA through the Nunn-Cohen Amendment, which authorized MFP-11 to provide acquisition and funding autonomy for SOF capabilities when no conventional equivalent existed (USSOCOM Fact Book, 2020). This structure was designed to address historical operational shortfalls and to enable the rapid development of mission-specific solutions tailored to SOF requirements. According to DoD Directive (DoDD) 5100.03 (2019a, p. 8), SOF Peculiar material includes "equipment, materials, supplies, and Services adopted by a military Service for its forces and activities." The autonomy granted by MFP-11 continues to serve as a strategic enabler, giving USSOCOM the flexibility to meet operational demands outside traditional Service and DoD 5000 series acquisition pathways (USSOCOM, 2023a).

In contrast, the Services operate under Service-Common frameworks, emphasizing interoperability, standardization, and cost control. These systems, from the M2A1 to the HUMVEE, are characterized by shared use across conventional forces (DoDD, 2019, p. 8). USSOCOM Directive 700–8 affirms that such equipment is provided by parent Services to support component commands. However, despite USSOCOM's obligation to adopt Service-Common solutions where feasible, there is no equivalent requirement for the Services to evaluate or adopt SOF Peculiar programs. This asymmetry limits integration leads to redundant development, and perpetuates sustainment fragmentation (GAO, 2007; Held, Newsome, & Lewis, 2008).

The divergence in acquisition philosophy is not theoretical; it has real-world implications. The RQ-11B Raven, initially fielded through USSOCOM channels, was later adopted by conventional forces without adequate life cycle planning. Units reported frequent parts shortages, inconsistent technical manuals, and limited sustainment support. Coordination with the Marine Corps Logistics Command (MARCORLOGCOM) and Marine Aviation Logistics Squadrons (MALS) was insufficient, and the absence of standardized maintenance procedures hindered operational availability (Van Bourgondien,

2015, p. 45-48). These issues stem from poor integration during the Technology Maturation and Risk Reduction (TMRR) and Engineering and Manufacturing Development (EMD) phases (Van Bourgondien, 2015, p. 45-48). Figure 1 illustrates the system's component complexity, which proved unrealistic for tactical-level sustainment without sufficient backend support.

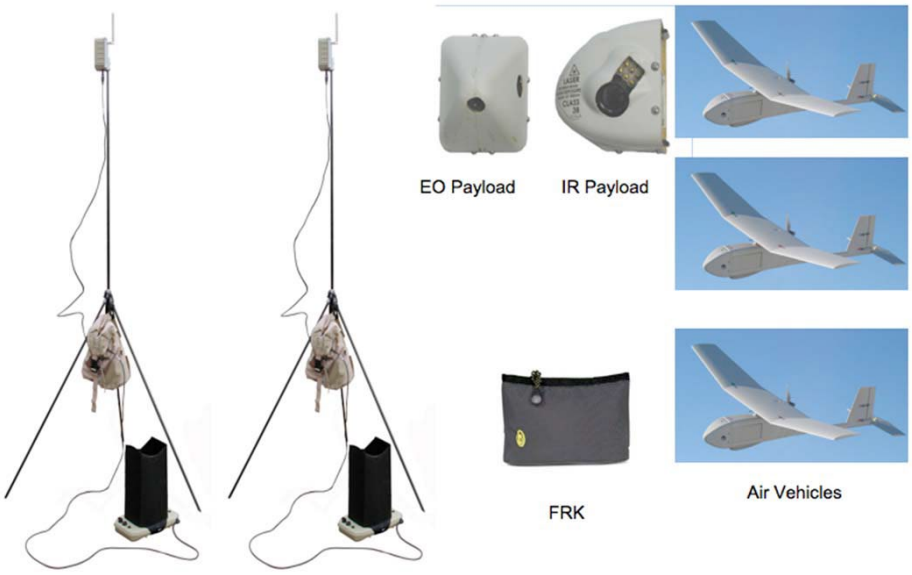


Figure 1. Component Breakdown of the RQ-11B Raven SUAS. Source: Van Bourgondien (2012).

Although the Raven has been adopted across the Joint Force, its sustainment challenges persist. The U.S. Air Force reports high operating costs, approximately $260,000 per system, despite its small footprint and limited endurance (U.S. Air Force, 2023). These issues are not unique to the Raven; they reflect a broader pattern in which commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) systems are rapidly procured for operational needs but lack the sustainment depth required for long-term success (Van Bourgondien, 2015, p. 61). These recurring deficiencies indicate a misalignment between acquisition speed and sustainment readiness, particularly when joint adoption is not accompanied by proper training, logistics, and life cycle support planning.

Clausewitz's "Fascinating Trinity," the people, chance/friction, and rational policy, provides a theoretical framework for understanding these institutional breakdowns. Cultural resistance within the Services to externally developed solutions reflect the "people" component. Procedural ambiguity, mismatched funding streams, and inconsistent oversight embody "friction." The lack of coordinating authority to align Service and SOF acquisition policy underscores the failure of rational governance. Figure 2 maps this framework to acquisition dysfunction, illustrating how the trinity's imbalance disrupts integration and undermines strategic coherence (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 89; Souchon, 2020).

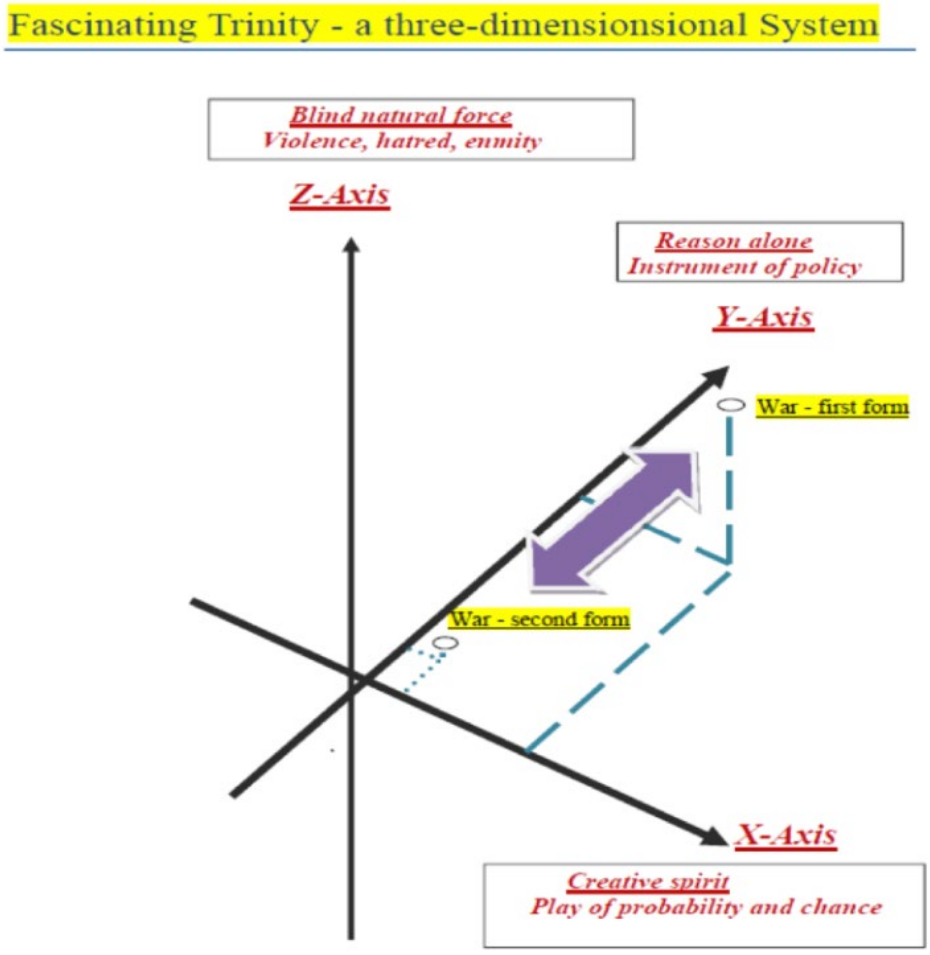


Figure 2. Clausewitz's "Fascinating Trinity" as Applied to Acquisition Dysfunction. Source: Souchon (2020).

Sablan (2022) reinforces this analysis by highlighting outdated acquisition systems, fragmented oversight structures, and institutional inertia as critical barriers to modernization. The costs are strategic: missed opportunities to adopt proven solutions, inconsistent fielding timelines, and unnecessary duplication of effort. These challenges arise not from technological gaps, but from behavioral and structural resistance (Sablan, 2022). Clausewitz's model reminds us that acquisition reform must tackle institutional culture, not just regulatory mechanics

Former USSOCOM Acquisition Executive James Geurts has argued that the current model is unsuitable for future operational demands (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2025). He emphasized the need for acquisition systems that anticipate requirements 6 to 10 years ahead and prioritize "innovation at the edge," empowering operational users in early design phases (Mishory, 2015). This approach supports USSOCOM's agile framework but is largely absent from the milestone-driven processes governing most Service acquisition programs. The process differences highlight different organizational philosophies about trust, control, and end-user influence principles at the heart of acquisition reform.

Ultimately, these differences might create inefficiencies, including fragmented capabilities, delayed deliveries, and diminished operational effectiveness. As peer competitors adopt iterative, technology-driven strategies, U.S. acquisitions must evolve or risk falling behind. Clausewitz's friction, in this context, becomes a systemic force, representing not just battlefield uncertainty but institutional resistance. Recognizing this friction as systemic, not incidental, clarifies the need for deliberate reform. This capstone applied project identifies where alignment fails between USSOCOM and the Services and explores how structural change could enhance readiness and interoperability across the DoD.

B. RESEARCH RATIONALE

The growing complexity of the threat environment has intensified the need for integrated, adaptive acquisition practices throughout the Department of Defense (DoD). Maintaining an advantage in speed, interoperability, and capability deployment requires

more than just platform modernization; it demands structural alignment between USSOCOM and the Services.

Attempts to unify DoD procurement through "commonality" are not new. That logic drove the U.S. industrial base during World War II, when standardized production models dramatically accelerated capability delivery (CRS, 2019). More recently, RAND's work on acquisition commonality emphasized similar goals: simplified logistics, reduced procurement costs, and operational cohesion (Held, Newsome, & Lewis, 2008). Despite these imperatives, modern acquisition remains siloed. A historical example occurred in the 1980s, when SOF helicopters deployed from Navy ships lacked electromagnetic shielding for ordnance, requiring costly remediation to address HERO risks (NAVSEA, 1987). This early failure reflected the dangers of parallel development without shared oversight.

Modern systems reflect these tensions in more costly and capability-compromising ways. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter was designed as a unified platform across Services, yet sustainment divergence surfaced quickly. Ground support equipment, IT backbones, and sustainment contracts now differ by Service, undermining the program's original promise (GAO, 2020a). In contrast, SOF aircraft like the MH-47G and MC-130J illustrate USSOCOM's capacity to deploy tailored platforms rapidly. However, these programs function in isolation from Service life cycle planning, resulting in avionics upgrades and threat detection systems being implemented inconsistently. Sustainment responsibility remains unclear, jeopardizing long-term readiness.

Visual systems provide a ground-level perspective on these misalignments. White phosphorus night vision devices used by USSOCOM and the Marine Corps deliver clearer contrast and depth perception compared to the older green phosphorus models still in use by Navy aviators (Aviation Specialties Unlimited, 2024; Night Flight Concepts, 2024). These seemingly minor differences have significant tactical implications. As illustrated in Figure 3, enhanced clarity boosts situational awareness, yet adoption remains inconsistent without a unified strategy for evaluation and procurement.



Figure 3. Visual Comparison of White vs. Green Phosphorus Night Vision Imagery. Source: Aviation Specialties Unlimited (2024).

A similar benchmark arises from the Army's Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node (TITAN). Designed under traditional acquisition governance, TITAN integrates multi-domain sensors into a mobile targeting node. Although not a USSOCOM program, TITAN illustrates that accelerated development and mission relevance are attainable within Service processes if acquisition pathways allow it (PEO IEW&S, 2025). That capability, coupled with the examples of night vision variance, GSE fragmentation, and SOF aircraft sustainment gaps, constitutes the core evidence base for the comparative analysis that follows.

Deeper dysfunction manifests as institutional resistance. Separate funding authorities, differing requirements processes, and incompatible oversight structures reinforce organizational silos. No shared adjudication authority exists to resolve disputes, and ownership transitions remain ambiguous. This fragmentation promotes duplication, hinders scalable solutions, and introduces operational risk.

Clausewitz offers a powerful lens for interpreting these failures. His concept of friction is often associated with battlefield uncertainty, but its broader meanings-

bureaucratic inertia, policy ambiguity, and cultural resistance- are equally relevant here (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 119). These invisible forces disrupt coordination, slow down sustainment planning, and create barriers where unity is essential.

Consequences manifest in capability delays, inflated life cycle costs, and fragmented support for the warfighter. Maintaining technological dominance becomes increasingly complex when sustainment timelines diverge, documentation standards conflict, and capability validation remains constrained by the organizational oversight framework.

Addressing these issues requires a commitment to acquisition reform. Integration must be institutionalized throughout the entire life cycle, from requirements generation to sustainment execution. It must be supported by a cultural shift that changes behavior from individual organizational interests to collective operational readiness. Collaboration should become the norm, not the exception.

Fragmented sustainment, divergent procurement standards, and isolated system management are not anomalies—they are symptoms of a deeper, unresolved policy divide. The examples above demonstrate that acquisition misalignment is a strategic issue that requires urgent attention. Clausewitz's framework helps clarify why technically sound programs fail and why aligning structure with purpose is essential for delivering combat-ready capabilities at the speed of relevance. With this rationale established, the following chapter examines the existing literature to assess what has been explored and what remains unanswered.

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III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. PURPOSE

Divergence in acquisition practices across the DoD has remained a persistent obstacle. Significant gaps exist between USSOCOM and the Services, particularly concerning how systems are classified, funded, and sustained. This section evaluates how institutional structures, driven by funding mechanisms like MFP-2 and MFP-11, create procedural seams that hinder cross-component adoption of technologies and systems. Insights are drawn from doctrinal analysis, policy critiques, and case studies to demonstrate that acquisition misalignment is not an anomaly but a recurring systemic outcome that necessitates deliberate reform.

Reform efforts have emphasized policy change; however, execution continues to falter in the initial phases of the acquisition life cycle (GAO, 2023a). Top-down planning frameworks often overshadow operational feedback, leading to delays or distortions in capability delivery (Held et al., 2008). Martin (2023) identifies this disconnect in his assessment of user-centered design within the Marine Corps' Urgent Needs Statement process. By integrating frontline operator input early, the Corps established a feedback loop that clarified problem framing and reduced downstream inefficiencies. For USSOCOM, where requirements shift rapidly and unpredictably, institutionalizing such input mechanisms is not only practical but also essential (Scheiner, 2009; Mishory, 2015).

Emerging Service-led initiatives illustrate how alternative acquisition pathways can enhance responsiveness. The Army's Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node (TITAN), developed through the MTA process, demonstrates how advanced capabilities can be delivered within accelerated frameworks (PEO IEW&S, 2025). Combined with UCA and the establishment of RCOs, these efforts signify progress toward flexibility and speed, traits often associated with USSOCOM's MFP-11 model (GAO, 2021a; DoD, 2020d). Challenges remain, particularly regarding the rigidity of the PPBE process and oversight mechanisms, but the potential for scalable agility is increasingly evident (Loredo et al., 2014; GAO, 2015).

Program-level innovation also plays a key role in shifting acquisition behavior. The Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TALOS) program exemplifies how user-driven, model-based development can transform acquisition execution. USSOCOM employed a model-based systems engineering (MBSE) approach to align requirements, test data, and hardware-software integration within a single agile framework. Figure 4 highlights this architecture, while Figure 5 illustrates the program's test coverage strategy—an early proof of concept for synchronized verification and design traceability.

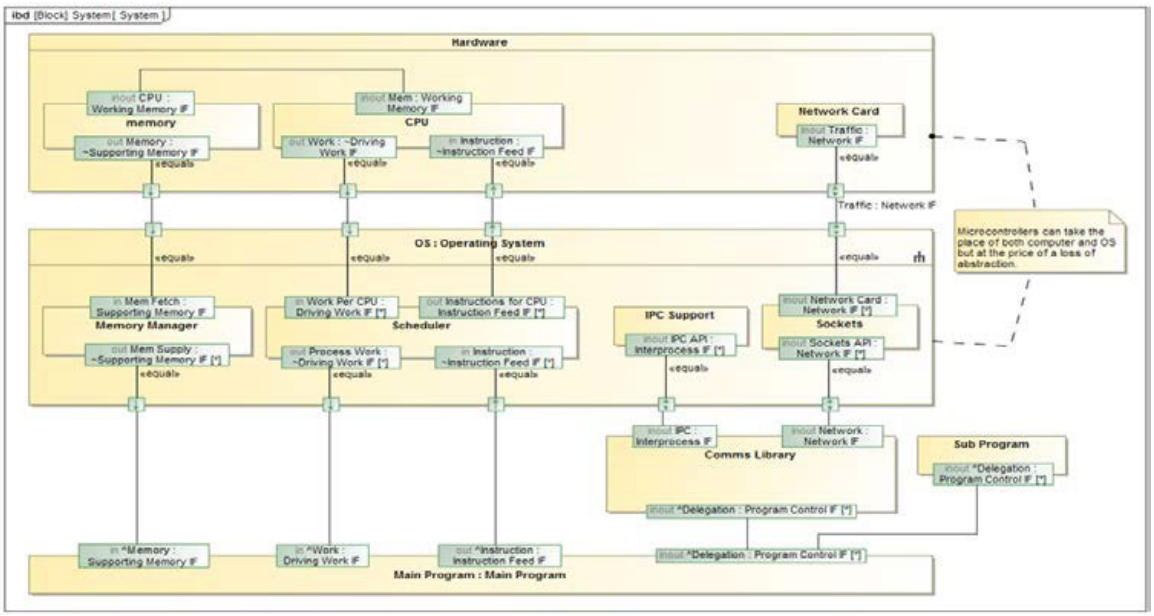


Figure 4. MBSE Architecture Used in TALOS Showing Synchronized Requirements, Diagrams, and Data Flow. Source: Cole et al. (2019).

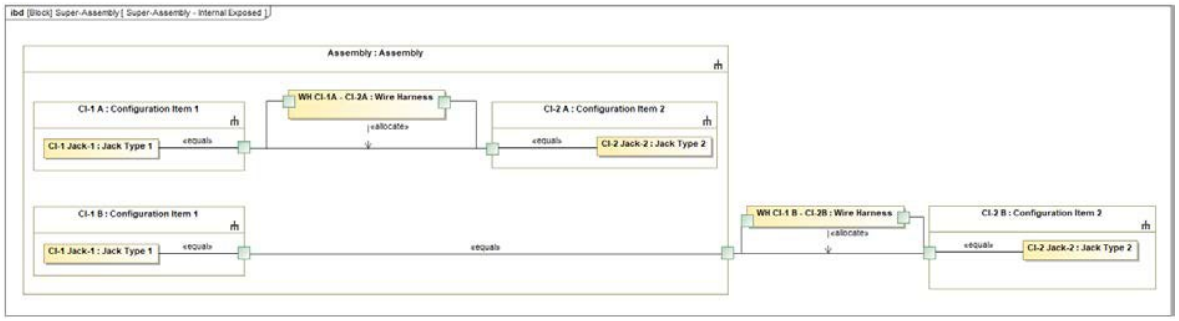


Figure 5. TALOS Test Coverage Matrix Connecting Subsystem Requirements to System Verification. Source: Cole et al. (2019).

Although it did not result in a fielded exosuit, TALOS generated innovations that extended well beyond its original intent. These included advancements in powered exoskeleton actuators, modular armor systems, lightweight ballistic materials, and helmet-integrated heads-up displays with augmented reality interfaces (Cole et al., 2019; Magnuson, 2019). Agile feedback loops, traceable design systems, and collaborative test planning are now influencing broader SOF acquisition efforts. These lessons are increasingly reflected across joint initiatives, where the ability to shape capability development proactively has proven more effective than reactive adaptation (Cole et al., 2019; Magnuson, 2019; Scheiner, 2009).

B. SERVICE-COMMON

Standardization is a cornerstone of Joint Force acquisition, yet the label "Service Common" remains inconsistently defined and applied across the Department of Defense. Services often diverge in classifying capabilities under this term, resulting in conflicting sustainment expectations, funding responsibilities, and fielding timelines. These inconsistencies produce avoidable delays, duplicated procurement efforts, and friction during operational integration, especially when USSOCOM-developed systems are introduced into Service portfolios.

1. DoDD 5100.03: Service-Common

DoDD 5100.03 defines "Service-Common" as "the equipment, materials, supplies, and Services adopted by a military Service for its forces and activities" (DoDD 5100.03, 20219a, p. 8). This includes standard military items, base operating support, and other resources necessary for military operations. However, the directive also acknowledges that one Service may classify an item as a Service standard while another may not, creating friction in the DoD's standardization efforts (DoDD 5100.03, 2019a, p. 8). This lack of uniformity complicates procurement, as different Services interpret "Service Common" based on their specific operational needs, further hindering joint operations and interoperability between USSOCOM and the Services.

These differences in interpretation lead to discrepancies in resource allocation and increased costs. For example, USSOCOM may consider a piece of equipment SOF-

specific, but the item might overlap with systems used by general-purpose forces. Procurement inefficiencies and sustainment gaps emerge across the Joint Force without a standardized process to adjudicate and adopt shared equipment classifications.

To underscore how modern technologies may help address these classification inconsistencies, Nikolakopoulos et al. (2022) present a case in which geometric accuracy enhancements in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems contributed to improved acquisition efficiency and interoperability. Their research illustrates how technological precision and process standardization can facilitate a common baseline for system integration, helping to reduce inter-Service classification conflicts and improve operational readiness across USSOCOM and the Services.

2. SOCOM-D 700–8: Service-Common and USSOCOM

Clear guidance on what qualifies as "Service-Common" exists within USSOCOM's internal policy. Directive 700–8 formally defines it as equipment, materials, and support provided by parent Services to SOF components—typically drawn from platforms already fielded across general-purpose forces (USSOCOM, 2019). While this framework aims to preserve interoperability, operational friction persists when USSOCOM must either adopt Service-Common systems or try to transition SOF-specific capabilities into broader use. Classification decisions are further complicated by the lack of a formal adjudication process that clearly defines when a system should remain SOF-peculiar or transition to Service ownership (Duncan, 2012; GAO, 2015).

These challenges become more apparent when evaluating mission-critical technologies like vehicle-mounted radio systems. Performance requirements often extend beyond conventional standards, necessitating features such as low probability of intercept/ low probability of detection (LPI/LPD), reduced electromagnetic signatures, and minimized size, weight, and power (SWaP) demands, criteria that are often non-negotiable in SOF applications (USSOCOM, 2023b; Van Bourgondien, 2015). If a radio fails to meet these operational benchmarks, particularly in dismounted or confined environments, USSOCOM retains the authority under SOCOM-D 700–8 to develop or procure an alternate solution tailored to mission-specific needs. The outcome may be higher

acquisition costs, but the tradeoff supports survivability and mission success (GAO, 2007; Loredo et al., 2014).

Mission-specific divergence is not limited to communications. Night vision systems reveal similar performance gaps. Green-phosphor AN/AVS-9 goggles used by some Navy units provide baseline night-fighting capabilities; however, USSOCOM and the Marine Corps have adopted white-phosphor variants for enhanced visual clarity, contrast, and situational awareness in low-light conditions (Aviation Specialties Unlimited, 2024; Night Flight Concepts, 2024). Medical kits follow the same pattern. SOF-specific packs are designed to support advanced trauma care and austere field treatment, significantly exceeding the capabilities of standard Service kits (USSOCOM, 2023a). These distinctions are not cosmetic; they reflect the doctrinal need for equipment that aligns with the realities of SOF missions.

Instead of serving as a rigid acquisition policy, SOCOM-D 700–8 acts as a doctrinal safeguard. It confirms that while commonality remains a goal, operational effectiveness takes precedence when mission demands diverge from general-purpose force assumptions (USSOCOM, 2019). Under this directive, USSOCOM is authorized to evaluate whether a Service Common system meets SOF thresholds—and when it doesn't, to seek alternatives designed for high-risk, high-impact operational environments.

3. NAVSEA Legal, 2017: Variability Across Services

Policy divergence rooted in legal precedent has long shaped how Services interpret acquisition responsibilities. One of the most significant examples remains the 1987 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) from the Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA), which dictates that Navy Special Operations Forces (NSW) are to be supported solely with Navy-common items (NAVSEA, 1987). Instead of facilitating joint acquisition, this guidance reinforces a restrictive, Service-first standard that hinders cross-component equipment adoption, even when greater interoperability could be achieved (GAO, 2015).

Navigating these legal boundaries adds an extra burden on USSOCOM, especially during joint operations where multi-Service participation is the norm. Without a consistent definition of "Service Common," logistics chains become fractured, procurement cycles

are duplicated, and USSOCOM often lacks access to platforms or sustainment channels that are otherwise available to conventional units (Duncan, 2012). Rigid adherence to narrow legal definitions increases operational risk, particularly in environments where equipment compatibility, rapid deployment, and shared support structures are mission critical.

Procurement decisions influenced by this legal doctrine also affect long-term sustainment. When platforms or systems are outside what a Service is authorized—or willing—to support, USSOCOM must take on full life cycle responsibility, regardless of whether the system is used jointly. In effect, legal separation bolsters budget and sustainment silos, leading to cost inefficiencies and technical divergence (GAO, 2023b; Loredo et al., 2014).

Momentum toward Joint capability integration stalls under these conditions. Legal interpretations aimed at preserving order and Service autonomy now obstruct interoperability and flexibility. Without an enterprise-wide adjudication mechanism to counter restrictive interpretations, USSOCOM remains isolated in its efforts to field, scale, and sustain capabilities that meet modern Joint Force operational demands.

C. FUNDING—MFP-2 VERSUS MFP-11

USSOCOM and the Services frequently clash over the allocation and management of two main funding streams: MFP-2, used by the Services, and MFP-11, which finances USSOCOM. These structures directly influence procurement priorities and decide which capabilities receive ongoing investment. MFP-2 supports long-term force development and sustainment within traditional Service hierarchies, operating through the PPBE process. PPBE is a multi-year system designed for centralized resource allocation and budget discipline, but it cannot respond swiftly to emerging threats (GAO, 2023b). In contrast, MFP-11 offers USSOCOM operationally focused, flexible funding that enables decentralized acquisition in line with real-time mission demands (Loredo et al., 2014). While this autonomy enhances responsiveness, it isolates SOF acquisitions from Service planning and sustainment frameworks, complicating long-term integration.

Tensions often escalate when platforms serve both SOF and general-purpose force applications. Without a precise adjudication mechanism, responsibility for sustainment and modernization frequently falls to USSOCOM, even after capabilities expand beyond their original mission set. Duncan (2012) illustrates how USSOCOM has repeatedly retained fiscal responsibility for such systems due to the absence of a formal transition pathway. GAO (2015) further notes that while MFP-2 is intended to support Service-Common items, ambiguity in its application has resulted in overlapping costs, unclear accountability, and persistent duplication.

Disjointed funding also affects field-level execution. When platforms fall into a gray area between MFP-11 innovation and PPBE sustainment, it leads to delays in delivery, support planning, and life cycle integration. These effects are particularly visible in hybrid programs that don't align neatly with either USSOCOM or Service budgeting rhythms. Loredo et al. (2014) emphasize that failure to synchronize funding responsibilities directly contributes to capability shortfalls and inefficiencies.

As shown in Figure 6, acquisition authority within USSOCOM is concentrated among a small number of contracting entities, a structure that streamlines internal decision-making but hinders broader integration with Service-managed programs (Scheiner, 2009; Tkach, 2017). This centralization enhances responsiveness under MFP-11 but restricts visibility into sustainment pipelines and planning cycles governed by MFP-2. As shown in Figure 7, the top 12 contracting units account for the vast majority of USSOCOM's total financial obligation, highlighting how operational agility is maintained within a closed ecosystem (Tkach, 2017). Without a formal bridge between MFP-11 development and MFP-2 sustainment, capabilities often stall at the transition point, leaving life cycle management fragmented and opportunities for cost-sharing unfulfilled.

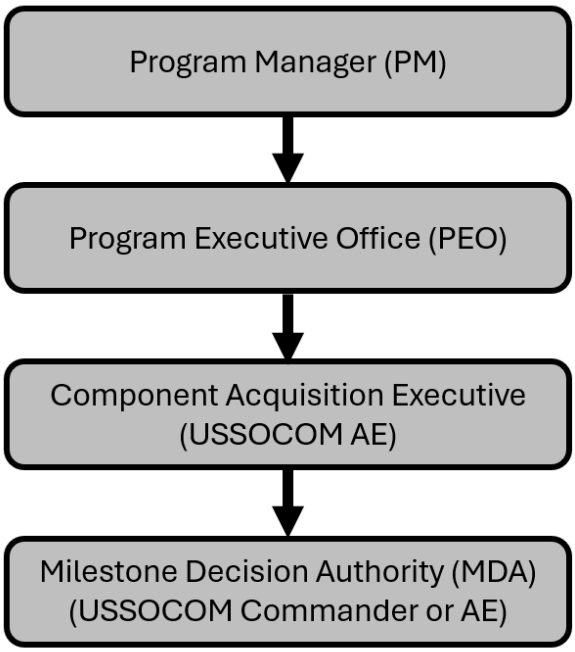


Figure 6. USSOCOM Acquisition Decision-Making Chain of Command. Adapted from Scheiner (2009)

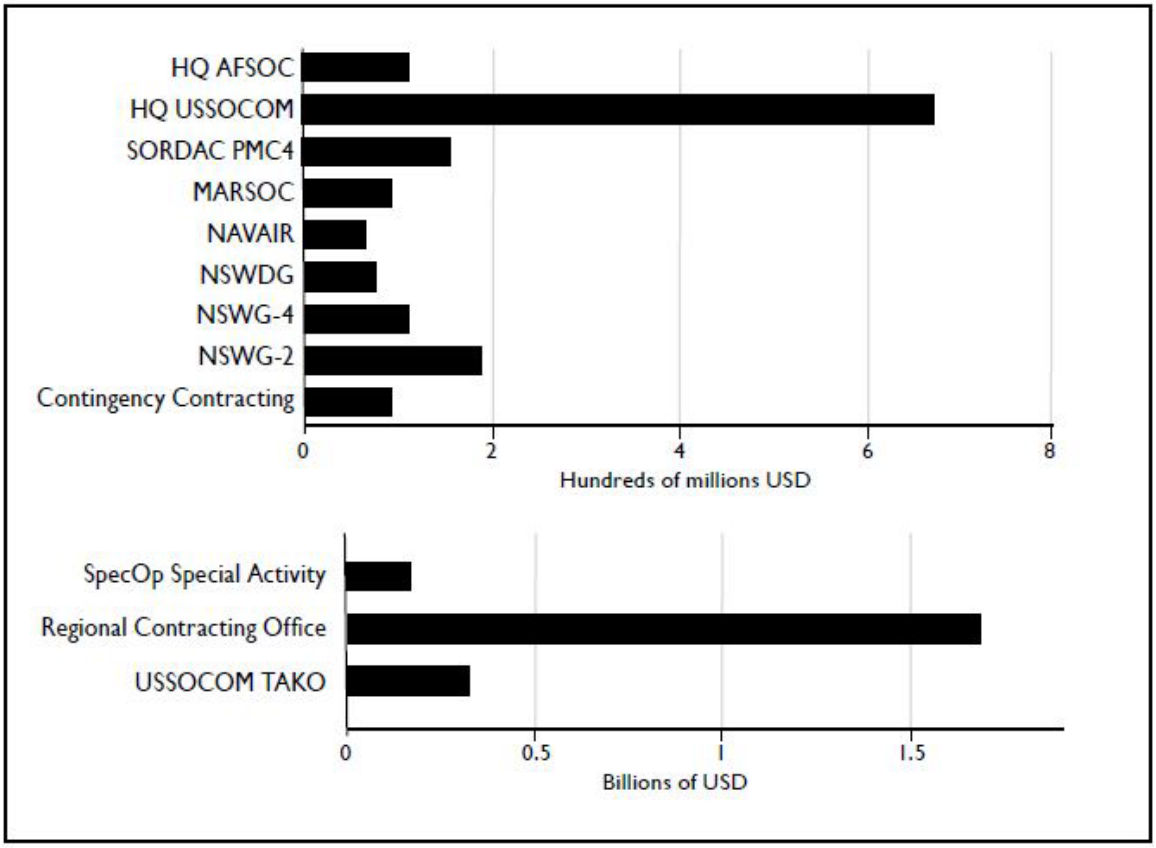


Figure 7. USSOCOM Total Financial Value by Top 12 Contracting Units. Source: Tkach (2017).

Reluctance to assume fiscal responsibility further reinforces institutional divides. Services are rarely incentivized to adopt USSOCOM-derived systems when doing so disrupts their Program Objective Memorandum (POM) cycles or introduces unplanned sustainment costs. Instead, they often initiate parallel programs, even for already fielded and proven capabilities under MFP-11 (GAO, 2015). For example, the Army chose to develop its own Tactical Unmanned Aerial System rather than fully adopting the RQ-11B Raven, despite its operational maturity and extensive use within SOF units (GAO, 2015). Similarly, the Navy declined to incorporate the SOCOM-developed SCAR rifle into its general-purpose forces, opting instead to refine its existing small arms programs (GAO, 2015). These decisions illustrate how the absence of formal transition pathways leads to duplicative investments. This dynamic erodes economies of scale, undermines Joint Force standardization, and perpetuates acquisition fragmentation.

These examples are not isolated. As shown in Table 1, redundant efforts have occurred across multiple systems due to the absence of formal transition mechanisms, unclear ownership responsibilities, and inconsistent sustainment planning. These decisions illustrate how the lack of policy-driven integration leads to duplicative investments, erodes economies of scale, undermines Joint Force standardization, and perpetuates acquisition fragmentation.

Table 1. Examples of SOF Systems Used Jointly but Retained Under USSOCOM Funding

System	Used by Conventional Forces?	Still USSOCOM Funded?	Ownership Transition	Issue
RQ-11 Raven	Yes (USMC, USAF)	Yes	No	No sustainment handoff
SOPGM	Yes (derivative of C-130J)	Yes (SOF-modified)	No	Shared platform, but USSOCOM funds the SOF version
NVD	Yes	Yes	No	No adoption despite overlapping in PGM needs
JLTV	Yes	Yes (for advanced variants)	No	Fragmented procurement and sustainment

Note: This table highlights instances where SOF-initiated capabilities were adopted by conventional forces but remained under USSOCOM funding due to the absence of formal transition mechanisms. Each case demonstrates the systemic failure to realign sustainment responsibilities despite joint utility.

Achieving real integration demands more than better budgeting tools. It requires structural alignment of funding authorities, clear sustainment ownership, and formal pathways for transitioning capabilities across fiscal boundaries. The absence of such integration continues to limit the Joint Force's ability to scale relevant capabilities and optimize shared investments rapidly.

1. The Dilemma for USSOCOM: Transitioning SOF Peculiar to Service Common

Duncan (2012) identifies a core inefficiency in how USSOCOM continues to fund systems that should logically transition to Service responsibility—a pattern clearly illustrated by recurring duplication across programs listed in Table 2. Without a formal mechanism to determine when a capability should move from SOF-peculiar to Service-Common classification, USSOCOM must use MFP-11 for items utilized by or beneficial to conventional forces. This situation creates a recurring financial strain on SOF accounts and hinders joint efficiencies that would arise from consolidating sustainment and procurement through MFP-2. Given that the Services lack a formal process to assume ownership, they have little incentive to adopt and support SOF-originated capabilities. As a result, resources are wasted on maintaining duplicative efforts instead of developing integrated support models.

Table 2. Examples of Redundant or Duplicative Efforts Due to Lack of Transition Mechanisms

System	Originating Authority	Redundant Effort by Service	Issue
RQ-11 Raven	USSOCOM	USMC and USAF initiated a parallel statement	Lacked integration planning, created sustainment gaps
SOPGM	USSOCOM	USAF developed alternative PGMs	Redundancy due to a lack of a shared acquisition channel
NVD	USSOCOM/USMC	USN retained green-phosphor goggles	Fragmented fielding, reduced interoperability
JLTV	Joint	SOF pushed additional requirements	Caused capability creep and duplication

Note: Examples compiled to illustrate common transition failures from SOF-originated programs to Service-led sustainment, based on case study data and GAO reporting.

According to the 2025 USSOCOM Fact Book, the Command's FY24 budget authority totaled $10.8 billion, with over half allocated to Operations and Maintenance (O&M), $3.1 billion to Procurement, and $1.9 billion to Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (RDT&E) (USSOCOM, 2025). These figures highlight how MFP-11 must

cover the entire capability life cycle, from R&D to sustainment, placing additional strain on USSOCOM when Services are reluctant to absorb sustainment or modernization costs for joint-use systems. The lack of a formal transfer process means this financial burden often continues indefinitely, undermining resource efficiency and readiness on a larger scale.

Because the Services lack a mandated process to take responsibility, there is little institutional incentive to adopt SOF-originated systems. As a result, resources are frequently diverted to support redundant efforts instead of being invested in developing integrated, cost-effective support models.

Underlying these challenges are deeper structural barriers. The transition of SOF programs to Service portfolios is complicated by complex acquisition processes, misaligned incentives, and limitations in contract scalability. Vendor exclusivity, low production volumes, and the regulatory burdens imposed by FAR and DFARS further limit the ability to adapt SOF solutions for wider applications. To date, no formal policy-driven transfer has resulted in a capability being moved from MFP-11 to sustained MFP-2 ownership. While informal support arrangements, such as the Air Force assisting with MC-130J sustainment, have emerged, they remain non-institutionalized and do not replace the need for a structured process. The lack of centralized oversight exacerbates the issue, as decentralized execution and unclear accountability lines lead to uncertainty in life cycle status. Figure 8 illustrates how these structural inefficiencies undermine USSOCOM's acquisition speed and flexibility when integration with conventional forces is necessary.

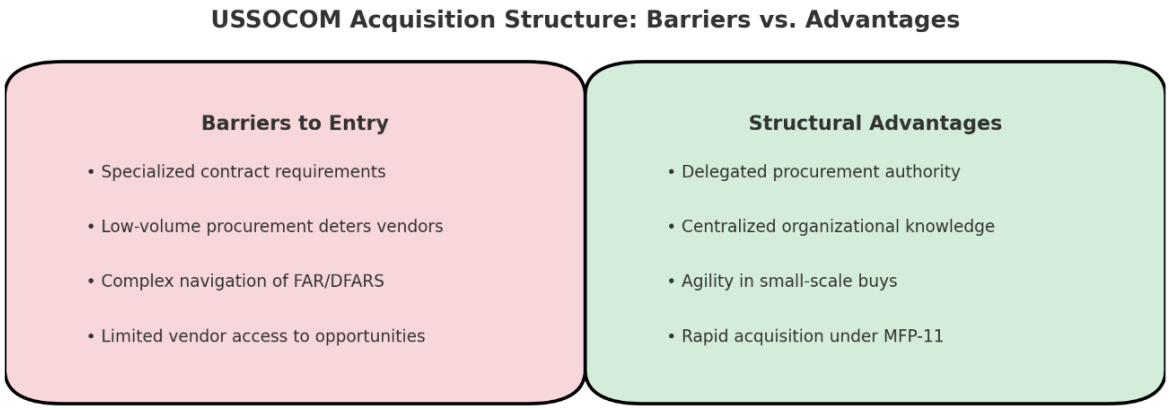


Figure 8. Key Barriers and Structural Advantages in USSOCOM Acquisition Processes. Adapted from Tkach (2017).

Without a formal adjudication framework to govern classification and funding transitions, the DoD risks ongoing inefficiencies and misallocated resources. GAO (2015) has long emphasized that blurred lines between MFP-2 and MFP-11 create uncertainty in determining who should fund procurement, integration, and life cycle sustainment. These ambiguities lead to programmatic stalls and reinforce fragmented procurement strategies, undermining acquisition efficiencies and increasing long-term costs.

Historical examples highlight the impact of these structural gaps. In the Army Special Operations Command's approach to electronic warfare acquisition, GAO (1999) reported that USSOCOM frequently had to fund systems outside its MFP-11 scope due to unclear delineation of roles and financial authority. For instance, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, USSOCOM procured and upgraded radio frequency jammers and electronic countermeasures that were ultimately fielded across conventional Army brigades, despite lacking any formal SOF designation (GAO, 1999). A similar pattern appeared with the RQ-11B Raven. Although initially funded through SOF channels, the system was widely adopted by conventional forces without a transfer of sustainment ownership, leaving USSOCOM with long-term fiscal responsibility (Van Bourgondien, 2015).

These examples highlight a persistent institutional challenge: once SOF-originated capabilities demonstrate Joint Force utility, the lack of a formal transfer mechanism leaves USSOCOM responsible for programs that should naturally transition to Service support.

Until a consistent adjudication process is established, these inefficiencies will persist in undermining both the effectiveness of both SOF and Service acquisitions. .

2. RAND Corporation Study on USSOCOM Funding

Loredo et al. (2014) reinforce these findings in a RAND study that identifies chronic disputes over fiscal responsibility for SOF-originated systems. In many instances, disagreements delay fielding decisions, reduce economies of scale, and lead to duplicative investments that could otherwise be avoided. While the study clearly presents the SOF perspective, it also highlights the lack of Service-side budget integration in many planning cycles. Without incentives to assume sustainment or procurement roles, the Services have little motivation to collaborate, resulting in systems that never fully transition from USSOCOM's control.

MBSE (Model-Based Systems Engineering) provides a forward-looking solution. Phillips (2024) asserts that MBSE techniques can simulate life cycle performance and resource requirements during the early stages of acquisition, allowing stakeholders to visualize sustainment outcomes across MFP-2 and MFP-11 planning horizons. This modeling capability promotes earlier collaboration between USSOCOM and Service program offices, uncovering trade-offs, risks, and dependencies that are often concealed in traditional budget exercises. When applied strategically, MBSE can generate shared fiscal insights and encourage intentional, synchronized acquisition decisions across organizational boundaries.

D. ACQUISITIONS AND CONTRACTING

Delays, cost overruns, and stagnant capability development plague the DoD's acquisition enterprise. Systemic inefficiencies, well documented across GAO reports, highlight how advanced defense systems often face increasing complexity and procurement timelines that extend far beyond initial projections. In its 2023 annual assessment, GAO reported that program age across the acquisition portfolio has risen significantly, reflecting an inability to adapt to emerging mission needs or field solutions within operationally relevant timelines (GAO, 2023a). RAND's findings reinforce this,

noting that technological disruptions and shifting requirements frequently expose traditional pathways to slippage and ballooning costs (Loredo et al., 2014).

Entrenched bureaucracy and institutional risk aversion exacerbate the problem. As GAO (2021b) notes, nearly 50 percent of major defense acquisition programs have experienced increases in average procurement unit cost, highlighting weak oversight structures and an inability to contain growth once programs enter execution. The Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) serves as a key example. Initiated to replace the aging Humvee fleet, the JLTV faced multi-year delays and cost overruns as evolving requirements outstripped the rigid structure of the MCA framework (GAO, 2012). Cases like the JLTV underscore a broader trend, traditional acquisition models struggle when innovation must move faster than governance frameworks allow.

Reforms have emerged in the form of the Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF), which is intended to provide faster, more mission-aligned pathways for capability development (DoD, 2020b). MTA enables rapid prototyping and fielding with reduced documentation burdens, while UCA facilitates accelerated validation for urgent requirements outside the full JCIDS and PPBE process (DoD, 2020c; 2020d; DAU, 2022). Rapid Capability Offices (RCOs) institutionalize this agility by placing lean program teams under flexible oversight, thereby supporting real-time adjustments without compromising program integrity (GAO, 2021a).

Despite these shifts, friction persists. Many newer pathways draw from USSOCOM's long-standing MFP-11 authorities—where rapid acquisition and decentralized execution have long been the norm (Loredo et al., 2014). However, RCOs, MTA, and UCA initiatives still encounter barriers rooted in Service-specific validation practices, PPBE timelines, and legacy sustainment expectations (GAO, 2023b). Meanwhile, MCA continues to serve as the default model. Although designed for transparency, deliberate planning, and life cycle oversight, MCA often struggles to keep pace with modern operational urgency. Differences in these pathways extend beyond timelines; they influence how requirements are validated, how sustainment is funded, and how interoperability across components is either enabled or obstructed. The analysis ahead

shows that acquisition failure often originates not from poor technology but from the institutional mismatch between competing models.

Success in contested environments now depends on integration timelines measured in months—not fiscal years. Yet, the acquisition structure remains largely defined by rigidity and compliance rather than adaptability. GAO's 2020 evaluation warned that despite procedural reforms, most programs still lack the speed and flexibility required to confront modern threats or support multi-domain operations (GAO, 2020a). Emerging acquisition pathways offer promising mechanisms, but without aligning funding models, sustainment planning, and risk-sharing protocols, they remain tools constrained by a system still optimized for legacy demands.

1. Comparing U.S. DoD Acquisitions with Israeli MoD Acquisitions

Joshua Fernandez (2024) offers a comparative analysis of the acquisition processes between the U.S. DoD and the Israeli Ministry of Defense (MoD), highlighting key differences influencing procurement speed and flexibility. Although both systems share core principles, Fernandez contends that the Israeli system is more agile, enabling quicker procurement and deployment of vital systems. This agility is primarily attributed to Israel's readiness to accept higher performance risks in exchange for faster acquisition timelines, which sharply contrasts with the more procedural and conservative approach of the U.S. DoD.

For example, Fernandez compares the Israeli Namer Heavy Armored Personnel Carrier and the U.S. Marine Corps Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. The Israeli system was deployed rapidly, whereas the U.S. program faced significant delays and budget overruns, ultimately leading to its cancellation. These instances underscore the potential benefits of a more flexible and responsive acquisition strategy, which could significantly enhance the DoD's ability to address evolving operational needs.

At the same time, this comparison highlights a deeper issue: speed without sustainment results in its form of failure. As noted earlier in the background section, Van Bourgondien (2012) documented how the RQ-11B Raven SUAS was deployed with inadequate logistical support, leading to widespread operational problems. Maintainers

scrambled without proper training, technical documentation, or spare parts. That failure was not isolated—it exposed a persistent chronic weakness in acquisition planning. Fernandez reinforces this concern by clarifying that faster acquisition is not a cure-all; instead, agility must be matched with readiness or risk being wasted (Fernandez, 2024).

Building on this theme, Rea (2023) presents a promising solution by utilizing relative research volume to evaluate technology maturity. This approach provides a data-driven method to assess whether a capability is ready for field deployment, assisting USSOCOM and other branches in avoiding investments in systems that are not operationally viable. When implemented early, this tool can decrease time and cost overruns while ensuring acquisition timelines do not outpace sustainment planning.

2. Limitations of Israeli Acquisition Data

Comparative assessments between the Israeli Ministry of Defense and the U.S. DoD have generated interest, particularly regarding procurement speed and risk tolerance. However, Fernandez (2024) cautions that much of the Israeli data cited in support of these arguments' dates back over twenty years, weakening its relevance for modern applications. Successes like the Namer armored personnel carrier, while instructive, occurred under historical conditions that may not translate to today's multidomain battlespace or U.S. acquisition structure. Applying these lessons without updated validation risks drawing conclusions that are more aspirational than actionable.

Institutional dynamics further complicate comparisons. Centralized authority, cultural acceptance of operational risk, and unified logistics chains enable Israel's procurement system to pivot quickly and iterate with minimal procedural resistance. These conditions stand in stark contrast to U.S. acquisition norms, which are heavily influenced by congressional oversight, the PPBE process, and competing stakeholder priorities. Van Bourgondien (2015) warns that rapid acquisition without integrated sustainment planning, as seen in the case of the RQ-11B Raven, can lead to readiness shortfalls and sustainment breakdowns. Applying Israeli speed in the absence of structural reform could unintentionally exacerbate the very inefficiencies reformers seek to address.

Cross-national comparisons from Bitzinger (2010) and Gupta (2022) highlight these concerns. Bitzinger notes that regional procurement strategies often face fragmented sustainment pipelines and institutional inertia, regardless of initial velocity. Gupta's review of India's centralized acquisition efforts shows that control without flexibility frequently results in industrial stagnation, delayed delivery, and poor operational integration. These examples indicate that successful acquisition reform relies less on emulating external models and more on transforming internal processes to prioritize adaptability, life cycle transparency, and system-of-systems coordination.

Achieving speed without reworking governance and sustainment integration poses a strategic risk. In the U.S., particularly for SOCOM and joint capability integration, any reform needs to address institutional complexity and planning fragmentation as key challenges. These case studies remind us that surface-level comparisons can miss important differences in acquisition architecture, cultural norms, and readiness priorities.

3. Integrating Technology Maturity Assessments

As acquisition programs encounter tighter timelines and increasing risks, decision-makers are turning more to empirical tools to predict transition success. Rea (2023) proposes a data-centric method for evaluating technology readiness by monitoring relative research volume. This approach offers organizations like USSOCOM an early indication of which technologies are most likely to transition successfully from prototype to fielded systems, minimizing uncertainty and enhancing life cycle planning in a resource-constrained environment.

Higher maturity levels often correlate with more stable outcomes. Technologies such as unmanned systems and night vision devices, where research saturation is high, tend to demonstrate higher success rates in fielding and lower cost volatility. In contrast, advanced but immature technologies like directed energy weapons remain promising yet carry disproportionately higher failure rates, as illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 9. Rea's framework transforms risk analysis from a subjective judgment into a structured decision aid, allowing acquisition teams to better align program expectations with technological realities.

Table 3. Technology Maturity vs. Procurement Outcomes. Adapted from Rea (2023).

Technology Category	Relative Research Volume (2023)	Fielded Success Rate (%)	Acquisition Risk Level
Unmanned Systems	92	87	Low
Night Vision Devices	78	81	Low
AI-Based ISR Tools	55	58	Moderate
Directed Energy Weapons	33	25	High

Note: Adapted from Rea (2023) to illustrate the relationship between technology readiness levels and acquisition outcomes. Demonstrates how early-stage SOF capabilities often outpace Service acquisition timelines but lack long-term support.

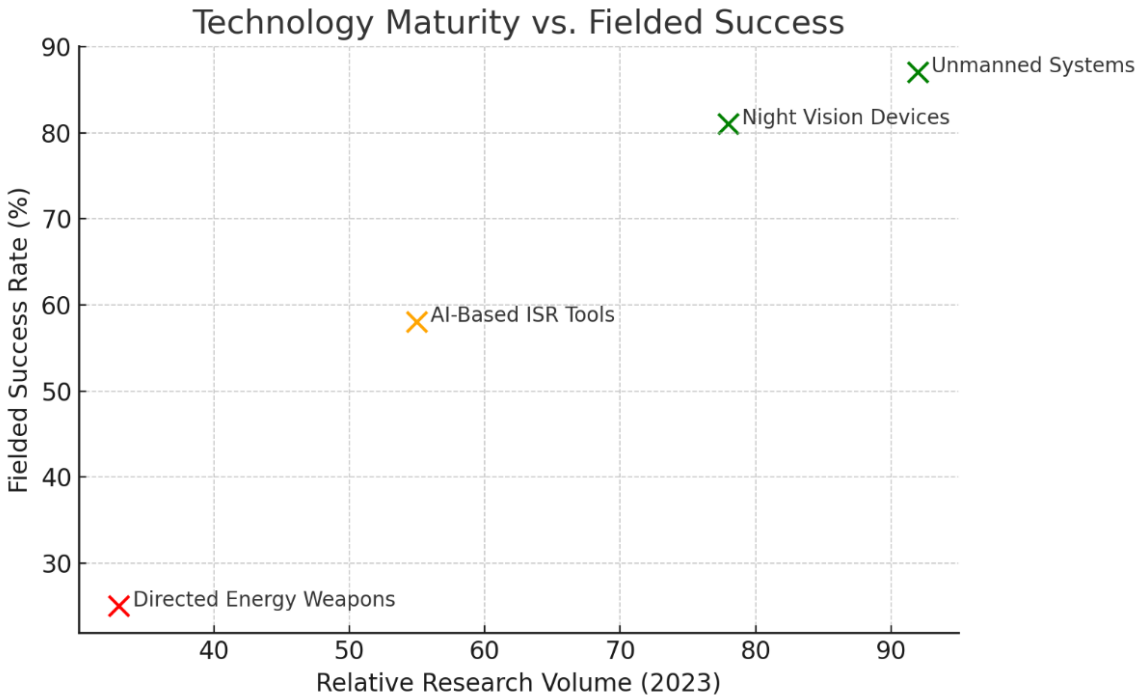


Figure 9. Correlation Between Technology Maturity and Fielded Success Rates. Adapted from Rhea (2023)

When used alongside previous insights on institutional misalignment and procurement rigidity, this assessment model emphasizes the need for early-phase investment in analytical tools. Maturity scoring provides more than insight; it generates actionable intelligence for prioritizing acquisition resources, adjusting timelines, and

selecting programs with greater integration potential. Implementing this methodology upstream could help minimize the occurrence of delayed, unsupported, or redundant systems that have historically undermined DoD acquisition efficiency.

E. SOCOM ACQUISITIONS AND DOD ACQUISITION REFORM

In "USSOCOM Acquisition . . . Light, Agile, Lethal: A Pathfinder for DoD Acquisition Reform," Glenda Scheiner presents a compelling argument that USSOCOM's acquisition framework can serve as a viable template for reform across the DoD. Instead of focusing solely on procedural adjustments, Scheiner (2009) highlights the significance of organizational culture in fostering agility, responsiveness, and effectiveness in defense acquisitions. Her analysis examines how USSOCOM's streamlined approach, rooted in its origins as a mission-focused and operator-driven command, has achieved results that more rigid Service acquisition structures continue to struggle to replicate.

Scheiner identifies several cultural and structural features that distinguish USSOCOM's model:

- A streamlined decision-making structure
- Continuous evaluation of industry capabilities
- A joint, warfighter-driven perspective
- A culture that embraces risk management and rapid adaptation

Evidence of these principles in action is demonstrated through concrete case studies. Programs like the Stand-Off Precision Guided Munitions (SOPGM) Quick Reaction Capability and the Electronic Countermeasures (ECM) development team exemplify how USSOCOM circumvents traditional bottlenecks to deliver operational solutions efficiently (Goure, 20212; GAO, 2015). These efforts succeed by embracing rapid prototyping and fielding strategies that align with the urgency of mission requirements, an approach often unavailable within traditional MCA frameworks (Scheiner, 2009). Scheiner (2009) notes that such agility stems from USSOCOM's ability to align user feedback acquisition authority and funding under a single chain of command. However, it is worth noting that Scheiner's analysis predated the 2020 launch of the AAF.

This DoD-wide reform effort introduced multiple acquisition pathways at least in part to address the very challenges her work outlined.

Additional insights from Žárský et al. (2023) strengthen this cultural argument through a technological perspective. Their analysis of real-time data integration in UAV operations demonstrates how dynamic, responsive acquisition systems improve situational awareness and tactical execution. This alignment between mission-driven data and agile fielding reinforces the idea that adaptability must be embedded in both processes and mindsets from the outset.

Breaking away from legacy acquisition norms requires more than just adjusting timelines or simplifying documentation. What USSOCOM demonstrates is that a deliberate cultural shift toward risk-informed adaptability and operator-centric decision-making can reshape the entire trajectory of capability development. While pathways such as the MTA, UCA, and Service RCOs reflect this cultural shift on paper, successful implementation still depends on the behavior of acquisition professionals and institutional incentives. For the MILDEPs to adopt USSOCOM's "buy-try-decide" process is constrained not only by the existing DoD acquisition processes but also by the current DoD mindset regarding risk (Babbit & Schlomer, 2019). If broader DoD reform is to succeed, it must internalize these lessons and prioritize behavioral changes in acquisition with the same seriousness it attaches to compliance reform.

F. SOCOM ACQUISITIONS AND CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT

Christopher J. Castelli's article, "Senators Want More Oversight for Acquisition of SOCOM Submersibles," published in Inside the Navy on July 4, 2011, highlights growing congressional concern regarding USSOCOM's procurement of specialized submersibles. The Senate Armed Services Committee sought greater involvement from the Pentagon's senior acquisition leadership due to recurring cost overruns and technical setbacks in previous programs. Castelli uses notable failures, such as the Advanced SEAL Delivery System (ASDS) and the Joint Multi-Mission Submersible, as case studies to advocate enhanced oversight. He argues that direct involvement from senior acquisition officials like

Ashton Carter could help prevent repeated mistakes and bolster accountability in SOCOM programs.

Several points reinforce this position:

- **Historical Failures**: Both the ASDS and Joint Multi-Mission Submersible encountered significant setbacks, reflecting weak program management and integration issues.
- **Financial Burden**: ASDS alone cost $677.5 million before it was ultimately terminated, a warning sign of unchecked program scope and inadequate oversight.
- **Policy Precedents**: Castelli highlights that previous high-cost programs required "acquisition category ID" designation, demanding oversight from top DoD officials, a precedent SOCOM should follow.
- **Leadership Accountability**: Vice Adm. William McRaven's acknowledgment of prior shortcomings and emphasis on changing SOCOM's acquisition approach shows a willingness within the command to embrace reform.
- **Independent Verification**: GAO reports on these programs add weight to Castelli's argument, providing objective evidence of programmatic dysfunction (Castelli, 2011).

Castelli's reporting reveals that the call for increased oversight is not just about cost control; it reflects a broader need to align specialized programs with sound acquisition principles. The submersible programs exemplify a broader pattern seen across the DoD: technical complexity and rapid mission demands often outpace traditional oversight mechanisms. SOCOM's unique needs don't exempt it from accountability; rather, they require even more disciplined integration of sustainment planning and strategic oversight principles echoed across RAND and DAU research on acquisition reform.

G. DOD ACQUISITIONS AND COMMONALITY

Returning to RAND's analysis, Held et al. (2008) argue that "commonality can lead to outcomes that are both negative and positive, but these outcomes are less often

acknowledged or understood. They require nuanced decision-making" (p. iii). Their study dissects the effects of commonality across cost structures, logistics chains, and operational performance, offering both cautionary tales and examples of successful integration. It complements the challenges outlined in SOCOM oversight discussions by emphasizing that efficiency gains through standardization must be weighed against operational trade-offs, particularly for unique or high-risk missions like those carried out by USSOCOM. The U.S. Army and DoD have increasingly embraced the concept of system families built around common platforms. Initiatives such as standardizing tires across multiple vehicle types and converging small arms platforms reflect a desire to reduce life cycle costs and ease logistics burdens. However, like SOCOM's submersibles, the promise of efficiency often clashes with the reality of differing mission needs, highlighting where standardization falls short.

What RAND identifies, but is often understated in practice, is the danger of imposing commonality without first securing alignment on mission profiles and sustainment pathways. In programs like the F-35, shared components do not automatically lead to cohesive support structures, which can result in fragmented logistics chains and increased long-term costs. Despite its aim as a joint platform, the F-35 program has encountered persistent sustainment challenges due to disjointed planning among the Services. GAO findings indicate that the program lacks a cohesive strategy for transferring sustainment responsibilities to the government, contributing to inflated costs and inconsistent maintenance outcomes (GAO, 2021c; GAO, 2023a). The 2021 GAO report highlighted that the projected sustainment costs exceed affordability targets for all Services, while the 2023 report identified fragmented maintenance and parts shortages as major contributors to low readiness. These real-world consequences reinforce Held et al.'s caution that commonality can become a liability if implemented without adequate logistical and organizational integration. Their research encourages acquisition planners to consider not only hardware standardization but also the entire ecosystem necessary to deploy, maintain, and support that hardware over time.

Additional research from Wicht and Crawley (2012) indicates that achieving meaningful commonality requires upfront architectural planning and stakeholder

coordination. Their acquisition planning model (see Figure 10) illustrates how early design choices affect integration success or failure across multiple system life cycles. This model reinforces RAND's findings, emphasizing that successful standardization relies not only on shared parts but also on shared priorities and processes. Without an enterprise-wide sustainment vision, commonality risks creating fragmented systems that seem unified on paper but underperform in the field. The dangers of over-standardization become especially evident when viewed through the lens of USSOCOM's mission demands. Held et al. (2008) and Wicht & Crawley (2019) reveal that commonality, like any tool, is only as effective as the context in which it is applied.

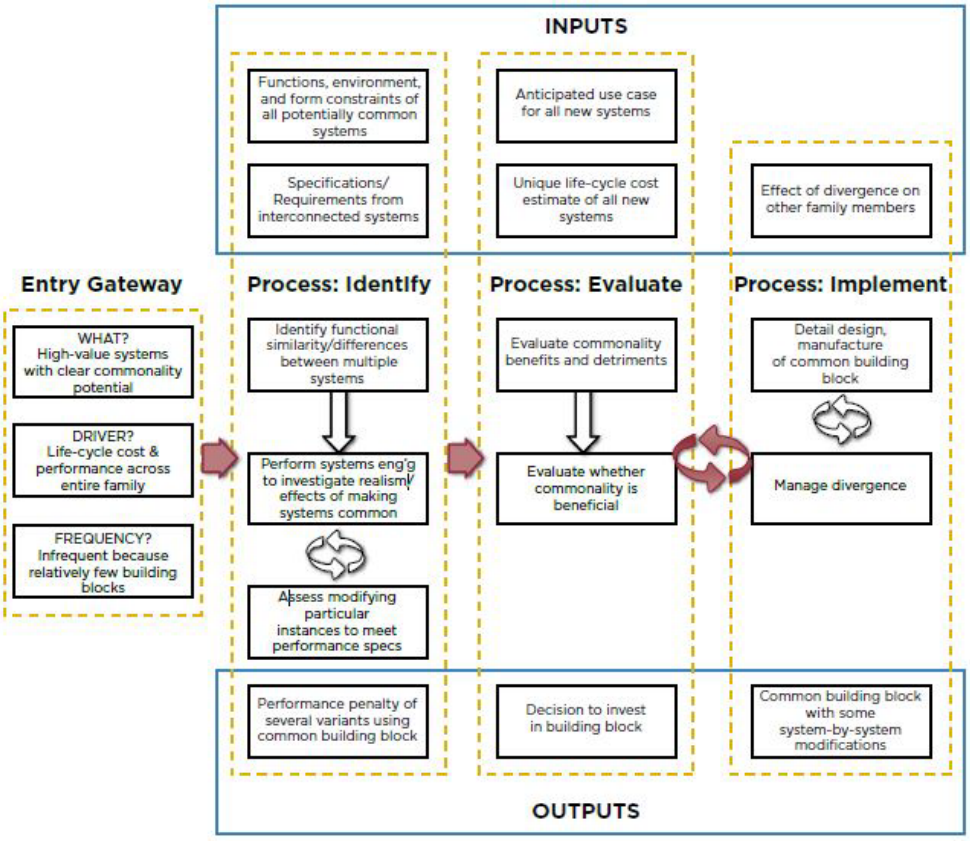


Figure 10. Acquisition Planning Framework for Complex Common Systems. Source: Wicht & Crawley (2012)

Moreover, a recent DAU report by Jacobsen and Meador (2022) provides empirical support for these concepts, noting that efforts to enforce top-down standardization across

the Joint Force often stall due to inconsistent governance structures and unclear sustainment pathways. Figure 11 visualizes these systemic challenges by mapping the competing forces, fragmented acquisition oversight, divergent Service priorities, and siloed sustainment models that inhibit true Cross-Service Commonality. The figure highlights the intersections and clashes of these elements, particularly regarding efficiency-driven approaches, as policies encounter entrenched institutional cultures and risk-averse contracting mechanisms. Rather than a linear process, the acquisition system becomes a web of conflicting incentives and diffused accountability. This complexity is especially problematic for programs that bridge USSOCOM's rapid, tailored needs with broader Service adoption timelines. The model reinforces that commonality remains an aspirational goal, rather than an operational reality, without unifying architectural authority and clearly defined sustainment ownership.

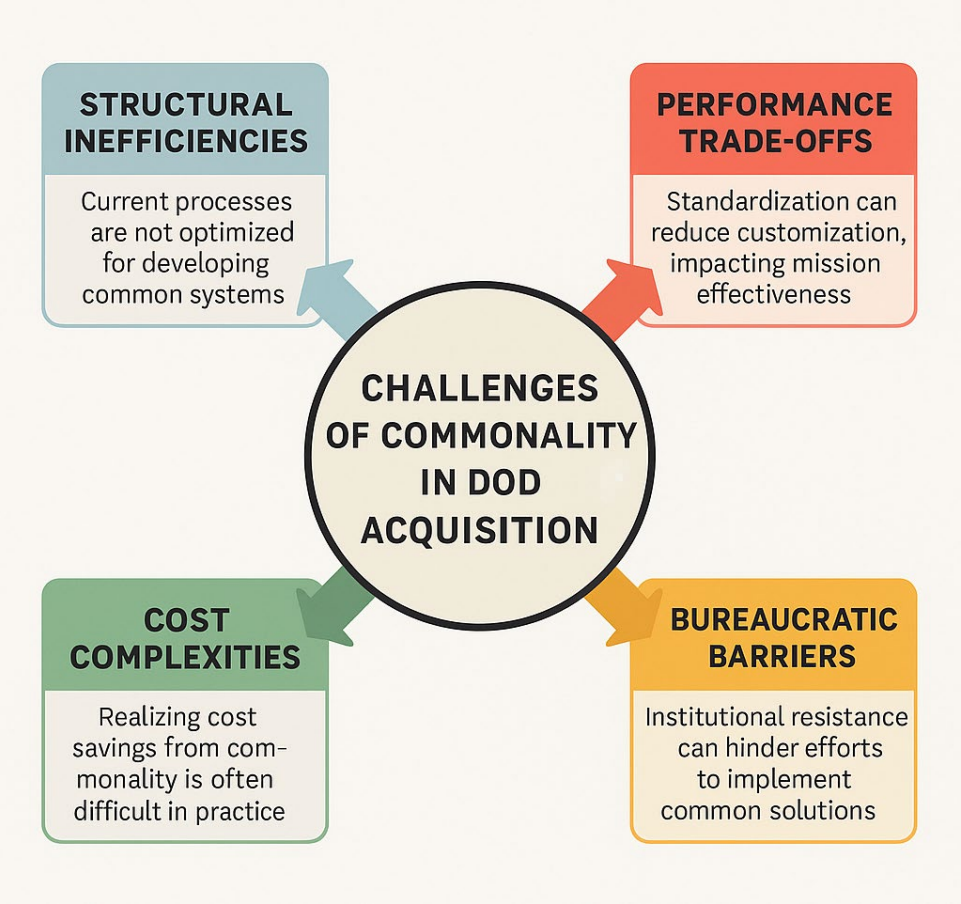


Figure 11. Challenges of Commonality in DoD Acquisition. Adapted from Jacobsen & Meador (2022)

These analytical frameworks are especially relevant to programs like the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. While both aimed to promote commonality across Services, each encountered significant challenges: JLTV with divergent Service-specific requirements and F-35 with sustainment issues tied to differing configurations (GAO, 2015; GAO, 2023a). These cases reinforce the point made by Held et al. (2008) and Wicht and Crawley (2012): commonality must be supported by architectural discipline, early stakeholder alignment, and a unified sustainment strategy. Without these, integration efforts risk becoming costly and ineffective.

Held et al.'s complete assessment offers nine insights into how commonality affects defense acquisition strategy (Held et al., 2008):

1. **Operational Impact**: Hybrid platforms often involve capability compromises, as seen in the FA-18 versus specialized platforms like the A-10 or F-16.
2. **Cost Considerations**: Cost savings through shared development only materialize under specific conditions, such as with complex, high-demand items.
3. **Logistical Trade-offs**: Common components may streamline supply lines or inadvertently overburden them depending on demand levels.
4. **Decision Complexity**: No universally optimal solution exists; context and trade-offs must guide each decision.
5. **Empirical Evidence**: Their claims are backed by qualitative program data and quantitative cost analysis.
6. **Mission Trade-offs**: The F-4 and F-111 procurement histories show how joint acquisition can sacrifice performance.
7. **Training Alignment**: Programs like SINCGARS demonstrate the potential cost savings of training and support convergence.
8. **Governance Gaps**: Misaligned acquisition structures perpetuate inefficiency, particularly without joint sustainment strategies.
9. **Life Cycle Planning**: Effective commonality decisions demand ongoing evaluation throughout a system's life cycle.

These insights from RAND, reinforced by Wicht and Crawley (2012), illustrate that the benefits of commonality are neither automatic nor universally applicable. Ultimately, the warfighter bears the operational burden. Misjudging these trade-offs highlights the need for decision tools prioritizing sustainability and effectiveness over bureaucratic efficiency. Figure 12 synthesizes these challenges into a visual trade-space framework to assist acquisition planners in balancing mission need, sustainment feasibility, and cost-effectiveness.

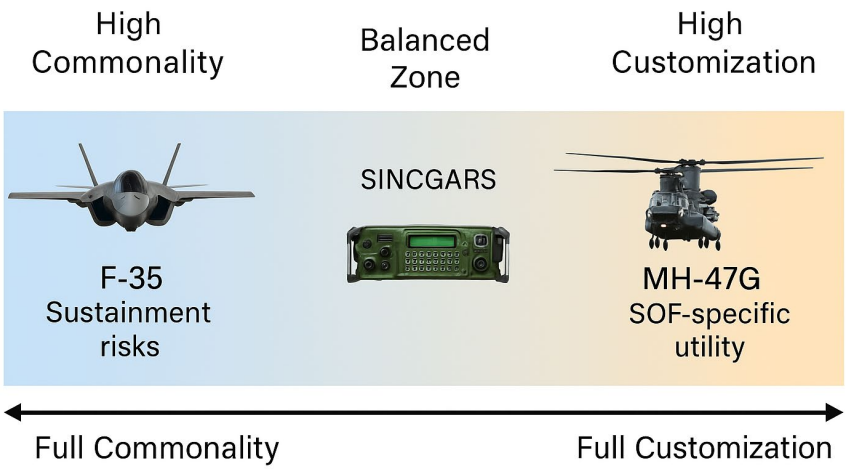


Figure 12. Commonality Trade-off Spectrum in Defense Acquisition. Adapted from Loredo et al. (2014), GAO (2015), and Golany & Kress (2000).

H. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Persistent blind spots in current research continue to hinder meaningful reform of DoD acquisition strategies, particularly when examining the disconnect between "Service Common" and "SOF Peculiar" designations:

1. **Ambiguity in the Definition of "Service Common"**

   There is no standardized definition of "Service Common" across DoD literature or policy. This lack of clarity leads to inconsistent classification of equipment and systems, which in turn contributes to misaligned funding, sustainment confusion, and barriers to joint integration.

2. **Governance and Policy Fragmentation**

   While acquisition directives such as SOCOM-D 700–8 offer guidance, limited empirical research evaluates whether existing governance structures facilitate or hinder inter-service commonality. Most policies fail to reconcile joint interoperability needs with unique Service cultures and authorities.

3. **Services Funding Constraints and Operational Priorities**

   Existing studies disproportionately reflect USSOCOM's acquisition challenges

and priorities. Insufficient exploration of Services resource limitations, doctrinal commitments, or structural pressures make absorbing SOF-initiated systems difficult. Understanding these perspectives is essential for bridging institutional divides.

4. **Formal Adjudication Pathways for Equipment Transitions:**
Duncan (2012) and RAND (2014) highlight the need for a formal process to evaluate and reclassify systems from "SOF Peculiar to Service Common." However, practical frameworks or policy mechanisms remain absent from the literature. Without clear adjudication standards, sustainment handoffs and procurement responsibilities remain unresolved.

5. **Lack of Cross-Functional Coordination Models**
While operational tension between USSOCOM and the Services is well-documented, potential coordination structures, such as liaison offices, Joint PMOs, or integrated requirements boards, receive little attention. Future research should explore models that encourage shared ownership and accelerate fielding without undermining Service autonomy.

6. **Limited Operational-Level Analysis**
Current literature emphasizes acquisition mechanics and budget execution, but offers little insight into how Service Common designations influence real-world joint operations. This omission obscures how equipment integration (or the lack thereof) shapes warfighter effectiveness across different theaters and mission sets.

7. **Comparative Lessons from Allies**
Although some references are made to Israeli acquisition models or NATO standards, there is minimal comparative analysis of how allies manage similar integration and sustainment challenges. Incorporating allied case studies, such as U.K. or Australian procurement coordination, could offer valuable benchmarks for U.S. reforms.

8. **Service-Level Rejection of SOF Capabilities**
Additionally, limited literature explores the Services' rationale for rejecting SOF

capabilities, such as concerns over configuration divergence, life cycle cost ownership, and governance accountability. Without a deeper understanding of why Services choose not to adopt proven SOF-developed systems, reform efforts risk being one-sided and failing to address the institutional behaviors that reinforce acquisition silos.

I. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Delayed fielding, mismatched sustainment roles, and the lack of adjudication authority significantly harm the warfighter's ability to adapt and succeed. As adversaries accelerate their development cycles and embrace more agile acquisition strategies, the U.S. risks falling behind—not because of a deficiency in technological capability, but due to its struggle to translate innovation into scalable, joint-ready solutions.

Institutional blind spots remain deeply entrenched. Despite acknowledgment in oversight reports and reform proposals, literature rarely dissects how classification ambiguity, funding silos, or fractured sustainment responsibilities systematically undermine integration. Narrow solutions are proposed without addressing the larger ecosystem of policies and behaviors that perpetuate inefficiency. Furthermore, there is limited exploration of how shared sustainment models, cross-program authority, or formal adjudication mechanisms could bridge these divides. Without structural change, the cycle of duplicated efforts and underutilized SOF-developed capabilities will persist.

Findings from this review lay the groundwork for the comparative analysis that follows. Chapter IV will assess how MFP-11-based acquisition processes differ from Service-aligned pathways under MCA, MTA, and UCA. The next chapter further supports the central argument: scalable acquisition reform requires speed and synchronization by pinpointing the gaps in requirements, funding, and oversight, where joint adoption efforts fall short.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ACQUISITION ALIGNMENT: A LAYERED MODEL OF DYSFUNCTION

Structural mismatches in authorities, processes, and priorities are central to acquisition fragmentation between USSOCOM and the Services. Empowered by Title 10 authorities under the Nunn–Cohen Amendment and funded through MFP-11, USSOCOM has the statutory autonomy to swiftly acquire and field capabilities independent of Service-led systems (USSOCOM, 2023a). This agility enables short-cycle, mission-specific development and deployment. In contrast, Service acquisition efforts are governed by the PPBE system, the JCIDS, and the DoD 5000 series, structures that prioritize long-term affordability, interoperability, and careful planning (DoD, 2020b; CJCS, 2021).

Divergence begins early in the requirements process. USSOCOM validates needs through internal mission command, minimizing documentation and expediting solution development. In contrast, Service requirements must navigate the JCIDS process, which involves creating Initial Capabilities Documents (ICDs), Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC) validation, and alignment with the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP), a multi-year roadmap that limits responsiveness (CJCS, 2021; GAO, 2017). However, it is essential to note that Service-led programs utilizing Middle Tier Acquisition (MTA) or Urgent Capability Acquisition (UCA) pathways often reflect USSOCOM's accelerated acquisition approach, which minimizes documentation demands and enhances flexibility (DoD, 2020c; GAO, 2021a).

Despite procedural similarities among USSOCOM, UCA, and MTA, all three pathways tend to deprioritize features such as scalability, sustainment planning, and cross-Service alignment that are more characteristic of traditional MCA or MDAP efforts. This disconnect partially arises from USSOCOM's focus on mission-specific technologies that may not readily translate to conventional use cases. The 2025 USSOCOM Fact Book outlines continued priorities in adaptive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), hyper-enabled operators, next-generation mobility platforms, and precision effects, capabilities designed for speed, discretion, and specialized environments (USSOCOM,

2025). To the conventional Services, these systems may seem over-specialized, technically misaligned, or operationally unnecessary for larger formations, which reinforces their reluctance to adopt or sustain them at scale. Without early coordination and modular design for dual-use applicability, SOF innovations often remain siloed and underutilized across the broader DoD enterprise.

Conceptually, these structural gaps can be visualized using a triangular model of compounding barriers, as shown in Figure 13. At the apex of the triangle lies entrenched institutional resistance: "not-invented-here" bias, cultural aversion to externally developed solutions, and bureaucratic layering that slows down decision-making. The middle layer reflects the operational disconnect between SOF agility and Service rigidity—manifested in misaligned metrics, slow validation cycles, and poor scalability for SOF-originated capabilities. At the base of the triangle lies the sustainment gap: the absence of formal pathways to transition MFP-11 programs into MFP-2 portfolios, which results in fragmented life cycle management, duplicated sustainment planning, and inefficient resource allocation across the enterprise.

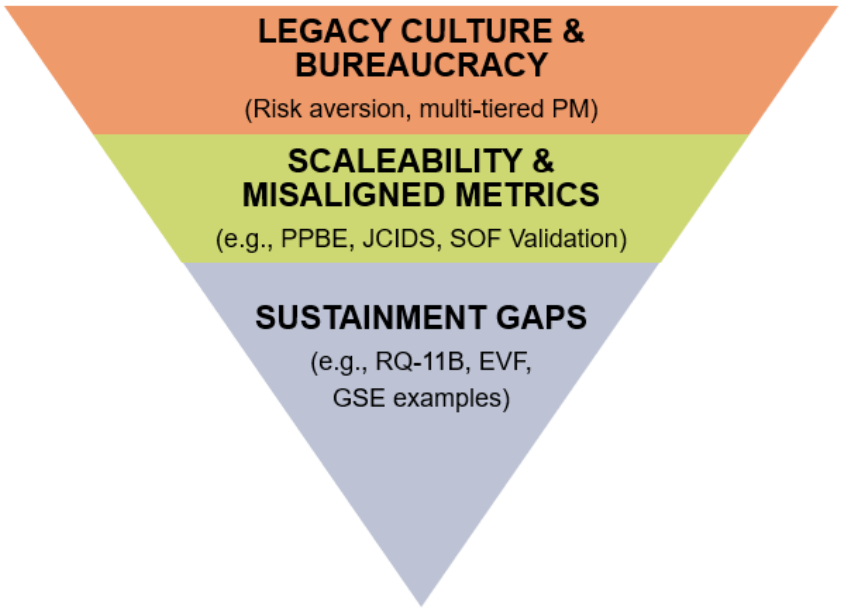


Figure 13. Compounding Barriers in U.S. Defense Acquisition. Adapted from an internal model synthesized by the authors using GAO, DoD, and USSOCOM sources

This layered dysfunction reveals that solving acquisition alignment is not just a matter of policy, but of systemic redesign. Without addressing the reinforcing nature of institutional resistance, process misalignment, and sustainment fragmentation, reform efforts will remain piecemeal and insufficient for modern Joint Force demands.

A second model, visualized as an iceberg shown in Figure 14, elaborates on this dynamic. While surface-level differences such as milestone charts and funding cycles are visible, the true divergence lies beneath, where organizational identity, cultural resistance to external solutions, and conflicting philosophies of control influence acquisition behavior. These deeper forces create parallel ecosystems that operate independently and sometimes engage in subtle competition.

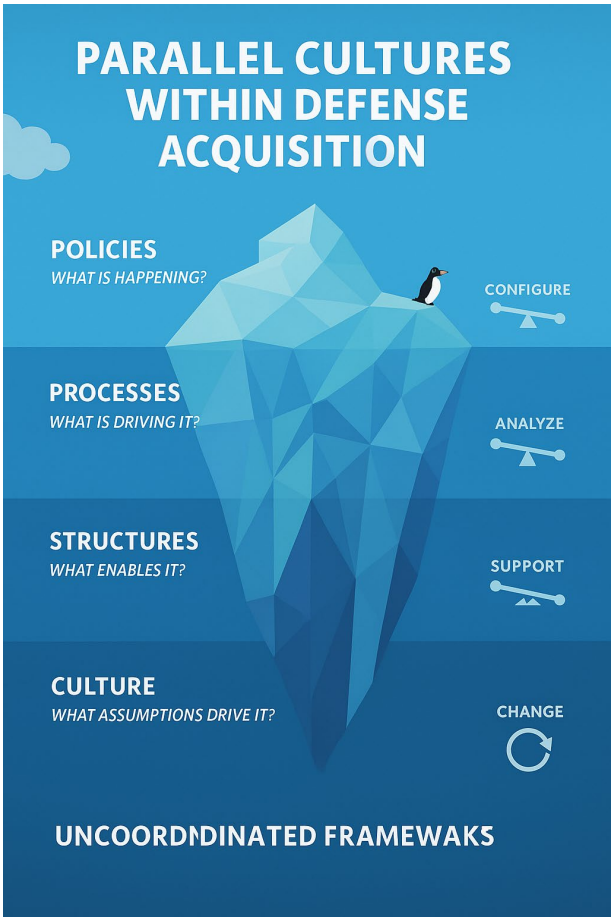


Figure 14. Parallel Acquisition Cultures: The Iceberg Metaphor with a DoD Acquisition Context Overlay. Source: Visual Synapses. (2024).

Surface similarities can be misleading. Although both systems aim to equip the warfighter, they function on different timelines, use different metrics, and follow different definitions of success. Deeper still, organizational habits and authority boundaries discourage meaningful collaboration. Innovation that originates in SOF channels rarely scales upward, and proven Service capabilities seldom integrate downward, despite overlapping mission sets.

Breakdowns in coordination are a persistent issue that hampers the scalability of USSOCOM-developed systems. Even when a capability is operationally validated, the lack of life cycle alignment across sustainment planning, funding transitions, and milestone documentation often obstructs a smooth handoff to Service portfolios. For their part, Services frequently resist adopting USSOCOM innovations that fall outside JCIDS governance structures, even when those systems have clearly demonstrated value in combat environments (Duncan, 2012; GAO, 2023a). This resistance is further exacerbated by the absence of a formal sustainment bridge between MFP-11 and MFP-2. USSOCOM's funding model is designed for agility, not for managing long-term sustainment across the Joint Force. When SOF-peculiar capabilities prove broadly applicable, no adjudication mechanism exists to transfer sustainment responsibility to the Services. Consequently, USSOCOM often incurs the cost of supporting systems that exceed its operational scope, creating unnecessary risk at the operational edge, where SOF and conventional forces are increasingly interdependent (Van Bourgondien, 2015).

What emerges is not just a policy gap but an ecosystem imbalance: two acquisition cultures operating with different assumptions, unable to align at scale. Without a structured interface or shared governance model, integration will remain the exception rather than the norm. The following section explores whether acquisition pathways like MTA and UCA can be functional bridges between these diverging models.

B. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: USSOCOM'S ACQUISITION MODEL VS. AAF PATHWAYS

Six acquisition pathways make up the AAF: UCA, MTA, MCA, Software Acquisition, Defense Business Systems, and Acquisition of Services. These frameworks

prioritize structured oversight, life cycle cost control, and deliberate planning, typically aligned with Service-driven PPBE processes. USSOCOM, by contrast, operates under MFP-11, which enables responsive and autonomous acquisition focused on SOF-specific needs. Although highly agile, this model often circumvents formal mechanisms required for transition, sustainment, and integration with Service-led governance structures.

For analytical clarity, UCA and MTA serve as the most suitable comparators to USSOCOM's approach. Both are designed to compress timelines, streamline decision-making, and deliver relevant capabilities with minimal procedural friction. The visual overview in Figure 15 illustrates how each AAF pathway balances oversight, risk, and speed, offering a valuable baseline for assessing USSOCOM's divergence. A comparison across core dimensions—acquisition velocity, oversight thresholds, sustainment planning, funding alignment, transition pathways, JCIDS compliance, and cultural flexibility—reveals areas of structural friction as well as opportunities for targeted reform.

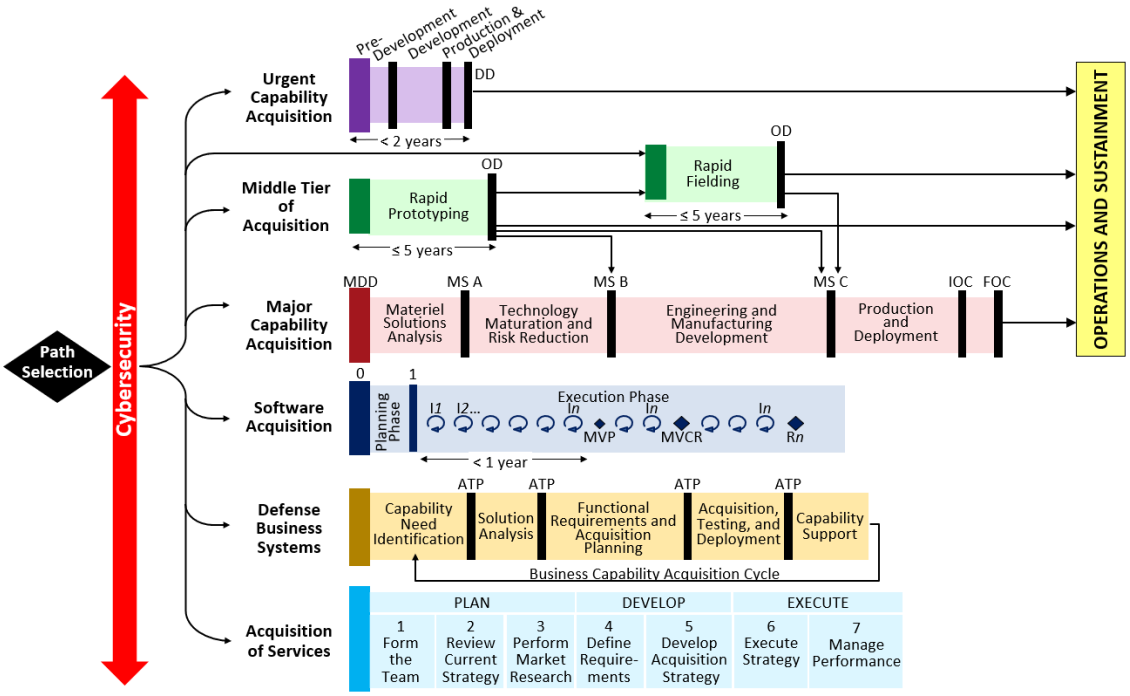


Figure 15. AAF Pathways. S*ource: DAU (2020).*

Upcoming subsections provide a detailed comparison between USSOCOM's model and the UCA and MTA pathways. Instead of examining them in isolation, the analysis focuses on where these frameworks intersect, conflict, or complement each other across real acquisition variables. Emphasis is placed on how deliberate alignment could reduce friction, enhance joint readiness, and lay the groundwork for more integrated governance in the future.

1. UCA vs. USSOCOM

Designed for speed, UCA provides essential warfighter solutions in under two years. As one of AAF's quickest pathways, it facilitates rapid fielding by validating Joint Urgent Operational Needs (JUONs) and Joint Emerging Operational Needs (JEONs), often utilizing COTS technologies to reduce development timelines. Its impact was most apparent during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), where acquisition velocity frequently influenced operational outcomes.

USSOCOM operates with comparable agility under MFP-11, executing acquisitions that bypass traditional milestone reviews and directly address SOF component needs. Despite these similarities, one structural distinction is clear: UCA maintains a connection to JCIDS, whereas USSOCOM remains entirely independent of it. This autonomy provides speed but limits integration with Service-wide capability development efforts. The process overview illustrated in Figure 16 highlights how UCA still retains touchpoints with established oversight structures, facilitating broader alignment across the acquisition enterprise—an advantage often lacking in USSOCOM's framework.

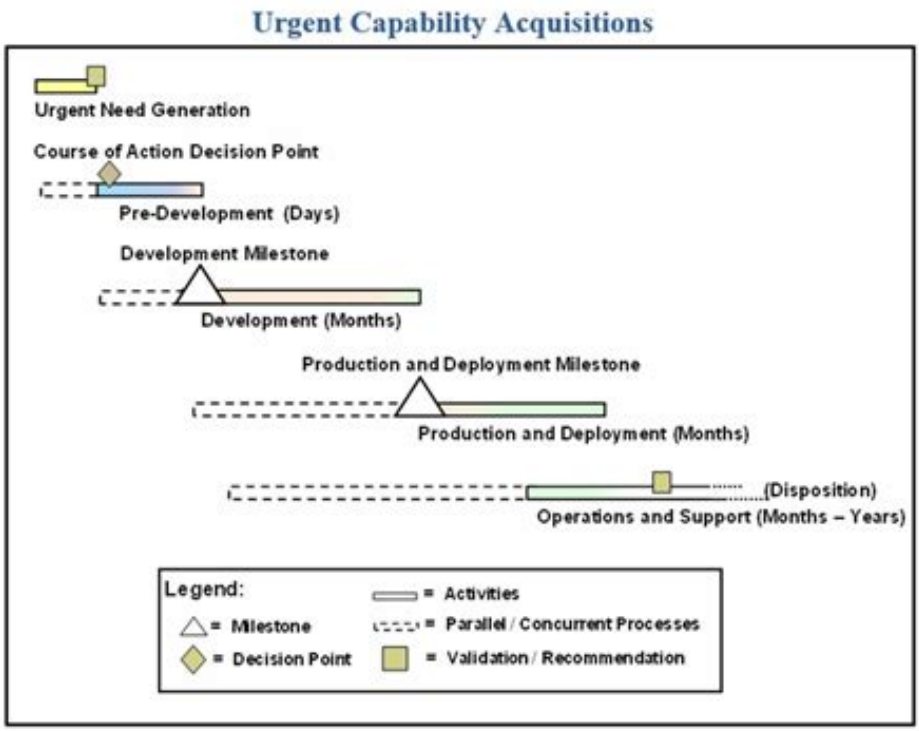


Figure 16. UCA Process Flow Overview. Source: DAU (2020).

Differences in funding models further complicate the transition. Projects that follow a UCA pathway typically begin with OCO funding and may transition to support programs funded through PPBE, which enables predictable long-term sustainability. In contrast, USSOCOM often carries the entire burden of life cycle support through MFP-11, even when conventional forces adopt new capabilities. The RQ-11B Raven serves as a prime example. Initially deployed rapidly through Special Operations Forces (SOF) channels, it achieved widespread use but encountered incomplete sustainment infrastructure, including missing technical manuals, limited spare parts, and inadequate integration with MARCORLOGCOM and MALS (Van Bourgondien, 2015, pp. 45–48). These challenges arose during the TMRR and EMD phases, where USSOCOM's process lacked the transition planning typically integrated into UCA. Despite its joint applicability, Raven continued to be a USSOCOM-funded system, emphasizing the consequences of fielding without a formal handoff strategy.

Oversight frameworks also vary. UCA falls under NDAA reporting and maintains visibility through Service PEO channels. USSOCOM's internal acquisitions are more agile but lack consistent external oversight unless flagged for review. Duncan (2012) notes that SOF capabilities are sometimes undervalued, not due to poor performance, but because they fall outside familiar governance systems.

Cultural factors present both overlap and contrast. Operational relevance, speed, and end-user input drive both models. However, UCA benefits from its integration into Service funding and validation structures, enabling greater scalability. USSOCOM, while highly responsive, often operates in isolation; its innovations are vulnerable to redundancy or neglect once the initial need diminishes. The absence of structured transition mechanisms places promising SOF-developed systems at risk of obsolescence or duplication.

Sustainability, rather than speed, defines UCA's comparative advantage. While USSOCOM excels in immediacy, it lacks the institutional tools required to transfer ownership when capabilities exceed SOF requirements. This imbalance limits the full potential of joint capability integration. The following section examines whether MTA provides a more effective balance between agility and governance.

2. MTA vs. USSOCOM

By design, MTA provides a faster alternative to milestone-intensive acquisition, enabling capabilities to move from concept to fielding in under five years (DoD, 2020d). It balances USSOCOM's agility with the structure necessary for Service-wide integration. Through early planning, regular reviews, and a life cycle focus, MTA aids in closing the "valley of death" between prototyping and sustainment. One of the most illustrative examples of this model is the TITAN program, which has set a standard for accelerated Service-led development.

TITAN, illustrated in Figure 17, integrates multi-domain sensor feeds into a mobile ISR node mounted on a standardized Army vehicle. The platform exemplifies how MTA leverages commercial technologies and open architecture while maintaining oversight through formal acquisition channels (PEO IEW&S, 2025). TITAN's progress

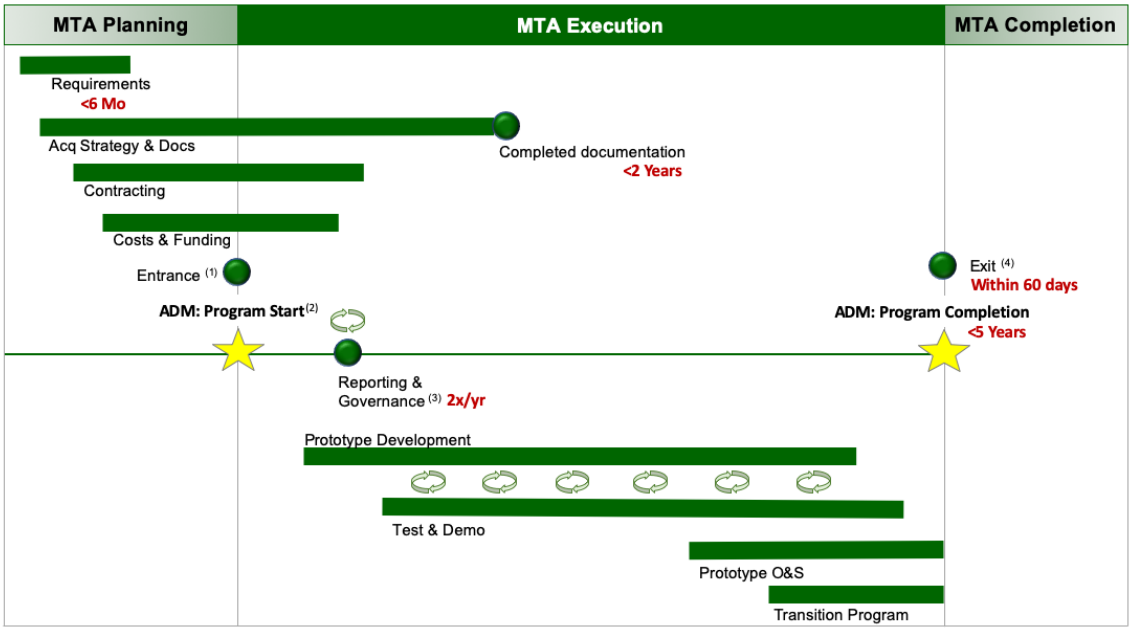
demonstrates that speed and scale are not mutually exclusive when structure supports rapid development. While the program reflects the Service's ability to deliver operationally relevant capabilities through MTA, it also reveals a persistent limitation: MTA lacks a framework for formally absorbing externally developed systems, particularly those originating under USSOCOM's MFP-11 authorities. The absence of this transition mechanism reinforces the broader systemic divide and highlights why SOF innovations, even when validated in combat, often fail to scale across the Joint Force.



Figure 17. TITAN in Production. Source: PEO IEW&S (2025).

Service-led rapid development, as exemplified by the TITAN program, under the MTA demonstrates that the Army can deliver complex and mission-relevant capabilities when structured pathways are in place. As shown in Figure 17, this model enables accelerated development without compromising operational effectiveness. However, despite MTA's strengths in speed and adaptability, it lacks a formal mechanism to absorb externally developed systems, particularly those initiated under USSOCOM's MFP-11 authorities. The result is a persistent institutional gap: even when SOF-originated capabilities are validated in combat, the absence of a standardized transition framework continues to hinder formal Service adoption (DoD, 2020c; GAO, 2021a).

Built into the MTA life cycle are sustainment planning, cost assessment, and oversight checkpoints from the outset; features notably absent from USSOCOM's internal acquisition processes. As shown in Figure 18, entry criteria, decision memorandums, and mandatory reporting cycles are codified under DoDI 5000.02 and DoDI 5000.80, reinforcing formal integration planning throughout the acquisition timeline (DoD, 2020c; 2020d). These procedural guardrails sharply contrast with USSOCOM's more flexible but less scalable approach. While both models emphasize early fielding and operational responsiveness, only MTA incorporates statutory governance mechanisms that facilitate Service adoption. In the absence of comparable transition milestones or life cycle ownership frameworks, SOF-originated systems, regardless of battlefield validation, frequently stall when broader institutional integration is necessary (Van Bourgondien, 2015; GAO, 2023b).



(1) *Major Systems*: Acquisition Decision Memorandum(ADM) signed by the Decision Authority (DA), Acquisition Strategy (which includes [1] Security, Schedule & Production Risks; [2] Test Strategy/Results; and [3] Transition Plan), and Program Identification Data (PID)
Non-Major Systems: ADM signed by the DA, PID
(2) Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs) require Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition & Sustainment (USD(A&S)) Prior Written Approval
(3) Updated PID submitted twice a year with President's Budget and Program Objective Memorandum submissions to Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD)
(4) Signed Outcome ADM, Final PID, Assessment of Test Results

Figure 18. Rapid Prototyping Life Cycle. Source: DAU (2024).

Aligned with USSOCOM's emphasis on speed and early operational testing, the MTA rapid prototyping life cycle, illustrated in Figure 18, offers a streamlined development model. However, it lacks a formal sustainment handoff mechanism, contributing to the frequent stalling of SOF-originated systems at the edge of broader adoption. The absence of a structured transition node or adjudication milestone remains a critical barrier to full integration across the Services.

Sustainment planning further distinguishes the models. TITAN's development included dedicated budget lines and long-term logistics coordination. In contrast, USSOCOM's fielding of the Raven, as discussed in the Program Background section, encountered significant sustainment gaps when transitioning to conventional forces, resulting in unsupported upgrades and delayed technical documentation (Van Bourgondien, 2015, pp. 45–48). MTA is designed to prevent such issues by incorporating a transition strategy into the early phases of prototyping and fielding.

As shown in Figure 19, MTA's production and deployment life cycle includes formal integration points with stakeholder coordination and acquisition documentation. This structure contrasts sharply with USSOCOM's agile-but-isolated execution model, where the lack of external validation can hinder scaling, even when operational value is proven (Duncan, 2012).

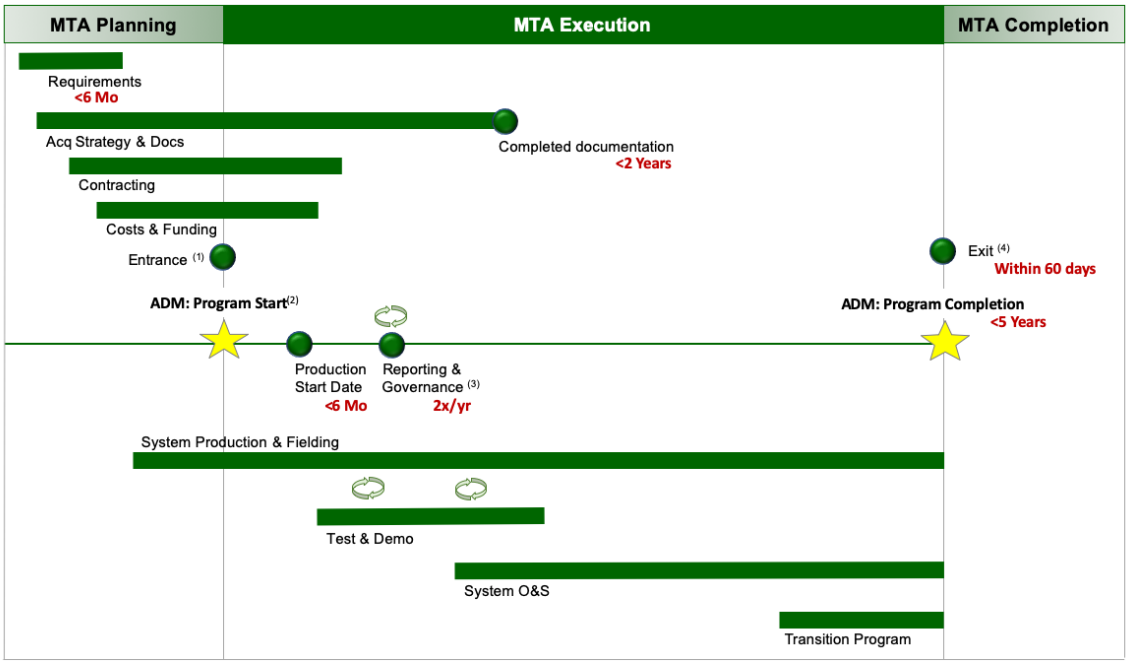


Figure 19. Rapid Fielding Life Cycle. Source: DAU (2024).

Despite MTA's structured approach to rapid fielding, the life cycle model lacks critical provisions for downstream sustainment ownership and cross-component coordination. That omission underscores a recurring challenge highlighted in this thesis: USSOCOM-developed capabilities, even when operationally validated, have no formal pathway to transition into enduring Service portfolios. Without an embedded mechanism to guide these transitions, SOF innovations often remain siloed, hindering broader adoption and reducing their long-term strategic value to the Joint Force.

Autonomy remains a central advantage of USSOCOM's MFP-11 authority. Programs can progress without JCIDS validation or PPBE synchronization. In contrast, MTA provides institutional accountability through purposeful planning and integrated funding alignment. DoDI 5000.02 requires life cycle assessments and cost maturity, giving MTA a scalable framework for converting prototypes into sustainable programs (DoD, 2020c). Although MTA closely follows USSOCOM's pace in many ways, it lacks

enforceable mechanisms to transfer sustainment responsibilities once a capability is deemed viable. Without binding transition gates, SOF-originated systems frequently stall at the brink of adoption, unable to transition into Service portfolios. While the MTA pathway provides speed like MFP-11, it still lacks enforceable sustainment transfer mechanisms, especially when transitioning a capability beyond the initial prototyping phase. The absence of binding transition gates creates a dead end for USSOCOM capabilities that are needed to scale across the Services.

MTA is not intended to replace MCA for enterprise-scale systems with extensive validation needs. However, it provides a flexible path for capabilities that require speed, adaptability, and joint applicability. TITAN emphasizes that rapid acquisition is attainable when oversight and agility are integrated rather than opposed. In contrast, USSOCOM's approach, while operationally responsive, remains susceptible to isolation if a formal pathway for transition and alignment is not established. The following section assesses whether MCA's structural depth fosters long-term readiness or institutionalizes delay and complexity at the expense of innovation.

3. MCA vs. USSOCOM

Among the acquisition pathways in the AAF, none is more rigid or milestone-intensive than the Major Capability Acquisition (MCA) model. Designed to support large-scale, high-cost programs, MCA emphasizes careful planning, multi-phase oversight, and well-coordinated documentation reviews governed by JCIDS and PPBE (DoD, 2020b; CJCS, 2021). Each step—from Materiel Solution Analysis to Production and Deployment—must pass formal milestone gates while integrating strategies for contracting, cost estimation, and risk mitigation. Although this structure reflects a systemic preference for control and predictability, it also creates inertia that slows fielding and limits innovation (GAO, 2023b). The structure of MCA, rooted in milestone decision points and documentation-heavy phases, stands in stark contrast to USSOCOM's agile acquisition approach. This misalignment often results in early-stage SOF innovations stalling when forced into MCA timelines, particularly if programs must rebase their line under JCIDS or PPBE rules (Duncan, 2012).

MCA's governance model reinforces accountability through milestone reviews labeled A, B, and C. These gates require detailed acquisition strategies, formal cost assessments, and sequential approval processes. The process illustrated in Figure 20 demonstrates how cost analysis, test events, and risk validation are embedded throughout the life cycle, highlighting the structured level that defines MCA oversight (DAU, 2023). While these mechanisms ensure rigor, they also illustrate why USSOCOM-developed capabilities, which typically lack JCIDS validation and traditional baselines, struggle to integrate into MCA pipelines (GAO, 2021a). Without early alignment planning or formal policy waivers, MFP-11-funded initiatives rarely transition into this structured framework.

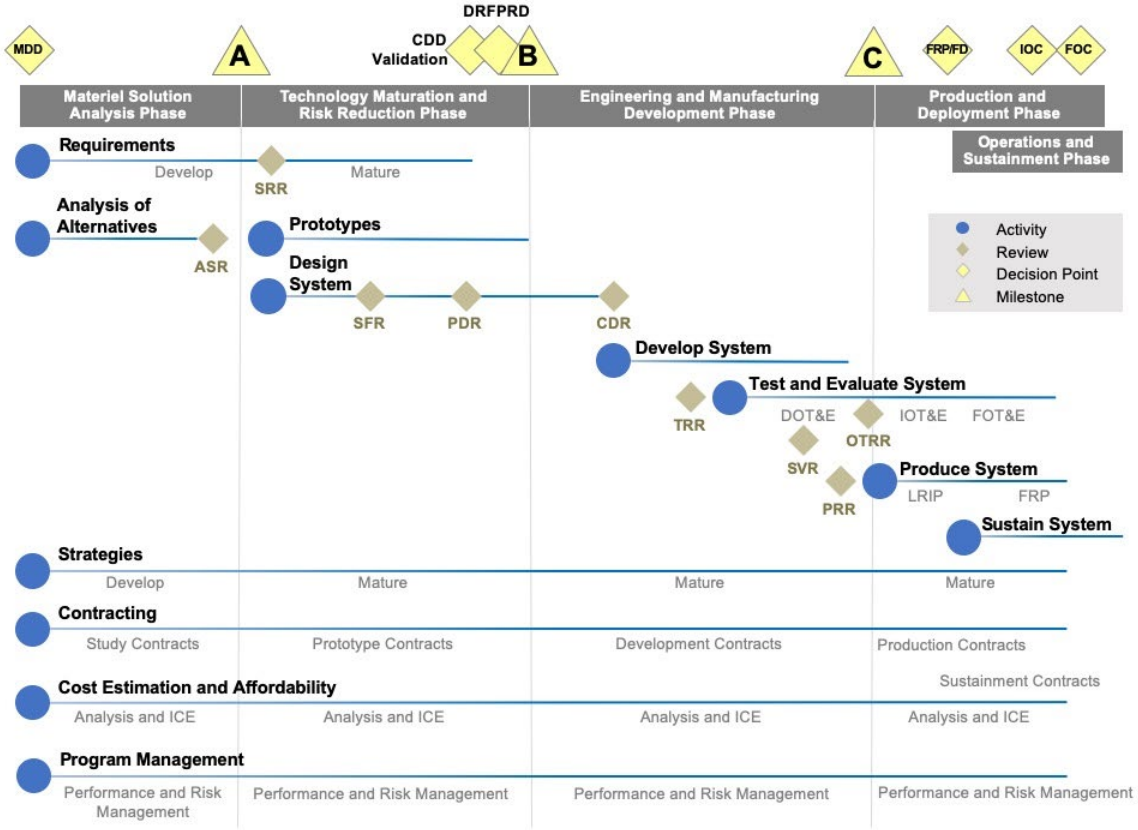


Figure 20. MCA Process Under AAF. Source: DAU (2023)

In contrast, USSOCOM's MFP-11-funded model bypasses many of the institutional gates imposed by the MCA process. Acquisition timelines are compressed through internal validation, operationally defined requirements, and flexible resourcing tailored to mission tempo. While this allows USSOCOM to deliver capabilities rapidly, it lacks the milestone structure and external accountability embedded in MCA. The detailed flow of reviews and activities shown in Figure 20 underscores this contrast; every MCA phase includes synchronized planning for sustainment, test events, and contracting milestones that drive integration across stakeholders (DAU, 2023). By comparison, USSOCOM can proceed without JROC validation, AoAs, or formal entry documentation, enabling speed but complicating downstream adoption. This divergence in governance affects not only program pace but also life cycle ownership, integration potential, and sustainment viability.

Operational comparisons emphasize this distinction. The MC-130J Commando II and KC-130J Super Hercules offer a compelling side-by-side illustration of these acquisition paradigms. Acquired under USSOCOM authority, the MC-130J attained initial operational capability within five years, integrating mission-specific enhancements such as terrain-following radar, advanced defensive suites, and refueling systems (USSOCOM, 2023a). In contrast, the KC-130J, developed under the MCA model, took over a decade to navigate the JCIDS and PPBE processes before reaching similar fielding milestones (GAO, 2021b). Despite sharing the same airframe, the differing timelines highlight the agility gap and systemic friction between the two approaches.

Governance structures amplify this divide. MCA programs require milestone certification, Selected Acquisition Reports (SARs), and multi-year budget allocations tied to Service POM cycles (DoD, 2020b). In contrast, USSOCOM avoids many of these requirements and relies instead on rapid internal approvals and flexible funding within MFP-11. However, this autonomy comes at a cost: there is no codified process for transitioning sustainment responsibilities to the Services, even when capabilities are widely adopted by conventional forces (Van Bourgondien, 2015). As a result, life cycle costs often remain isolated within USSOCOM's budget, creating inefficiencies.

Funding frameworks reinforce this separation. MCA programs benefit from stable funding through congressional appropriations included in POM cycles, but this stability limits agility (GAO, 2020b). USSOCOM's MFP-11 allows for dynamic reallocation and immediate funding adjustments, but it lacks a formal mechanism for transferring financial responsibility once capabilities scale. The MC-130J continues to illustrate this challenge—despite its interoperability with Air Force logistics and training ecosystems, USSOCOM retains responsibility for its sustainment due to the absence of a structured funding handoff (USSOCOM, 2025).

Contracting mechanisms further differentiate these models. MCA typically relies on the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), which involve layered reviews, milestone-aligned documentation, and extensive cost justifications (Deltek, 2025). Although some MCA programs can employ non-FAR-based agreements, this remains uncommon and requires special authorization. By contrast, USSOCOM operates under the Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (SOF AT&L) Acquisition Regulation Supplement (SOFARS), which explicitly encourages the use of non-FAR-based contracts to support tailored acquisition strategies (USSOCOM, 2023b). SOFARS enables faster contract awards, direct vendor negotiations, and streamlined procurement cycles aligned with SOF mission tempo. While FAR-based oversight reduces legal exposure and ensures process consistency, it often slows responsiveness and discourages risk-taking. Conversely, SOFARS promotes agility but limits transparency and replicability across Service programs, particularly when attempting to scale or transition capabilities outside USSOCOM (Duncan, 2012).

Ultimately, this comparison reveals that the divide between USSOCOM and MCA is not just procedural but also institutional. While MCA provides predictability and standardized oversight, it often causes delays in delivering urgently needed capabilities. USSOCOM's speed and flexibility, although effective in the short term, lack mechanisms for long-term integration. Bridging these gaps will require more than informal agreements; it will demand formal adjudication frameworks, shared life cycle ownership policies, and a willingness to incorporate non-traditional acquisition strategies into the broader DoD

enterprise. Without such reforms, even highly successful SOF innovations will remain isolated, and the Services will continue to be held back by bureaucratic inertia.

C. PROCESS AND OVERSIGHT GAPS

Beyond structural barriers, acquisition friction between USSOCOM and the Services is heightened by differing contracting frameworks, oversight structures, and regulatory compliance processes. Each organization functions under fundamentally distinct interpretations of risk, flexibility, and accountability, influenced by the policies that govern how capabilities are acquired, tested, and fielded.

Service-aligned acquisition primarily adheres to the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), which are frameworks designed to promote transparency, legal compliance, and accountability across major acquisition programs. These policies require comprehensive cost analyses, source selection procedures, and milestone documentation that often span multiple fiscal years. However, the DoD Contracting Cone clarifies that Services are not restricted to FAR-based contracts alone. Rather, they can access a full spectrum of FAR and non-FAR agreements tailored to program urgency, risk posture, and operational need (Defense Pricing & Contracting, 2020). In contrast, USSOCOM operates under the Special Operations Forces Acquisition Regulation Supplement (SOFARS), which streamlines internal procedures, empowers program offices to engage directly with vendors, and supports faster award cycles (USSOCOM, 2023b). While FAR/DFARS promote consistency and legal defensibility, they can impose constraints ill-suited for the fast-paced, rapidly evolving missions often undertaken by SOF.

Oversight structures further exacerbate this divide. The Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD(A&S)) typically monitors major defense acquisition programs (MDAPs) within the Services for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD(A&S)), the Director of Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E), and, in some instances, congressional committees through Selected Acquisition Reports (SARs) and NDAA-mandated briefings (Rhea, 2023). USSOCOM, by contrast, primarily reports through internal chains of command, with occasional oversight from the Assistant

Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)). While this framework promotes speed and responsiveness, it lacks cross-Service visibility and institutional accountability mechanisms that enhance commonality, resource optimization, and long-term sustainment. In the absence of mandatory review points under DFARS or JCIDS, SOF-developed programs often overlook early integration planning and Service alignment.

Contracting flexibility plays a critical role in determining whether a capability can transition beyond its original sponsor. USSOCOM leverages authorities such as Other Transaction Agreements (OTAs) and rapid prototyping contracts under SOFARS to accelerate development cycles and engage nontraditional vendors. However, these efforts frequently occur outside the traditional acquisition life cycle, lacking Acquisition Category (ACAT) classification. This absence complicates the transition of programs to Service sustainment pipelines. In contrast, Service-managed Major Capability Acquisition (MCA) programs follow structured pathways anchored in FAR-based contracting, milestone decision gates, and extensive documentation reviews. UCA and MTA serve as hybrid models, offering some of USSOCOM's agility while retaining elements of structured oversight, but they still encounter institutional resistance when scalability, test rigor, or inter-Service interoperability is insufficient. Table 4 provides a comparative summary of these attributes across the USSOCOM, UCA, MTA, and MCA models.

Table 4. Comparison of Acquisition and Contracting Attributes Across Pathways. Adapted from DAU (2020, 2023), Defense Pricing and Contracting (2020), and USSOCOM (2023b).

Attribute	USSOCOM	UCA	MTA	MCA
Contracting Type	FAR & non-FAR (SOFARS, OTA)	FAR & non-FAR	FAR & non-FAR	Primarily FAR
ACAT Classification	Generally not ACAT unless joint	Not typically ACAT	Can be ACAT II/III if scaled	ACAT I–III based on scope/cost
JROC Involvement	Internal validation (SOF-specific)	May be waived	Not required unless designated	Typically required (ACAT I–II)
T&E Oversight	SOF-specific testing	Minimal/ streamlined	Streamlined DT/limited OT	Formal DT/OT with DOT&E oversight
Transition Risk	High (limited Service adoption)	Moderate	Moderate	Low (structured for transition)

Note: Included to summarize key differences in acquisition and oversight between USSOCOM, UCA, MTA, and MCA. Supports text claims and improves clarity through quick visual comparison.

Moreover, the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) system further entrenches these differences. USSOCOM utilizes the MFP-11 to swiftly reallocate funds and initiate acquisitions without adhering to multi-year programming cycles. Conversely, the Services operate under the traditional PPBE process, which introduces delays of up to five years between capability validation and initial obligation (DAU, 2025). While UCA provides a limited means of bypassing PPBE in urgent cases, these authorities are narrow in scope and inconsistently applied. This budgetary mismatch often leads to a disconnect between SOF-driven innovation and Service sustainment planning. Even when SOF programs demonstrate proven effectiveness, the lack of synchronized planning across acquisition, funding, and sustainment phases hinders their ability to scale or persist within the broader force.

Without mechanisms to resolve these differences, the acquisition enterprise remains fragmented. Policies intended to enforce discipline have unintentionally created rigidities that hinder adaptability. Meanwhile, the speed that makes SOF acquisition effective often prevents those systems from being scaled, shared, or sustained across the

Joint Force; this disconnect between governance and utility results in inefficiencies that burden both ends of the acquisition spectrum.

1. Requirements Generation: JCIDS vs. SOF Internal Validation

Among the most critical and often misaligned components of the DoD acquisition enterprise is the requirements generation phase. The Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS), as defined in CJCSI 5123.01I, provides a formalized process for identifying, validating, and prioritizing capability gaps across the Joint Force (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). JCIDS includes three requirement lanes: Urgent, Emergent, and Deliberate, each aligned with a corresponding acquisition pathway. Urgent supports UCA, emergent supports the MTA, and deliberate aligns with MCA (DAU, 2022). While the Deliberate Lane enables long-term strategic oversight, it has faced criticism for its bureaucratic complexity and extended timelines (GAO, 2022a). In contrast, the Urgent and Emergent lanes aim to expedite capability delivery for time-sensitive needs (DAU, 2022).

Despite these flexible options, the JCIDS framework is rooted in consensus-building and long-term integration into the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP), which can still cause delays, particularly during cross-Service adoption (GAO, 2022a). In contrast, USSOCOM follows a distinct requirements process. Rather than relying on JCIDS, USSOCOM employs internal validation mechanisms informed by direct operational feedback, allowing component commands to generate and refine requirements swiftly (Matthews, 2004). These are reviewed and approved by the USSOCOM Acquisition Executive following SOCOM Directive 70–1 (U.S. Army, 2018). While this decentralized model enhances speed and responsiveness, it often results in capabilities that lack JCIDS traceability, complicating efforts to transition them into Service-level sustainment or funding portfolios (DAU, n.d.-b).

This divergence has measurable operational consequences. Capabilities such as small, unmanned aircraft systems (SUAS), specialized intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) tools, or SOF mobility kits may offer joint utility but often remain isolated due to incompatible validation structures. Exclusion from cybersecurity pipelines,

architectural standards, and formal integration channels reduces their interoperability and delays widespread adoption (GAO, 2008).

These procedural differences reflect a deeper philosophical divide. JCIDS was designed to ensure strategic efficiency, enterprise-wide integration, and disciplined documentation (DAU, 2022). In contrast, USSOCOM emphasizes operational relevance and speed over process (U.S. Army, 2018). This cultural contrast complicates the path to integration.

Bridging these frameworks requires more than just policy adjustments; it demands a cultural shift in acquisition practices. Institutionalizing shared validation criteria, standardizing documentation formats, and establishing coordination mechanisms between USSOCOM and the Services can help ensure that tactically relevant SOF capabilities are preserved during transitions. Without reform, many of USSOCOM's most effective innovations risk remaining stovepiped, underleveraged, and disconnected from broader Joint Force operations (Matthews, 2004; GAO, 2008).

2. Funding & Budget Alignment: PPBE vs. MFP-11

PPBE governs how the Services allocate resources across multi-year planning cycles. It provides predictability, enabling long-term investment strategies, but it significantly limits agility. Shifting resources within this framework requires internal resourcing boards and congressional committees, often taking two to three years to complete a single adjustment (GAO, 2020b; DAU, 2025). A 2023 GAO study found that 67% of acquisition programs were unable to quickly adjust funding timelines in response to emerging threats, highlighting the inflexibility of the current system (GAO, 2023b).

Unlike the rigid multi-year planning constraints of PPBE, USSOCOM's MFP-11 funding model is designed for speed and flexibility. Authorized under the Nunn-Cohen Amendment, it allows USSOCOM to swiftly execute programs in the year of execution without being tied to the traditional Service Program of Record (POM) or congressional resourcing cycles (Duncan, 2012; USSOCOM, 2023b). This operational autonomy enables USSOCOM to align acquisition funding directly with mission feedback, facilitating real-time investment in emerging technologies and SOF-peculiar systems.

However, this budgetary flexibility creates notable friction when capabilities are developed under MFP-11 but are later expected to transition into Service portfolios. The RQ-11B Raven SUAS exemplifies this disconnect. Initially deployed by USSOCOM to address immediate reconnaissance needs, the Raven eventually proved useful across general-purpose forces. However, 43% of deployed units lacked complete sustainment packages, including technical manuals, parts support, and backend logistics, due to the lack of a formal transition mechanism (Van Bourgondien, 2015, pp. 45–48). Marine Corps sustainment entities such as MARCORLOGCOM and MALS were never included in the sustainment planning process, leaving USSOCOM financially responsible for a capability it no longer operated independently.

Such cases are not isolated anomalies. GAO (2021a) reported that the DoD lacks consistent procedures for transferring sustainment ownership between organizations. Consequently, USSOCOM often retains funding responsibility even after the Services assume operational control. These disconnects persist because PPBE lacks the mechanisms and incentives needed to support the integration of externally developed capabilities.

More critically, the structure of PPBE actively discourages the Services from adopting SOF-developed systems. Mid-cycle realignments to fund external programs can trigger congressional scrutiny, reprogramming hurdles, and broader budget instability. Jacobsen and Meador (2022) found that the Services overwhelmingly prefer to initiate new programs under their control rather than absorb legacy systems, regardless of whether those systems are already validated in combat.

Statistically, the problem is systemic. Tkach (2017) reports that 71% of USSOCOM-developed capabilities with joint utility fail to transition into Service portfolios. The leading causes are funding ambiguity, a lack of shared sustainability planning, and incompatible budget authorities. USSOCOM's speed is unmatched, but its fiscal isolation under MFP-11 hinders long-term sustainment unless formal adoption processes are established.

Unless the policy addresses the procedural gap between PPBE and MFP-11, duplication will remain unavoidable. Nearly identical programs will continue to be funded

and supported independently, inflating costs and complicating field logistics. While USSOCOM delivers speed, it lacks a scalable sustainment infrastructure. In contrast, the Services offer scale but are hindered by procedural inertia. Breaking this deadlock will require more than informal coordination; it demands a reform framework that incentivizes co-investment, clarifies ownership, and aligns budget authority with operational needs.

According to the 2025 USSOCOM Fact Book, the Command's Acquisition Executive (AT&L) reports directly to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)), reinforcing USSOCOM's statutory autonomy over procurement and sustainment decisions (USSOCOM, 2025). While this reporting relationship facilitates faster internal decision-making, it also isolates USSOCOM from the oversight frameworks used by the Services and limits opportunities for coordination on cross-Service acquisition challenges. This governance model helps explain why SOF acquisitions remain agile, but also why transitions to Service sustainment portfolios are so rare.

3. Documentation and Transparency: FAR, DFARS, SOFARS

Documentation and regulatory compliance are vital to acquisition governance, yet they highlight a significant fault line between USSOCOM and the Services. Most Service-led programs are governed by the FAR and DFARS, which emphasize accountability, risk mitigation, and procedural standardization. These frameworks mandate layered reviews, detailed acquisition strategies, and extensive documentation to ensure proper stewardship of taxpayer funds (DAU, 2022). While these controls offer transparency and alleviate legal risk, they often obstruct flexibility, delay timelines, and limit responsiveness, particularly in time-sensitive or operationally fluid environments (GAO, 2023b).

USSOCOM operates under a distinct regulatory framework known as SOFARS. This tailored system allows contracting officers to simplify award procedures, negotiate directly with vendors, and expedite procurement cycles to meet urgent operational demands (USSOCOM, 2023a). Programs that could take years under FAR and DFARS can be implemented within months under SOFARS, often with direct feedback from deployed operators. However, the very flexibility that gives SOFARS its speed also limits

standardization. Jacobsen and Meador (2022) noted that SOF-specific contracting mechanisms rarely align with Service documentation formats, life cycle sustainment requirements, or cybersecurity standards, particularly when transitioning beyond SOF portfolios.

These misalignments become more problematic during capability transitions. Without shared documentation templates, life cycle support plans, or validated technical baselines, Service PEOs often reject SOF-generated documentation as noncompliant or insufficient for long-term sustainment (GAO, 2021a; Tkach, 2017). This results in redundant validation cycles, prolongs fielding, and introduces unnecessary costs and risks. Issues such as incomplete cyber accreditation, a lack of configuration control, or undocumented test parameters are not uncommon, especially when systems developed for SOF use are repurposed for general-purpose forces.

Fragmented oversight structures and incompatible documentation flows contribute directly to acquisition delays, duplicated efforts, and sustainment bottlenecks, as depicted in Figure 14. Instead of isolated friction points, these issues represent systemic breakdowns in how regulatory frameworks are interpreted and applied across the defense enterprise. Held et al. (2008) cautioned that even slight regulatory divergence, if unaddressed early in the acquisition life cycle, can lead to disproportionately large barriers to integration, further complicating joint sustainment and transition planning.

Ultimately, failures in documentation and transparency undermine the potential of integration. USSOCOM's speed advantage is negated when systems halt during revalidation or require significant rework to meet FAR-based expectations. In contrast, Services encounter delays in deploying ready-made solutions not due to technical shortcomings, but because their own compliance frameworks conflict with how those solutions were acquired. Addressing this gap will necessitate the creation of interoperable documentation standards, early agreement on sustainment ownership, and formalized adjudication procedures to manage SOF-to-Service acquisition transitions.

4. Static Trends Across Evolving Fact Books: A Missed Opportunity for Reform

While USSOCOM's Fact Books highlight evolving mission areas, from counterterrorism and hyper-enabled operations to digital transformation and ACAT-level execution, structural barriers to life cycle alignment and inter-Service adoption remain essentially unchanged (USSOCOM, 2020; USSOCOM, 2021; USSOCOM, 2022; USSOCOM, 2023a; USSOCOM, 2024; USSOCOM, 2025). A comparative review of the Fact Books from 2020 to 2025 reveals that, despite rhetorical shifts and changing operational priorities, the USSOCOM has not established a formal pathway for transitioning SOF-developed capabilities into Service-managed sustainment portfolios. This omission directly supports the broader argument of this thesis: USSOCOM remains financially and logistically responsible for capabilities even after conventional forces adopt them.

A six-year overview of USSOCOM budget trends and strategic focus areas, presented in Table 5, illustrates a notable evolution in mission priorities alongside ongoing gaps in sustainment planning. Although procurement and RDT&E allocations fluctuate annually to reflect shifting priorities, none of the Fact Books reference mechanisms for adjudicating life cycle transitions or formally integrating MFP-11-developed capabilities into MFP-2 portfolios (USSOCOM, 2020–2025).

Table 5. USSOCOM Fact Book Trends (FY20-25). Adapted from USSOCOM (2020–2025).

FY	Total Budget	Key Priorities	Notes of Transition Planning
20	$13.3B	Counter-VEO, Hyper-Enabled Ops	No formal mechanisms
21	$13.1B	AI/ML Integration, ISR	None Identified
22	$12.5B	Digital Transformation, Cyber Capabilities	Still absent
23	$11.6B	Next-gen ISR, Digital Engineering	Not addressed
24	$10.9B	Hybrid Threats, SOF Logistics	No change
25	$10.8B	ACAT-level Execution, Digital Focus	Still missing

Note: Data compiled from USSOCOM Fact Books (FY20–FY25). While strategic priorities have evolved annually, no formal transition pathways or sustainment ownership mechanisms were identified across any of the reviewed publications.

Throughout these cycles, USSOCOM's evolving priorities, from AI/ML integration to ISR modernization, illustrate a clear responsiveness to the operational environment. However, absent from every iteration is any mention of Service adoption protocols, ownership responsibilities, or codified transition mechanisms (USSOCOM, 2020; USSOCOM, 2021; USSOCOM, 2022; USSOCOM, 2023a; USSOCOM, 2024; USSOCOM, 2025). This repeated omission highlights a deeper institutional challenge: the persistent disconnect between SOF innovation and Joint Force sustainment integration. Despite strategic agility, the USSOCOM remains financially isolated, dependent on MFP-11 for the entire capability life cycle, even for systems that ultimately serve broader force needs.

This pattern reinforces the central claim of this thesis: until adjudication frameworks and ownership transfer mechanisms are formalized across MFP boundaries, the DoD will continue to encounter duplication, inefficiencies, and degraded readiness due to disjointed acquisition structures and fiscal compartmentalization.

D. LACK OF TRANSITION PATHWAYS AND ADJUDICATION MECHANISMS

Persistent breakdowns between SOF-peculiar capability development and broader Service adoption continue to obstruct the DoD's efforts to achieve scalable modernization. USSOCOM excels at delivering time-sensitive, high-impact technologies, yet those same innovations frequently falter when transitioning into Service-managed programs of record. Underlying these failures are not just administrative delays or bureaucratic inefficiencies, but systemic disparities in how different defense components conceptualize, validate, and institutionalize capability development (Matthews, 2004; GAO, 2023b).

The root causes of these disconnects are illustrated in Figure 21, which provides a structured visualization of barriers across four interdependent domains: structural, cultural, policy, and finance. Transition friction does not arise from a single failure point but from the cumulative impact of misaligned frameworks. SOF-developed capabilities, optimized for responsiveness and operational relevance, often struggle to gain traction within Service channels that are weighed down by formalized validation processes, long-range budget

planning, and traditional sustainment paradigms. When accountability, funding streams, and validation authorities are misaligned, even the most field-proven technologies risk exclusion from enterprise adoption (DAU, 2024; U.S. Army, 2018).

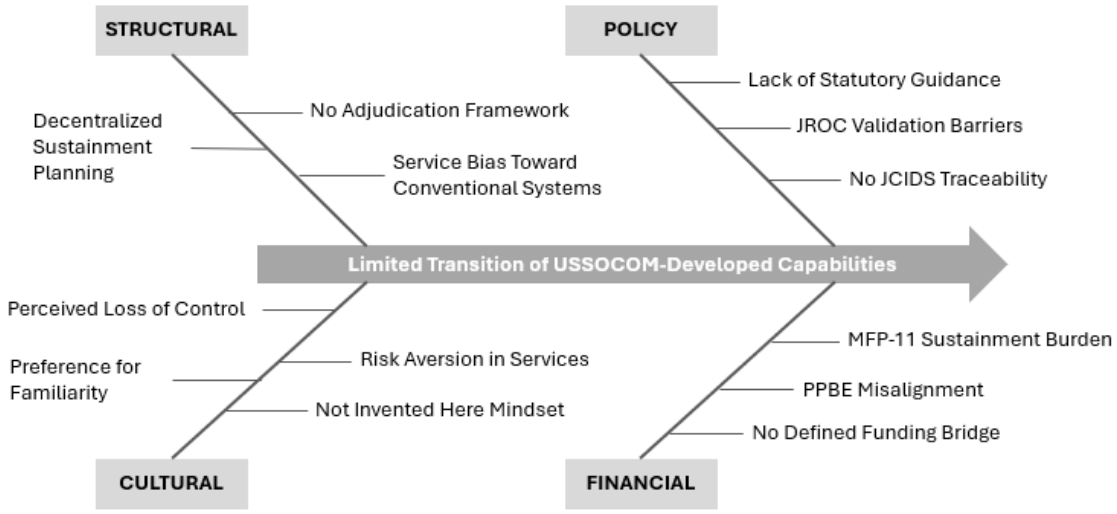


Figure 21. Root Causes of Limited Transition of USSOCOM-Developed Capabilities. Adapted from Ishikawa (1986), GAO (2008), Matthews (2004), and DAU (2024).

A deeper analysis of the domains outlined in Figure 21 reveals how fragmented authority and rigid adherence to legacy acquisition culture erode opportunities for shared capability development. Structural issues include the lack of dedicated adjudication mechanisms or enforceable transition policies between USSOCOM and the Services. Cultural resistance exacerbates these gaps, as each Service tends to prioritize organic development over externally sourced solutions. Policy conflicts, such as inconsistent application of JCIDS or disparities in oversight, hinder eligibility for Service portfolio inclusion. Finally, asynchronous financial planning between MFP-11 and POM cycles undermines sustainment integration, particularly when SOF programs lack visibility in long-term budget structures (GAO, 2008; DAU, 2024). Each of the next four subsections

explores these domains in detail, providing a comprehensive account of how and why effective transition remains so elusive.

1. Structural and Policy Barriers

Distinct funding authorities between USSOCOM and the Services create a fundamental divide in acquisition structures. Operating under MFP-11, USSOCOM benefits from flexible budgetary and acquisition authorities that enable rapid prototyping and fielding of SOF-peculiar capabilities. In contrast, the Services operate under MFP-2, adhering to traditional PPBE cycles that impose rigid sequencing and extensive lead times (GAO, 2020a). This mismatch in budget alignment introduces procedural friction when transitioning capabilities across enterprise boundaries (Drezner et al., 2019). Without formal transition mechanisms or adjudication policies, responsibilities for sustainment, cost sharing, and integration into the broader force structure remain unclear, often resulting in capability abandonment, redundancy, or delays (GAO, 2021b).

Evidence from the Defense Innovation Board (2023) further illustrates these systemic shortfalls. Only 16% of DoD Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) projects transition successfully to Phase III, underscoring how structural rigidity and fragmented decision authority impede full life cycle integration. This trend is mirrored in USSOCOM-developed solutions that, despite their operational effectiveness, often fail to meet the Services' formal requirements documentation, cost modeling, or technical review standards (Held et al., 2008). The absence of a common adjudication framework inhibits early coordination between USSOCOM and the Services, allowing capability gaps to persist even when validated alternatives exist. The 2023 GAO report on weapon systems sustainment highlights how the lack of joint planning early in the acquisition process directly contributes to life cycle cost overruns and readiness shortfalls (GAO, 2023b).

Unless institutionalized pathways for transition are embedded in acquisition governance, such as shared milestones, interoperable documentation standards, or cross-functional adjudication panels, SOF innovations will continue to encounter obstacles to Service-wide adoption. Structural divides in budget authority and acquisition policy are

not merely administrative challenges; they are systemic barriers to delivering adaptable, scalable capabilities to the Joint Force.

2. Cultural Resistance and Risk Aversion

Cultural resistance within the Services continues to hinder the adoption of USSOCOM-developed capabilities, adding to structural and procedural challenges that already limit cross-component integration. A persistent "not-invented-here" mindset encourages a preference for internally developed systems, even when SOF-derived alternatives demonstrate operational value. Risk-averse behaviors strengthen this bias, as acquisition officials fear accountability for adopting unfamiliar solutions, especially when those solutions fall outside established Service acquisition channels or deviate from standardized requirements processes (Held et al., 2008).

Resistance is not merely a result of bureaucratic inertia. In many cases, it arises from legitimate concerns over sustainment burden, configuration management, and risk ownership. Service program offices often hesitate to take responsibility for capabilities developed without their involvement, especially when life cycle documentation, technical baselines, or configuration control measures do not align with Service standards (GAO, 2015; Drezner et al., 2019). USSOCOM systems may also be perceived as overly tailored to niche mission sets or financially impractical when scaled across larger formations, which limits their broader adoption appeal (Duncan, 2012; GAO, 2022).

Although formal transition policy remains underdeveloped, there have been limited instances of capability cooperation. The MC-130J and MH-47G programs serve as models where Services provide platform sustainment while permitting SOF-specific enhancements. However, these arrangements are facilitated by informal agreements rather than codified mechanisms, making them challenging to replicate or scale (USSOCOM, 2023a). RAND researchers emphasize that cultural biases, when left unaddressed, undermine the diffusion of innovation across the DoD by reinforcing stovepipes, discouraging inter-Service learning, and weakening long-term modernization goals (Held et al., 2008; Drezner et al., 2019).

Until the DoD establishes shared ownership models, improves transparency among program offices, and promotes joint education on acquisition pathways, SOF innovations will continue to be underleveraged. Success on the battlefield alone is not enough to overcome cultural friction when adoption mechanisms are informal, unclear, or culturally misaligned.

3. Lack of Adjudication Mechanisms

Currently, the DoD lacks a centralized adjudication mechanism to resolve disputes or make binding decisions regarding the transition of capabilities from USSOCOM to the Services. This absence leads to promising capabilities in limbo, with neither USSOCOM nor the Services willing or authorized to assume responsibility for their sustainment and integration. The DAU notes that bridging the "valley of death" requires coordinated efforts and mechanisms to transition technologies from development to acquisition programs. Without such mechanisms, the DoD risks underutilizing innovative capabilities that could enhance operational effectiveness.

Historical assessments underscore the repercussions of lacking a formal adjudication mechanism. GAO evaluations of past SOF-developed systems, such as the RQ-11B Raven and specialized PGMs, highlight that without clear authority, even fielded and operationally successful capabilities struggle to gain traction within Service portfolios (GAO, 2015). Moreover, the Defense Innovation Board (DIB) (2023) emphasizes that the inability to establish binding transition decisions leads to duplicative development efforts, inefficiencies in sustainment, and misaligned funding across the enterprise. These issues are not isolated; instead, they reflect a systemic failure to synchronize innovative pathways with institutional structures. As Drezner et al. (2019) argue, the DoD's oversight and accountability frameworks remain insufficiently adapted to the pace of modern warfare, where agility must match structural clarity. Addressing this requires codified transition protocols and an empowered adjudicating body—one capable of aligning USSOCOM and Service interests to prevent capability stagnation and ensure warfighter needs are met in a timely, scalable manner.

4. Financial Implications

Failing to transition SOF-developed capabilities to the Services leads to costly duplication, fragmented sustainment planning, and lost opportunities for Joint Force integration. Instead of capitalizing on operationally proven SOF solutions, the Services often initiate redundant development programs to meet similar requirements. These duplications arise not only from a bureaucratic preference for organic solutions but also from incompatible requirements, processes, risk aversion, and misaligned funding. When transition mechanisms are informal or absent, Services are less likely to invest in sustaining SOF-derived technologies that do not fit within their acquisition life cycles or planning documents such as the FYDP (GAO, 2015; Drezner et al., 2019).

According to the DIB, only 16% of innovation projects—such as those funded under the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program—successfully transition to Phase III, underscoring persistent structural gaps in bridging the divide between development and operational deployment (DIB, 2023). This statistic reflects broader challenges within DoD acquisition, including the absence of formal transition planning, misaligned performance incentives, and inadequate coordination across sponsoring entities. Supporting this view, the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) highlights how entrenched institutional silos and uneven oversight mechanisms obstruct the path from successful prototyping to long-term sustainment and programmatic adoption (NDIA, 2021).

The consequences extend beyond fiscal waste. Redundant development cycles often delay fielding timelines for urgently needed technologies, degrade interoperability across the Services, and increase logistical burdens in the sustainment phase. These inefficiencies undermine the DoD's ability to maintain technological superiority, especially against near-peer competitors in contested domains (GAO, 2023). Moreover, they reflect a strategic failure to reward innovation through institutional adoption, effectively disincentivizing high-risk, high-reward development pathways and limiting the operational reach of SOF-led experimentation.

Only by institutionalizing early coordination frameworks and adjudication mechanisms can the Department prevent such waste, streamline joint capability development, and ensure promising technologies are neither abandoned nor duplicated across the force.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTEGRATION FRAMEWORKS

Bridging the gap between SOF-peculiar capabilities and Service adoption requires more than case-by-case fixes; it demands a structured integration framework. This framework must prioritize early coordination, formalize adjudication mechanisms, and embed life cycle sustainment planning from the outset (GAO, 2022; Mazzetti, 2020).

While USSOCOM's MFP-11-funded model allows for rapid acquisition tailored to operational needs, its strengths frequently conflict with Service requirements for cost maturity, milestone documentation, and JCIDS alignment (GAO, 2020; DoD, 2020). Even transitional pathways like MTA and UCA are inadequate without synchronized planning, leading to delayed adoption or abandonment of SOF capabilities (CNA, 2021).

To mitigate these friction points, the DoD should institutionalize Joint Force planning constructs and codify transition criteria across acquisition pathways. Shared governance models, pre-planned handoff authorities, and joint program baselines would facilitate a smoother transition from SOF to Service portfolios (DoD, 2022). Case studies such as the RQ-11B Raven and TITAN demonstrate how the absence of such mechanisms led to missed opportunities for joint modernization (Army Futures Command, 2021; Pellerin, 2013).

Aligning life cycle responsibilities must become a foundational element of innovation. Without structured integration, the Services risk duplicating efforts and not fully utilizing high-performing SOF capabilities. These recommendations create the necessary bridge to the concluding chapter, where broader implications and future research directions are examined.

V. CONCLUSION

Persistent friction between USSOCOM and the Services arises not from a lack of innovation, but from structural fragmentation—misaligned funding (MFP-11 vs. MFP-2), divergent process frameworks (JCIDS, PPBE, DoDI 5000-series), and the lack of formal transition mechanisms. This study examined disconnects in requirements generation, budgeting, acquisition execution, and sustainment planning, highlighting how these gaps hinder integration and delay the delivery of joint-capable solutions.

While AAF provides flexibility through UCA, MTA, and MCA pathways, these models remain isolated in execution. USSOCOM's speed-focused acquisition under MFP-11 lacks standardized handoff points to Service-led MCA programs. Without defined transition nodes, shared documentation, or joint sustainment ownership, SOF-developed capabilities often remain disconnected, regardless of battlefield utility.

Inconsistent oversight, limited adjudication, and mismatched expectations further exacerbate the divide. Unless the AAF incorporates formal integration triggers, joint governance, and scalable transition criteria, these acquisition pathways will continue to operate in parallel rather than in partnership. Below is a summary of key findings, an analysis of persistent structural and cultural barriers, and forward-looking recommendations to enable meaningful acquisition reform across the Joint Force.

A. RESOLVING THE DISCONNECT: FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS

Alignment between SOF-peculiar capabilities and Service acquisition systems continues to break down due to the lack of structural cohesion in the DoD's acquisition enterprise, which is necessary for seamless transitions. What starts as mission-focused innovation under USSOCOM often faces institutional resistance when broader fielding or sustainment is needed. Case studies show a consistent pattern: capabilities that prove operational value in SOF environments frequently stall during transitions because of fractured oversight, divergent funding authorities, and unclear life cycle ownership.

These are not abstract policy failures; they manifest as duplicative expenditures, delayed capability delivery, and underutilized technologies that could have advanced Joint

Force modernization. The following sections synthesize the key findings of this analysis, providing direct responses to the core research questions and identifying the institutional, cultural, and procedural barriers that continue to impede integration.

1. Disconnected Structures and Cultures Drive Systemic Fragmentation

Fragmented structures and deeply rooted cultural divides drive the behavior of the Defense Acquisition System as a whole. USSOCOM and the Services operate within separate acquisition paradigms, prioritizing rapid responsiveness to operational needs, while the other focuses on oversight, multi-year programming, and procedural accountability (Duncan, 2012; Jacobsen & Meador, 2022). Their systems are not just different in pace; they are built around fundamentally different incentives, authorities, and end states. This misalignment results in acquisition strategies that conflict before a capability reaches the field.

Division becomes costly when capabilities begin to scale. The RQ-11B Raven, for example, was initially fielded through USSOCOM's MFP-11 processes. Even after its utility was proven across conventional units, it struggled to transition smoothly because sustainment roles and funding responsibilities were never formally reassigned (Van Bourgondien, 2015, pp. 45–48). Programs like the MC-130J experienced similar handoff confusion. These are not outliers; they reflect a system that rewards autonomy and speed but fails to plan for broader ownership.

Institutional behaviors reflect structural incentives. Without shared process touchpoints, coordinated documentation standards, and aligned sustainment planning, integration remains dependent on individual efforts and unsustainable. Transparency and collaboration are not accidentally designed into the system. Until that occurs, joint acquisition success will remain the exception rather than the norm.

2. Legacy Policies Are Misaligned with the Modern Threat Environment

Policies like the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), DFARS, and DoD 5000 series reflect Cold War-era expectations: stable funding, predictable adversaries, and linear platform development (DAU, 2022; GAO, 2020a). The modern environment is anything

but stable. Strategic competitors innovate rapidly, technology cycles have compressed, and operational demands now shift faster than budget cycles can keep up.

Recent GAO assessments show that these legacy frameworks consistently lead to cost growth, delays in fielding, and mismatches in documentation (GAO, 2023b). Even with the implementation of the AAF, structural rigidity persists. For instance, PPBE's multi-year funding constraints hinder the reallocation of resources when priorities shift (GAO, 2021b). Services must validate requirements through JCIDS, even when mission feedback is received promptly (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021). These policies not only delay acquisition but also influence organizational structures and decision-making processes.

USSOCOM's SOFARS provides a way forward, offering speed and flexibility through targeted authorities (USSOCOM, 2023a). However, without interoperability between policy regimes, these advancements remain isolated. Legacy frameworks limit documentation compatibility, constrain budget lines, and disrupt life cycle planning. Until acquisition policies adapt to support co-ownership, shared execution, and agile budgeting, structural separation will continue to hinder innovation.

3. Scaling and Integration Breakdown

Scaling SOF-developed capabilities remains one of the most persistent and under-addressed challenges in defense acquisition. Even when these capabilities are validated in combat and address broader Joint Force needs, structural limitations frequently hinder successful transitions into Service portfolios. As noted in the analysis chapter, systems like the RQ-11B Raven and white phosphorus NVGs encountered barriers due to the rigidity of the PPBE cycle, inadequate life cycle sustainment planning, and a lack of standardized documentation across components (Van Bourgondien, 2015; GAO, 2015).

These issues were not due to technical shortcomings but to process incompatibility. USSOCOM's internal validation frequently excludes JCIDS traceability, making SOF-developed systems ineligible for formal integration into Service POMs or architecture alignment efforts (CJCS, 2021; DoD, 2020c). The lack of shared documentation templates and a formal adjudication mechanism leaves each Service to interpret requirements and

sustainment responsibilities independently, usually at the expense of efficiency and readiness (Held et al., 2008). For instance, despite widespread adoption, the Raven lacked coordinated sustainment support due to gaps in technical manuals, spare part provisioning, and cross-Service logistics planning (Van Bourgondien, 2015).

Without structured policies that enforce or incentivize transition planning, the DoD continues to depend on duplicated acquisition efforts, resulting in wasted funding and siloed capabilities (GAO, 2021a). Programs that could benefit the entire Joint Force remain isolated within USSOCOM portfolios long after their operational relevance has grown. The current system recognizes value but lacks the institutional tools to scale it. Integration must be more than doctrinal; it must be resourced, guided, and enforced by policy.

B. BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: PRACTICAL REFORMS FOR SCALABLE INTEGRATION

Addressing the systemic disconnect between USSOCOM and the Services requires more than identifying friction points; it demands intentional, structural reform. The fragmentation in requirements validation, funding streams, and sustainment planning is not incidental; it reflects deeply rooted divergences in how acquisition roles are defined, responsibilities assigned, and authority exercised throughout the enterprise. Without institutionalized mechanisms for shared governance and synchronized processes, integration will continue to be episodic and rely on informal agreements instead of consistent policy.

A viable reform path could involve establishing a Defense Acquisition Guidance (DAG)-level adjudication board or embedding a formal transition milestone within acquisition pathways, triggered when a SOF-peculiar capability demonstrates sufficient Joint applicability. These measures would ensure accountability and provide a predictable route for scaling innovations beyond their origin.

Such reforms address the fundamental questions driving this thesis. The ongoing inability to utilize complementary acquisition efforts across USSOCOM and the Services arises from a lack of codified handoff mechanisms, coordinated sustainment planning, and interoperable oversight structures. The subsequent two proposed solution areas build on

these insights, presenting actionable strategies to foster shared ownership and align acquisition behavior throughout all stages of the capability life cycle. In doing so, they create a pathway toward scalable and sustainable integration across the DoD.

C. FORMAL ADJUDICATION AND GOVERNANCE

Enduring disconnects between USSOCOM and the Services primarily arise from the lack of a formal adjudication body that can resolve life cycle ownership, funding responsibility, and transition timing. In the absence of policy-driven authority, decisions frequently default to informal negotiations, which can stall programs like the MC-130J despite their broader applicability (Duncan, 2012; GAO, 2015, 2021b).

Establishing a centralized adjudication mechanism, either by expanding JROC's remit or creating a new OSD entity under A&S, would provide structured validation for when SOF capabilities should transition to MFP-2 support. Codifying transition checkpoints within DoDI 5000.02 and 5000.80 ensures that life cycle roles, documentation standards, and funding triggers are addressed prior to a system achieving full operational use (DoD, 2020b; Loredo et al., 2014).

1. Institutionalizing Early Collaboration

Persistent transition delays reflect failures to align validation, budgeting, and sustainment during early development. USSOCOM's decentralized, feedback-driven process contrasts with the Services' centralized JCIDS and PPBE models, producing misaligned planning cycles (CJCS, 2021; GAO, 2023b).

Embedding a Service liaison into SOF-led programs from inception would help align cybersecurity, architecture, and cost documentation with Service requirements. Institutional reforms should also include DAU curriculum revisions and rotational billets that cultivate joint acquisition literacy (Held et al., 2008; DAU, 2024).

2. Sustainment and Transition Synchronization

Sustainment misalignment remains the most persistent and preventable barrier to the Service's adoption of SOF-developed capabilities. When programs under MFP-11

progress without synchronized life cycle planning, such as in areas like technical data development, depot-level maintenance arrangements, or POM-cycle budgeting, they reach transition gates structurally unprepared for MFP-2 assumption (GAO, 2021b; Drezner et al., 2019). This institutional disconnect often results in program stagnation, duplication, or abandonment (NDIA, 2021).

Mandating Joint Sustainment Planning Reviews before Milestone B would create a consistent forum to assess readiness and clarify life cycle responsibilities. These reviews should evaluate not only cost realism and configuration control but also cross-Service sustainment viability. Incorporating Product Support Manager Guidebook principles into DoDI 5000.02 would standardize expectations and provide an executable transition blueprint (DoD, 2020c; DAU, 2023).

Historical failures such as the RQ-11B Raven's fragmented adoption and the TITAN system's delayed scaling reveal a critical pattern: without policy-enforced synchronization, even validated systems remain siloed. Codified transition planning, reinforced by adjudication authority, enables the DoD to close the valley of death and scale innovation with fiscal and operational discipline (Van Bourgondien, 2015; Pellerin, 2013).

D. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this thesis focused on structural, procedural, and policy misalignments between USSOCOM and the Services, further research is necessary to fully map the organizational behaviors and legal limitations that constrain integration efforts. A deeper investigation into how transition authority can be incorporated within federal acquisition law, particularly under Title 10 of the U.S. Code, which governs the roles and responsibilities of the armed forces, would help clarify the boundaries of life cycle funding, program control, and cross-Service ownership. At the same time, Title 32, which governs National Guard forces under state control but supported by federal resources, introduces unique complexities in sustainment and capability adoption, especially when Guard units operate with SOF-equivalent systems or during domestic missions.

Furthermore, the U.S. Coast Guard, governed by Title 14 and typically operating under the Department of Homeland Security, plays a vital role in joint operations and

warrants further study regarding how its acquisition strategies align or misalign with DoD frameworks. Future research should explore how whole-of-government partners, including DHS, DOE, GSA, and others, might contribute to or influence acquisition integration, particularly in COTS procurement, emergency sustainment logistics, cybersecurity platforms, or shared technology development. Expanding the focus beyond traditional military actors will be crucial to fully comprehend how joint readiness is supported or undermined by gaps in interagency coordination.

Culture and institutional behavior continue to be underexplored. Future research should investigate how organizational identities, career progression systems, and risk cultures affect the willingness of program offices to co-develop, co-fund, or transition systems across component boundaries. Quantitative analyses comparing the life cycle sustainment burdens of SOF-originated capabilities utilized by the Services would offer clearer insight into inefficiencies and missed opportunities for cost-sharing.

Finally, more case study-driven work should be conducted to evaluate the success or failure of programs that attempted cross-component or cross-agency integration under non-traditional models (e.g., Army's RCCTO, AFWERX, Navy Tech Bridges, or Coast Guard's Maritime Domain Awareness initiatives). These examples can reveal best practices and structural weaknesses that reform efforts must anticipate. By continuing to examine these cross-domain and cross-jurisdictional gaps, future researchers can help guide the Department of Defense and its partners toward a sustainable acquisition system that is adaptive, interoperable, and joint by design.

Ultimately, the quicker we align governance, policy, and organizational behavior among all partners, not just within the DoD, the sooner we empower the warfighter to obtain the required capabilities: on time, integrated, and tailored for the challenges ahead.

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