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**From Policy to Practice: Drivers of  
Acquisition Reform**

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# From Policy to Practice: Drivers of Acquisition Reform

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## Abstract

The current geopolitical environment has intensified security concerns and increased pressure to deliver military capability rapidly. A persistent challenge has been the long timelines associated with defense acquisitions. In Norway, successive governments have sought to improve the effectiveness of defense acquisitions by promoting greater use of off the shelf solutions as the preferred acquisition strategy, rather than costly custom-developed solutions. Despite repeated policy signals, implementation remained limited for years. Recent evidence, however, indicates change, with a growing share of new acquisition projects adopting an off the shelf approach. This study examines what has driven this shift and what it can tell us about implementing acquisition policy more broadly. Drawing on policy implementation theory, we develop hypotheses about the conditions influencing the implementation of off the shelf policy. Empirically, we combine document analysis, previous research, and analysis of survey data. The findings align weakly with explanations based on changes in market conditions, governance structures, incentives, or policy communication. Instead, the observed change aligns more closely with shifts in the attitudes and perceptions of implementing actors. We argue that the policy has become more meaningful as its justification has shifted from a primary focus on cost efficiency toward enabling rapid build up of defense capability.

## Introduction

In an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical environment, the ability to rapidly procure, integrate, and adopt new defense materiel is critical. Yet, both Norwegian and international experience show that this remains difficult. Despite repeated reforms, acquisition processes are still lengthy and delays are widespread. Designing an effective defense acquisition system is challenging in a context where projects differ substantially and framework conditions continuously change. Ongoing adjustments to acquisition arrangements reflect the need for refinement but also illustrate how political directives do not always translate into practice. Ultimately, success depends not only on policy design, but on how policies are implemented.

For years, Norwegian authorities have promoted a policy of procuring more off-the-shelf solutions, arguing that this could accelerate defense acquisition and reduce costs. Implementation, however, progressed slowly. The Norwegian Armed Forces continued to rely heavily on costly custom-developed solutions, and acquisition projects remained long-running and often delayed.

Only in recent years has a measurable shift occurred. Norway is now buying more off-the-shelf solutions. Rather than assessing whether the current level of off-the-shelf procurement is the right one, we examine whether observed developments indicate a shift in acquisition decision-making in line with stated policy objectives. Drawing on policy implementation literature we analyze the actual implementation of the policy in the defense acquisition system over time, to understand the underlying conditions that shape implementation success. The goal is to generate knowledge that can support broader acquisition reform.



Although Norway is a small country with limited military capacity compared to major powers such as the United States, the findings have wider relevance. The study sheds light on general implementation challenges in complex acquisition systems faced by both large and small countries. The study may also contribute to the policy implementation literature by showing that implementation change can occur in the absence of structural reform, and by linking such change to shifts in how implementing actors perceive and justify the policy.

## Research questions

1. What conditions have shaped the implementation of the policy promoting increased use of off-the-shelf solutions within Norway's defense acquisition system?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the implementation of this policy for the design and execution of future reform initiatives?

## Background

A consistent finding in research on policy implementation is that achieving change is exceedingly difficult. It is particularly challenging to bring about change across multiple organizations or levels of government, a characteristic often seen in reform efforts within the defense sector (McLaughlin, 1987). In the Norwegian defense sector, the challenges associated with lengthy acquisition processes and delays have been highlighted for years (Prebensen & Voldhaug, 2026; Presterud & Øhrn, 2015; Riksrevisjonen, 2005, 2024). Several changes to both organizational structures and processes have been attempted, but the challenges remain unresolved. Similar difficulties are also reported in other countries. (GAO, 2024, 2025; House of Commons Defence Committee, 2023; National Audit Office, 2021).

In this study, we examine the implementation of a specific acquisition policy to identify the conditions that have shaped it. We use *policy implementation* to mean what occurs between “the establishment on the part of government to do something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action” (O’Toole, 2000). The policy examined is the Norwegian government’s policy to use off-the-shelf solutions as the preferred acquisition strategy in acquisition projects for the Norwegian Armed Forces. In the following section, we provide a brief background for the policy and its implementation.

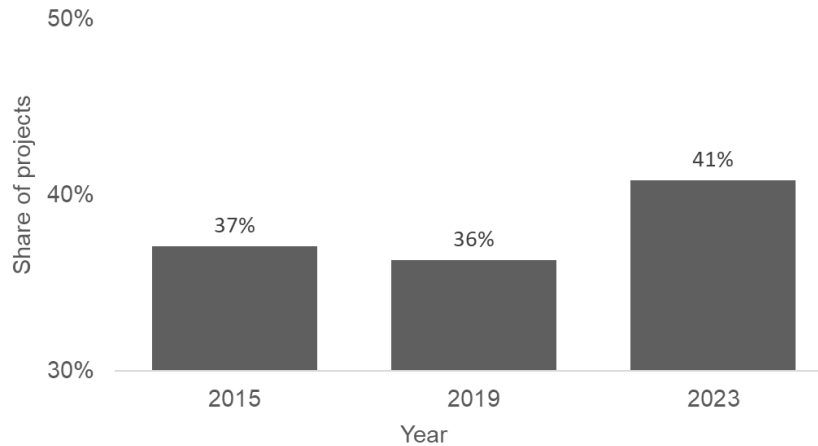
After the end of the Cold War, defense was deprioritized in Norway, as in many other countries. While defense budgets declined, the costs of defense equipment increased, making it increasingly difficult to modernize the Armed Forces at the required pace. In response, authorities introduced adjustments to the acquisition system. One key measure was to promote greater use of fully developed, off-the-shelf materiel. The aim was to enable reduced time and costs by limiting nationally tailored development and customization. Because acquisition projects are primarily designed to meet project-specific requirements, increasing the use of off-the-shelf solutions did not occur without intervention and had to be articulated as a distinct policy objective.

This policy did not constitute a major or disruptive reform for the sector. Nevertheless, it required changes to established practices, organizational culture, competence, and decision-making processes. It affected, and still affects, all key actors in the acquisition system. At the same time, because the policy was relatively concrete, delimited and measurable, it represents a useful case for studying how policies are implemented within the acquisition system.

In 2015, the Norwegian MoD asked The Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI) to study the use of the policy within the Armed Forces (Presterud et al., 2016). In the



study, we developed a conceptual framework and a method for assessing the share of off-the-shelf acquisition projects in the acquisition portfolio. The assessment has since been repeated twice, in 2019 and in 2023 (Berg & Waage, 2021; Voldhaug et al., 2024). This enables us to trace the implementation of the policy over time and assess how different conditions relate to the observed changes. The results of the assessments are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Share of Off-the-Shelf Acquisition Projects in the Norwegian Defense Acquisition Portfolio in the Period 2015–2023 (Voldhaug et al., 2024).<sup>1</sup>**

The figure shows the share of projects in the defense acquisition portfolio classified as off-the-shelf. There were only minor changes between 2015 and 2019, followed by an increase from 2019 to 2023. While this increase is not particularly large, this is partly due to the long duration of acquisition projects, as many projects classified in 2015 and/or 2019 were still part of the portfolio in 2023. When considering only projects that entered the portfolio after 2019, as many as 54% are classified as off-the-shelf (Voldhaug et al., 2024). This indicates that a change has taken place in the implementation of the government’s off-the-shelf policy after 2019.

A major challenge for evidence-based development of the acquisition system is that reforms are introduced and revised faster than it is possible to evaluate their effects. Our study is an attempt to examine how the Norwegian defense sector has implemented and responded to new policy over time. The findings from this study cannot be straightforwardly generalized to the implementation of larger and more disruptive reforms. Nevertheless, the analytical strength of the case lies in the fact that the policy is concrete, delimited, and has remained stable over time, allowing us to trace implementation dynamics and discuss possible causal mechanisms. Hopefully, the insights we provide can help inform future reform efforts.

### Delimitation

A successful policy is one that achieves its stated objectives. What constitutes successful policy implementation is a distinct analytical question. Following Winter (2002/2005) we distinguish between studies of policy outputs and policy outcomes. We use *outputs* to refer to the immediate products of implementation, in our case more off-the-shelf solutions in the acquisition project portfolio. *Outcomes*, on the other hand, refer to the subsequent effects of these outputs, such as whether acquisition would become faster, cheaper, or delivers the

<sup>1</sup> We measure the number of projects rather than their monetary value because our interest lies in the decisions made in each individual project. Had we instead measured the share in financial terms, it would have been considerably lower, since the largest acquisition projects in Norway are predominantly development projects.

intended capability. This study focuses on the outputs, and specifically on how acquisition policy is translated into decision-making practice.

The observable changes in the acquisition portfolio have been modest. This is not unexpected given the long duration of most defense acquisition projects and high path-dependence. In the context of this study, implementation success is therefore understood primarily in terms of direction in decision-making and underlying decision-making logic. Even limited changes in the composition of the portfolio are analytically meaningful as they reflect shifts in actions at key decision point.

## Method

In this study, we develop hypotheses about conditions that influence implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects, drawing on the literature on policy implementation theory. We then explore these hypotheses using empirical data based on document analysis, including previous research, and data from surveys.

### Document Analysis

To examine the structural conditions and their development over time, such as how the policy has been communicated, the processes through which it has been implemented, and the associated incentive structures, we conducted document analysis. By this we mean a structured review of the public documents that describe the government’s policy and objectives for the period 2004–2025. All documentation analyzed is unclassified and publicly available, except for the documents on performance indicators derived from classified agency reporting.

In addition, we have drawn on information and research findings from previous FFI studies on defense acquisitions and efficiency reforms in the Norwegian defense sector.

### Analysis of Survey Data

In analyzing attitudes and perceptions related to the policy, we draw on data from two earlier surveys conducted among actors involved in the acquisition process in the Norwegian defense sector, one from 2014 and one from 2023. The surveys were originally carried out in connection with previous studies on related topics, but parts of the data have been analyzed and used in new ways in this study. Table 1 summarizes key information about the survey.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Key Information About the Surveys in 2014 and 2023.**

Year	2014	2023
Respondents	119	98
Method	Audience response survey (anonymized responses)	Online survey (anonymized responses)
Agencies	Defense Staff, the service branches, The Armed Forces Logistics Organization (later the Norwegian Defense Materiel Agency) and the MoD.	Defense Staff, the service branches, the Norwegian Defense Materiel Agency and the MOD.

<sup>2</sup> More details about the data and the survey methodology can be found in Presterud and Øhrn (2015) and Voldhaug et al. (2024).



## Methodological Limitations

The study has several methodological limitations. We have not had access to internal documents or communication between the actors, nor to classified information about the acquisition portfolio or the execution of the acquisition projects. This means that we are unable to capture directives that may have been given through individual taskings or internal dialogue.

The survey data also has certain weaknesses. As with all surveys, it is hard to know whether the respondents are representative of the entire population or whether the sample is biased. We also cannot know whether the respondents answered truthfully, even though they were informed that their responses would be anonymized. In addition, both surveys were conducted in connection with other studies, meaning that the questions were not tailored to the research questions of this study. This limits our ability to analyze the actors' attitudes and perceptions as thoroughly as desired. The sample is also too small to allow for robust statistical analysis.

These limitations prevent strict causal identification. Nevertheless, the data are unique in Norway as they show how actors' perspectives have evolved over ten years. Although the number of respondents is small, it is important to emphasize that the acquisition workforce in the Norwegian defense sector also is small. Those who responded therefore represent a significant share of those working with acquisition projects on a daily basis. However, the sample may still be skewed due to nonresponse and self-selection, and we cannot rule out systematic differences between respondents and non-respondents.

## Theoretical Background

“Policy success and effectiveness depend on the implementation process as much as it depends on the policy design that stands at the beginning of the implementation process.”  
(Sager et al., 2024).

Policy implementation theory as a scholarly field emerged from this recognition in the 1970s. Many point to the classic study by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) as the real starting point for the literature in this area. Here, the authors examined the implementation of a development project in California and highlighted why seemingly sound political decisions often fail during the implementation phase. Since then, the field has expanded considerably. The purpose of implementation studies is to provide insight into which conditions can be influenced in order to ensure that policy is actually put into practice (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). In this study, we draw on the literature to develop hypothesis of the implementation of acquisition policy in Norway.

Policy implementation models have been applied to a wide range of policy domains, including public administration, environmental and energy policy, health policy, and education policy (Sætren, 2024). Researchers in the field often focus on major political reforms and their effects on the population. Policy rollout within defense acquisition differs somewhat from this: the number of people involved is usually smaller, and there are fewer layers between the decision-makers and those responsible for implementation. The target group is also not an entire population, but the Armed Forces themselves. Also, in contrast to many other societal reforms, implementing acquisition reform is not necessarily very costly. This means that some of the themes frequently emphasized in policy implementation theory, such as financing of implementation, are not particularly relevant for our study.

The policy implementation literature has traditionally been divided between those who examine implementation from the perspective of decision-makers and those who analyze it from the viewpoint of the implementing actors. While researchers with top-down perspective aim to provide normative advice to decision-makers about the implementation process, scholars in the



bottom-up school focus more on describing the conditions that may hinder the achievement of policy goals (Matland, 1995). The aim of this study is to support decision-makers in the defense sector by improving understanding of the conditions that shape policy implementation. To this end, the analysis primarily builds on top-down perspectives in the policy implementation literature, which focus on how policy design and governing arrangements shape implementation outcomes.

As its starting point, our analysis takes the overarching framework of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) which we adapt to the context and policy examined here. We investigate three overarching explanatory conditions shaping implementation: (1) conditions related to the tractability of the problem, (2) structural conditions, and (3) non-structural conditions. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on these categories and presents the associated hypotheses, which are explored in the subsequent analysis.

### **Tractability**

An important condition for policy implementation is how challenging the problem to be addressed actually is. This category differs from the next two in that it concerns external conditions that influence implementation, conditions that may be difficult for the actors involved, whether decision-makers or implementers, to influence. Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) refer to this category as “the tractability of the problem,” meaning the extent to which the problem addressed by the policy is in fact manageable. In our case, we limit this to the degree of difficulty and the time required to put the policy into practice, that is, to procure more off-the-shelf solutions.

We examine tractability primarily to assess whether changes in external conditions could plausibly account for the observed implementation shift, that is, the increased tendency after 2019 to select off-the-shelf solutions, rather than as a fully testable explanatory mechanism in its own right. Against this background, we examine the following hypothesis as a potential contextual explanation:

- The observed development in the implementation of the policy may be related to the problem having become more tractable over time.

### **Structural Conditions**

This category of conditions concerns the structural framework established by decision-makers for the policy, namely how the policy is communicated, the processes and governance structures surrounding it, and the incentive arrangements that accompany it. These conditions are typically under the control of decision-makers and are therefore often a central focus when new policy is to be implemented.

The top-down literature emphasizes that clear communication is essential for successful implementation. Goals and guidelines must be precise, consistent, and comprehensible for implementation to be effective (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Not only must the policy itself be clear, but the implementing actors must also know what is expected and required of them. Vague mandates and guidelines may lead to competing perspectives or dominant interest groups shaping the execution of the policy (McLaughlin, 1987). Matland (1995) highlights that ambiguity, both regarding objectives and the means for achieving them, can lead to misunderstandings and uncertainty, but he also notes that vague goals may reduce conflict when new policy is being designed.

Furthermore, the process for policy execution and the governance structure of the policy play a vital role. Long decision chains, numerous actors, and multiple veto points increase the likelihood of implementation failure (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979). Hupe (2011) refers to this as the Thesis of Incongruent Implementation. A policy process



usually involves several actors at different administrative levels. Hill and Hupe (2003) introduced the concept of the multi-layer problem to describe the challenge that arises when a policy must pass through several layers of governance before it can be implemented and executed. Different actors apply their own assessments and priorities in implementation, which may affect both output and outcome.

The literature also highlights the role of incentives in implementation. Situations in which actors are responsible for implementing a policy on behalf of a principal can be viewed as a principal–agent problem. Incentives are a tool for addressing this challenge by motivating actors to behave in a particular way. Successful implementation may depend on mechanisms that enable decision-makers to induce the behavior they desire. The greater the burden associated with implementing the new policy, the stronger the incentives typically need to be (McLaughlin, 1987; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975).

In the empirical analysis that follows later, we assess whether strengthened structural conditions, namely communication, processes, governance structures, and incentives, have shaped the observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy. Accordingly, we examine the following hypothesis:

- The observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects may be attributable to strengthened structural conditions.

### **Non-structural Conditions**

In the framework of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980), non-structural conditions cover the non-legal factors that influence whether a policy is implemented. We limit our discussion to the conditions that concern the implementing actors. The structure established by decision-makers shapes how the policy is supposed to be carried out, but if the actors responsible for implementation oppose the policy, success is unlikely. Those who actually implement policy are individuals with their own interests and values that influence the policy in practice (Sager et al., 2024). The bottom-up literature rests largely on the assumption that the preferences and interests of the implementing actors must align with the policy for implementation to be successful (Sætren, 2024). The actors' sense of meaningfulness in relation to the policy influences their willingness to implement it, which in turn affects how successful implementation will be (Tummers et al., 2012). If actors perceive the policy as meaningful for society or the group it targets, this will strengthen their willingness to implement it.

The experience of the implementing actors also plays a role. Giacchino and Kakabadse (2003) emphasize that the actors' skills, defined as, among other things, experience, appropriate training, and the right qualifications, are key criteria for successful implementation. Employees who are overworked or who lack adequate competence or training, on the other hand, may hinder implementation (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975).

We examine whether changes among the implementing actors align with the observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy. Accordingly, we advance the following hypothesis:

- The observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects may be attributable to changes among the implementing actors.

### **Analysis**

Drawing on the literature, we developed three hypotheses that structure our analysis of the observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects over the past decade. We thus distinguish analytically between the policy implementation output and the conditions that may explain the development in this output. In this section, we use the



available empirical evidence to explore the hypotheses. The hypotheses are not tested as competing causal propositions in a strict sense, but as alternative explanatory perspectives on the observed patterns of the implementation of the policy over time. Our assessment therefore focuses on how well each perspective helps make sense of the empirical developments observed, rather than treating the hypotheses as symmetrically testable propositions. We begin by examining whether changes in external conditions (tractability) could plausibly account for the observed development, before turning to the other two categories of conditions more directly related to how the policy is governed and implemented.

### **Tractability**

Implementing minor policy changes aimed at addressing relatively simple problems is easier than implementing major policy changes intended to solve complex problems. Likewise, policies with long lead times will not produce effects until several years have passed. We have already established that the policy change examined in this study is relatively limited: actors are expected to select the off-the-shelf acquisition strategy more frequently. Nevertheless, the challenge of implementation should not be underestimated. Regardless of both structural and non-structural conditions, achieving the goal of increased use of off-the-shelf solutions is difficult if such solutions are not actually available or if acquiring them takes years. In this section, we examine whether the increase in off-the-shelf acquisitions observed between 2015 and 2023 may be due to the strategy having become easier to pursue. We assess both the actual availability of off-the-shelf solutions and the role of time.

A thorough analysis of whether off-the-shelf availability is greater now than ten years ago would require a broader market study of the defense industry in relevant countries. This has not been feasible within the scope of this study. We therefore limit the assessment to examining key high-level indicators of developments in the defense industry and the Norwegian Armed Forces' needs. Since 2015, global defense spending has increased every year, driven in part by Europe's intensified defense efforts following Russia's attack on Ukraine (Liang et al., 2025). This surge in demand has boosted revenues in the defense industry, but has also resulted in order backlogs and long lead times (Scarazzato et al., 2025).

How has this development affected Norway's access to off-the-shelf defense materiel? The substantial industry growth in recent years may have increased access to fully developed materiel, while strong demand may simultaneously have constrained it. On this basis, we cannot determine the net effect on Norway's access to off-the-shelf materiel.

We can, however, assess the demand side and examine whether the Norwegian acquisition portfolio has become more "off-the-shelf-friendly" over time. When comparing the overview of planned acquisitions in the Armed Forces in 2014 with the corresponding overview in 2023, there is little to suggest such a development (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2014, 2023a). ICT systems are often highlighted as an area with strong potential for off-the-shelf procurement, yet the share of ICT acquisitions was, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, just as large in 2014 as in 2023. The major difference between 2014 and 2023 lies in the maritime and air domains. Whereas half of the portfolio in 2014 consisted of air systems and only 14% of maritime systems, the two categories are now equal in size (30% each). Traditionally, the air domain has been an area in which Norway could procure off-the-shelf solutions from allies, while the maritime domain has been characterized by a need for tailored solutions (Presterud et al., 2016). Thus, there is little in the overall composition of the portfolio to suggest that using the off-the-shelf acquisition strategy is easier now than ten years ago.

Time is also an external factor affecting implementation. It takes time for political decisions to translate into real change. According to Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979) one must expect at least three to five years to ensure adequate compliance with a new policy. Given the



lengthy timelines of acquisitions in the Norwegian defense sector, it is reasonable to expect that the observable changes in implementation outputs of a new policy will only become visible after several years.

The policy examined in this study was introduced in the mid-2000s. From the first measurement in 2015 to the last in 2023, there has been a positive development in policy implementation, which may indicate that the system and the organization required time to move from decision to actual implementation. However, the development has not been uniformly positive throughout the period. From 2015 to 2019, the share of off-the-shelf acquisition projects declined somewhat, before increasing from 2019 to 2023. Taken together, the uneven development suggests that the overall trend is unlikely to be explained primarily by time alone.

Drawing on the research literature, we proposed the hypothesis that the tractability of the off-the-shelf policy, how difficult or time-consuming it has been to implement, could plausibly account for the observed developments in implementation. Based on the available data, we examined whether implementing the policy (i.e., selecting more off-the-shelf solutions at key decision points) has become easier over time in ways that might explain the observed shift. Overall, the evidence provides only weak support for the proposition that changes in tractability are associated with the development.

### **Structural Conditions**

Having assessed whether changes in external conditions (tractability) could plausibly account for the observed development, we now turn to conditions more directly related to how the policy is governed and enacted in practice. In this first section, we examine whether changes in the structural conditions surrounding the policy align with the observed development in its implementation. We begin by looking at communication, which the literature emphasizes should be clear and consistent.

It is not possible to identify exactly when increased use of off-the-shelf solutions as an acquisition strategy was first communicated as a political objective, as the policy has gradually evolved from vague formulations to more explicit ambitions over many years. It is nevertheless evident that successive governments, from across the political spectrum, have expressed a desire for greater use of off-the-shelf solutions in the Norwegian Armed Forces. To trace how policy communication has developed over time, we reviewed key governing documents for the Norwegian defense sector dating back to the early 2000s.

The government's long-term plans in the years from 2004 to 2012 contain references to the use of off-the-shelf solutions in defense acquisitions (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2004b, 2008b, 2012a). However, the policy received limited attention in these documents and was also scarcely mentioned in the documents that operationalize the strategy (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2004a, 2008a, 2012b). No specific targets or milestones were established. In other words, the policy does not appear to have been a priority during this period.

Around 2015, the government started expressing the policy more explicitly, with guidance stating that the acquisition of fully developed products should be the default approach (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2015, 2016a). The MoD also introduced a performance indicator related to the policy, albeit without accompanying targets or milestones (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2016b). Regardless of the changes in communication, the 2019 assessment showed a decline in the use of off-the-shelf solutions, suggesting that clearer communication did not result in increased implementation.

In the 2020 plan, the policy was mentioned less frequently than before, and the argument concerning cost savings was de-emphasized in favor of an emphasis on faster acquisition timelines, (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2020). The performance indicator disappeared,



and the Armed Forces remained without concrete objectives or milestones on the policy. In the years that followed, policymakers continued to promote off-the-shelf acquisition as a policy in this manner, sporadically and without explicit requirements or expectations. The emphasis on faster acquisition timelines persisted.

Overall, the policy has been articulated in a general and somewhat inconsistent manner, with varying rationales over time. Because our review is based on public documents, it may not capture all informal guidance or lower-level directives. Within these limits, the document review aligns only weakly with the proposition that clearer communication, with explicit goals and milestones, has been a key driver of the observed shift in the implementation of the off-the-shelf policy.

Further, we examine how the authorities have organized the policy's processes and governance structures, which the literature identifies as important for effective implementation. Policies of this type are decided by the government through the Norwegian MoD and articulated through long-term plans. When the policy was first put into effect in the 2000s, the MoD was also the commissioning body for acquisition projects. This meant they were responsible for initiating acquisition projects and providing frameworks and guidelines for implementation, based on overarching policies and strategies. The Armed Forces had the role of planner and executor of acquisitions, within MoD's given frameworks and guidelines. At first glance, this seems to be a straightforward process with a limited number of actors. In reality, various parts of the MoD were responsible for issuing the new policy and for launching projects. Multiple actors within the Armed Forces were also involved, ranging from end-users and engineering divisions to contract management. Although the overarching policy stated that off-the-shelf should be the preferred acquisition strategy, there were several decision points where the policy could be overridden by other, more or less specific, goals and guidelines in the projects, such as industrial policy requirements or operational requirements specifications (Presterud et al., 2016). Can a simplification of the process and governance structure in recent years be aligned with the observed development in the implementation of the policy?

As in previous years, in 2023 the MoD continued to both articulate the policy through the long-term plans and act as the commissioning authority for acquisition projects. However, by this time, their role as commissioning authority was limited to only the largest projects. Smaller projects were initiated by the Armed Forces through the Defense Staff. All projects were now required to undergo a conceptual study, a requirement that had previously applied only to the largest projects. Responsibility for the conceptual study rested with the Armed Forces, while further analysis and development of the decision basis, as well as the planning and implementation of the projects, were now handled by the Norwegian Defense Materiel Agency<sup>3</sup>. As before, several different actors remained involved within each of the different organizations.

Although we are unable to specify exactly how many actors were involved in decisions related to using off-the-shelf solutions as an acquisition strategy in either 2014 or 2023, there is little evidence to suggest that the process and decision-making hierarchy have become less complex over time. We can largely conclude that simplifications in processes and governance structures do not align with the observed strengthening of the off-the-shelf policy's implementation in the years following 2020.

Finally, within the category of structural conditions, we examine the incentives for adopting the policy. The literature asserts that policies which entail a cost or burden for those tasked with implementation must be accompanied by incentives to encourage actors to comply. The off-the-shelf policy cannot be characterized as such a "costly" policy. The policy essentially

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<sup>3</sup> Established in 2016 by separating the part of the Norwegian Armed Forces' Logistics Organization that was responsible for acquisition.



requires actors to choose one acquisition strategy over another. In itself, this is not costly, in fact, conducting off-the-shelf procurements is less resource-intensive than engaging in demanding development processes (Presterud et al., 2016) . For individuals, however, it can still be experienced as a burden to change behavior, that is, to do things differently. It may also be perceived as a sacrifice or cost to move away from exciting development projects in favor of simpler off-the-shelf procurements. A 2015 study of incentives in the Norwegian defense sector's procurement process found that actors used their expert authority to steer projects toward technologically sophisticated, development-oriented solutions, partly to serve their own interests (Presterud & Øhrn, 2015). In the 2023 survey, 27% responded that they found projects involving development most inspiring, while only 6% preferred projects without development. It is therefore conceivable that some formal incentives may be necessary to encourage actors to opt for more off-the-shelf solutions.

In the Norwegian public sector, there is little tradition for individual incentive schemes, either in the form of rewards or sanctions. Instead, government agencies are primarily governed through reporting and management objectives, which create incentives at the organizational or group level. When the off-the-shelf policy was first introduced, however, it was not accompanied by such objectives or reporting requirements. A performance indicator related to the share of off-the-shelf procurements was not introduced until 2016 but this indicator was discontinued in 2020 (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2016b).

The literature suggests that the observed increase in off-the-shelf procurements in 2023 may be due to changes in incentive schemes for the implementation of the policy. However, this development does not correspond with the observed changes in incentive schemes over time. Thus, it is unlikely that the development in the implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects is due to incentive arrangements.

In this section, we have examined the structural conditions related to the off-the-shelf policy, to assess whether changes in these have influenced its implementation. Our analysis is based on publicly available documents and may therefore not capture all relevant communication or informal guidance and practices. Within these limitations, our review of communication, process, management structure, and incentive schemes indicates limited alignment between strengthened structural conditions and the observed development in implementation of the policy.

### **Non-structural Conditions**

Defense acquisition is not a mechanical process, but a process carried out by people who make their assessments and decisions in various ways based on their inherent knowledge and perspectives. How the implementing actors respond to policy change is therefore crucial for its outcome. In this section, we examine whether changes among the implementing actors align with the observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects.

We have limited historical data on actors' attitudes toward the off-the-shelf policy. Still, we know a few things: In 2013, the then Chief of Defense in Norway, Harald Sunde, commented on off-the-shelf acquisitions (Bentzrød, 2013). In his statement, he said that Norway should choose development projects and not buy off-the-shelf materiel when "expensive and heavy weapon systems" are to be acquired. In our 2014 survey, we asked actors in the acquisition workforce if they agreed with the Chief of Defense on this. Around 50% disagreed with him, while about 25% agreed. The remaining 25% were neither in agreement nor disagreement.

Half of those asked disagreed that off-the-shelf is the wrong solution for "large" acquisitions, which can be interpreted as them having a positive attitude toward the possibilities



of using off-the-shelf as an acquisition strategy. But there were also half who either had no opinion or who agreed with the Chief of Defense. In a study from 2015 we found that actors perceived off-the-shelf solutions as something that can only work as an acquisition strategy in special cases (Presterud et al., 2016). Here, the actors mainly pointed to *one* argument for choosing off-the-shelf solutions: it can be procured quickly. At the same time, we found that acquisition speed was not a priority (Presterud & Øhrn, 2015). Given these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that the policy was relatively rarely exercised in 2015.

In 2023, our second survey was conducted. This shows a clear development in the actors' attitudes towards off-the-shelf solutions. In 2023, the proportion of respondents who disagreed with the former Chief of Defense had increased to 73%, while only 7% now agreed with him. Although the proportion who agreed with the then Chief of Defense in 2014 was already quite low, this is a significant shift. A full 71% of the actors state in the same survey that the focus on procuring and using off-the-shelf solutions in the Armed Forces was increasing, and only 16% disagreed. This was despite the absence of any changes in the structural conditions surrounding the policy. Only 6% of respondents stated that relevant off-the-shelf solutions are rarely available when the defense sector procures materiel. In 2023, implementing actors therefore appear to be both well acquainted with the policy and largely confident in its practical feasibility.

It appears that a change has occurred among the actors over the years, even though the way decision-makers govern the policy has not changed significantly. This suggests that non-structural factors provide a more plausible interpretation of the observed change than structural measures introduced by decision-makers. This aligns with other findings from the 2023 survey, where only 9% state that pressure from the MoD has led them to make different choices than they otherwise would have when it comes to implementing the policy.

We find indications of a change in attitudes among the actors, and these coincide with the observed changes in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects. However, the change in attitudes does not coincide with corresponding changes in how the policy has been governed through structural conditions. This raises the question of what has changed among the implementing actors. Because of data limitations and privacy considerations, we can only examine a limited set of characteristics. One relevant factor highlighted in the literature is experience.

We find that more experienced individuals are both more likely to disagree with the former Chief of Defense and more likely to believe that off-the-shelf solutions are available.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that experience is associated with attitudes toward the policy. However, we cannot assess whether experience has driven implementation in practice, because we cannot link individual respondents to decisions made in specific acquisition projects.

Is it likely that an overall increase in experience among the acquisition workforce can help explain the positive development in implementation of the policy? Survey respondents are, on average, more experienced in 2024 than in 2014, but we cannot assess whether the workforce experience level has increased across the acquisition system as a whole. Available key figures from the Norwegian Defence Materiel Agency do not indicate a major increase, and we lack comparable data for the other agencies involved (Forsvarsmateriell, 2017, 2024; Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2025a, 2025c, 2025b).

So, even though experience appears to influence the actors' attitudes toward the policy, there is little to suggest that the increase in the use of off-the-shelf as an acquisition strategy is

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<sup>4</sup> We define experience as how many years the actors have worked with procurement in the defense sector, divided into three categories (1–3 years, 4–6 years, and over 6 years)



due to major changes in the experience level of the actors. In fact, the survey shows that all subgroups have developed more positive attitudes toward the policy over time. The inexperienced group has actually changed the most, even though they are still more skeptical than the experienced group. As far as we know, there have not been any other significant changes in the type of people working in the acquisition workforce during this period that could help explain the shift.

Another possible explanatory factor is the actors' sense of meaningfulness. The implementing actors' understanding of how a policy contributes to important societal goals influences their willingness to implement it (Tummers et al., 2012). When guidelines for using off-the-shelf as an acquisition strategy were originally formulated, the need for it was primarily justified by the necessity to save money. We do not have direct measures of how meaningful implementing actors perceived this goal to be, but we do know that the Armed Forces viewed the general cost-efficiency requirements imposed on them during this period as very demanding (Forsvarssjefen, 2015).

In the years that followed, there was a significant shift in the geopolitical situation and in Norway's security policy focus. Flat or reduced defense budget trajectories were replaced by renewed investments in the Armed Forces and increased budgets (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2020, 2023b). Along with this came a shift in the argumentation for the off-the-shelf policy. Even though the argument about cost efficiency was still mentioned in the governing documents, there was now clearly increased focus on off-the-shelf as a strategy intended to speed up acquisitions.

Here, we observe a policy that has evolved over time. From being promoted primarily as a cost-efficiency measure, it is now promoted as a policy whose main goal is to build up the Armed Forces as quickly as possible. While we cannot empirically test whether this shift in justification has changed actors' sense of meaningfulness, the mechanism is consistent with earlier studies showing that implementing actors viewed off-the-shelf solutions as particularly suitable when speed is prioritized (Presterud et al., 2016). Given the increased emphasis on rapid strengthening of the Armed Forces, it is therefore plausible that the policy is perceived as more meaningful when framed as a means to accelerate capability build-up than when framed primarily as a cost-efficiency measure.

Overall, our analysis indicates that changes among implementing actors, particularly their attitudes and perceptions of the off-the-shelf policy, coincide with the increased share of off-the-shelf acquisition projects observed after 2019. While the available data do not support strict causal claims, alternative explanations based on tractability and formal structural conditions fit the empirical patterns less well. We cannot determine precisely why implementers' attitudes and perceptions shifted, but we outline one plausible mechanism: as the policy justification has shifted from primarily cost efficiency toward speed and the ambition of more rapid operational effect in a changed security environment, the policy may have become more salient and meaningful to implementers, increasing their willingness to select off-the-shelf solutions at key decision points.

## Conclusion

Over the past ten years, the security policy context has changed dramatically. Like many other countries, Norway has recognized the need for a rapid buildup of national defense capabilities. To achieve this, the acquisition sector must be further developed. However, acquisition reform has proven to be difficult and time-consuming to implement.

The purpose of this study has been to examine which conditions have shaped the implementation of the policy promoting increased use of off-the-shelf solutions within Norway's defense acquisition system. The policy was promoted as early as in the 2000s, but for a long



time seemed to have negligible effect. It is only in the years after 2020 that we observe a strengthening in the implementation of the policy. Based on policy implementation theory, we propose three hypotheses about overarching conditions that may have shaped this development. We explore the hypotheses using empirical data from document analysis, previous research, and data from surveys. The three hypotheses serve different analytical purposes. The tractability hypothesis primarily functions as a contextual plausibility check, while the latter two hypotheses capture factors more directly related to implementation dynamics.

The data do not allow for strict causal identification, but our analysis provides a theory-informed interpretation of the observed patterns of implementation over time. Table 2 summarizes the hypotheses derived from the literature and the degree of empirical alignment identified in the analysis.

**Table 2. Hypotheses and Findings**

Factors	Hypotheses	Findings
Tractability	The observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects may be related to the problem having become more tractable over time.	Weak alignment
Structural conditions	The observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects may be attributable to strengthened structural conditions.	Weak alignment
Non-structural conditions	The observed development in implementation of the off-the-shelf policy in acquisition projects may be attributable to changes among the implementing actors.	Stronger alignment

The three hypotheses receive different levels of support. The analysis points to limited alignment between the implementation shift, measured as the increased share of off-the-shelf acquisition projects, and changes in external conditions (tractability). While the defense market has evolved in recent years, the available information does not allow us to determine whether procurement of off-the-shelf solutions has become systematically easier or harder. Moreover, the Norwegian acquisition portfolio does not appear to have become more “off-the-shelf-friendly” over the period. We also find little support for the idea that the observed development primarily reflects the passage of time.

The available evidence also aligns weakly with explanations emphasizing changes in formal structural conditions. There have been some changes in communication, processes, governance structures, and incentives during the period, but these changes do not align with the development we observe in off-the-shelf acquisitions during the same time.

By contrast, explanations focusing on non-structural conditions, implementing actors’ attitudes and perceptions, provide the most consistent interpretation of the observed development. What has driven these changes remains uncertain, as neither the governance structure nor the composition of the group of implementing actors appears to have changed substantially. One plausible explanation is that the policy is now perceived as more meaningful because it is increasingly justified by the need for rapid build-up of the Armed Forces rather than primarily by cost efficiency.

Overall, the study’s findings indicate that factors outside direct control of decision-makers can impact whether a policy actually succeeds. For decision-makers, this may seem unsettling. However, this can also be seen as something positive because it means that real change does not necessarily require major structural adjustments. Policies linked to meaningful



goals that actors perceive as significant, in this case the need for rapid build-up of defense capability, can mobilize implementation willingness among the implementing actors and support the desired development.

Furthermore, the study illustrates that implementation can take time. This implies that repeated reforms and frequent adjustments in governance signals can weaken the possibility of both achieving effects and learning. For a sector facing historic demands to deliver faster, paradoxically, many structural reforms can contribute to delaying the necessary development. A more knowledge-based and evaluation-driven approach may be necessary to ensure that reform measures actually have the time and opportunity to take effect.

Overall, the study suggests that further reform efforts should combine clear political priorities with long-term stability, while also giving greater emphasis to the motivation, knowledge, and sense of purpose of the implementing actors. Effective acquisition reforms and policies are not just about what is decided, but equally about how those decisions are perceived, owned, and put into practice by the people who actually carry them out.

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