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A Field Report on the Last Mile to Contract

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In the Trenches: A Field Report on the Last Mile to Contract

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Abstract

The most difficult step in defense innovation is not scouting or prototyping; it is the last mile between identifying a promising solution and getting it under contract. Technologies generate operator interest, perform in testing, and align with mission needs, yet still fail to move forward. The problem is not whether the capability works. It is what happens next.

Across programs and services, the same patterns emerge: contracting paths are unclear, funding does not align with readiness, responsibility is diffuse, and operator demand remains informal. Momentum builds early, then fades before anything is executed.

The Pacific Northwest Defense Coalition (PNDC) and its Pacific Northwest Mission Acceleration Center (PNW MAC) operate at this transition point, working with operators, program sponsors, and technology companies across multiple innovation programs.

This paper is a field report based on those observations. It identifies recurring failure patterns and highlights practical conditions that improve outcomes, including early contracting awareness, clear ownership, sustained operator engagement, and active coordination across organizations.

Introduction

Innovation is not the chokepoint for the DoD or industry—converting it into a contract is. The breakdown happens in the “last mile,” when validated tech solutions fail to become contracts.

The DoD has made real progress in expanding access to innovation. Programs such as SBIR/STTR provide more than a billion dollars annually in phased research and development (R&D) contracts to small businesses, creating a pathway from feasibility through prototyping and, in some cases, follow-on production (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023). AFWERX and SpaceWERX have built on this model through Open Topic solicitations and Strategic Financing (STRATFI) and Tactical Funding Increase (TACFI) programs, which pair government investment with private capital to accelerate transition. The Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) has introduced Commercial Solutions Openings that use Other Transaction Authority (OTA) to competitively award prototype agreements in as little as 60–90 days, significantly reducing time to initial contract (Defense Innovation Unit, 2024). At the same time, organizations such as NavalX Tech Bridges have expanded access to operators, test environments, and non-traditional performers, improving early-stage alignment between technology and mission need. Taken together, these efforts have materially improved the DoD’s ability to identify, fund, and prototype promising technologies, particularly from companies operating outside the traditional defense industrial base (DoD, 2023).

Yet they have not solved the transition problem. Technologies routinely demonstrate operational relevance, generate user interest, and perform successfully in testing, only to stall when they need to move into an acquisition pathway.

For small businesses, getting from prototype to contract is unclear, slow, and expensive. On the government side, even when a solution fits the mission, there’s no clear owner, no clear

funding, and no clear path to contract. The result is predictable: the technology is sound, the DoD wants it—and it still does not move forward.

This paper examines that transition gap from a practitioner's perspective. The Pacific Northwest Defense Coalition (PNDC) and its Pacific Northwest Mission Acceleration Center (PNW MAC) operate directly at this interface, with a track record of supporting programs such as the Office of Naval Research (ONR) Warfighter Experience Lab, NATO's Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA), the Navy Northwest Tech Bridge, and Defense Innovation Unit's (DIU) OnRamp Hub. Across these efforts, PNDC engages operators, program sponsors, and technology companies to bring forth solutions, facilitate experimentation, and support transition.

From this vantage point, the same issues show up repeatedly. That's not coincidence—it's how the system operates. Technologies get traction, the DoD recognizes the value, but all too often, no one owns the path to contract.

This paper addresses two questions:

- Why do promising technologies stall at the contracting phase?
- What specific, practical interventions reduce that friction?

As the DoD increasingly relies on non-traditional innovation to address operational challenges, its ability to execute in the last mile will determine whether those efforts produce real capability or remain trapped in perpetual experimentation.

The "Last Mile" Defined

In the context of defense innovation, the "last mile" refers to the transition between a validated capability and an executed contract that enables deployment, scaling, or integration into operational use. This phase begins once a technology has demonstrated technical feasibility and operational relevance, and it ends when funding is obligated through a defined acquisition pathway.

In an ideal system, this transition is straightforward. A government sponsor takes interest in a promising capability, selects a contracting path, secures funding, and pushes execution toward fielding or integration. Roles are clear, timelines are defined, and momentum continues.

In practice, the transition is rarely linear. Instead, the last mile is characterized by uncertainty at each step. Contracting pathways are often unclear or poorly communicated. Funding availability does not align with technology readiness. Government stakeholders who recognize the value of a capability frequently lack the authority to obligate funds. Responsibility for advancing the effort is diffuse, with no single actor accountable for carrying momentum forward.

These conditions create a fragile environment in which progress can stall quickly. Even when a technology solution performs well in testing and generates strong operator interest, the absence of a clear and timely contracting path can halt transition indefinitely.

Across multiple programs and engagements, five recurring categories of failure emerge:

Last Mile Failure Framework

1. Contracting Friction

Delays in getting a contract in place or figuring out how to do it—even when all parties are interested in doing business.

2. Ownership Gaps
The absence of a clearly accountable individual responsible for driving transition from demonstration to contract, often resulting in companies attempting to self-navigate the system.

3. Incentive Misalignment
Program structures that reward continued participation, engagement, or phase progression more than successful transition to operational use.

4. Budget Timing Misalignment
A disconnect between when technologies are ready for transition and when funding becomes available, often tied to rigid fiscal cycles.

5. Demand Signal Suppression
The inability of operators and end users to formally advocate for or "pull" capabilities into acquisition pathways, even when operational value is clear.

These categories come from what we regularly experience in this work, and they show why the last mile remains a nagging challenge.

The sections that follow show how these problems play out in practice.

Methodology

This paper draws on direct practitioner experience at the point where innovation meets acquisition.

PNDC and its PNW MAC operate as an intermediary within the defense innovation ecosystem. Unlike program offices or contracting authorities, PNDC does not control funding or execute acquisitions. Instead, it works at the transition point, helping companies test capabilities and get them onto contract.

This position provides visibility across the innovation lifecycle, with particular focus on transition. PNDC's work spans DIU's OnRamp Hub, NATO DIANA, the Navy Northwest Tech Bridge, and ONR's Warfighter Experience Lab, engaging small businesses, operational units, and a range of test environments.

The observations in this paper come from extensive interactions across these efforts, including working with companies trying to get on contract and coordinating with operators evaluating technology.

While not a statistical analysis, this paper is a field report supported by patterns that show up consistently across independent efforts.

PNDC often engages after stakeholders establish interest but before a contract exists. That vantage point reveals where momentum breaks down.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: SBIR Effort—Technical Success Without Transition

Context

A small technology company entered a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program focused on microelectronics security. The company possessed a mature capability and was positioned to move rapidly toward operational validation.

What Worked

The technology was successfully tested in relevant environments at leading Navy surface and undersea warfare centers. These engagements generated strong interest from

government stakeholders and clear indications that further evaluation and transition would be valuable.

Where It Broke

Despite this success, multiple structural barriers emerged:

- Contract execution delays postponed the start of work
- The assigned Technical Point of Contact (TPOC) lacked engagement and authority
- The SBIR structure emphasized phased progression rather than accelerated transition
- Operational stakeholders were unable to formally advocate for the capability

Even when the company proposed an accelerated transition timeline, it was directed to adhere to the standard multi-year SBIR process.

Outcome

The capability demonstrated clear technical and operational value, but transition was delayed and constrained by program structure and procedural friction.

What It Reveals

Even when technology, operators, and test environments align, the system is not designed to truly accelerate transition.

Case Study 2: Operator Interest Without Transition Path

Context

A technology was presented to multiple operational units and aligned with mission needs across communications, logistics, and decision support.

What Worked

Operators identified clear use cases and expressed strong interest. The DoD proposed follow-on actions, including pilot programs, field demonstrations, and potential sponsorship through innovation funding pathways.

Where It Broke

No clear transition pathway existed. Responsibility for advancing the effort remained diffuse, and no single organization had both the authority and incentive to move the effort forward. Proposed next steps required coordination across multiple entities that were not aligned.

Outcome

The effort stalled after initial engagement. Interest did not translate into action.

What It Reveals

Even when operational demand exists, the system lacks mechanisms to convert that demand into funded acquisition pathways.

Case Study 3: The "Who Pays?" Problem

Context

A military installation identified infrastructure vulnerabilities and engaged with external partners to identify potential technology solutions.

What Worked

We saw clear alignment between identified problems and available solutions. The installation expressed willingness to experiment and positioned itself as an agile test environment.

Where It Broke

Despite alignment, no clear funding or acquisition pathway existed. Installation leadership lacked both the authority and resources to implement solutions. Funding responsibility was distributed across higher-level organizations that were not directly engaged.

Outcome

Technologies that directly addressed validated needs were not implemented.

What It Reveals

Requirements and solutions can align, but without aligned funding authority, transition cannot occur.

Case Study 4: Matchmaking Without Throughput

Context

An innovation program was tasked with identifying technologies and matching them to test and evaluation (T&E) environments across a national network.

What Worked

The program successfully built a broad network of test facilities and developed detailed knowledge of access requirements, timelines, and costs. It effectively enabled connections between companies and testing environments.

Where It Broke

Execution capacity lagged behind matchmaking. The program was required to support multiple technology areas, manage dozens of companies, and complete testing within a fixed contract period.

This created bottlenecks:

- Testing timelines exceeded program timelines
- Administrative overhead slowed execution
- Matches did not consistently result in completed testing

Outcome

The program generated activity and engagement but struggled to consistently deliver end-to-end transition outcomes.

What It Reveals

Matchmaking is necessary, but insufficient. The system generates connections faster than it can execute them.

Case Study 5: Testing Without Accountability

Context

A maritime testing effort enabled a company to deploy a system in an operational environment for evaluation.

What Worked

The program successfully provided access to real-world test infrastructure and enabled collaboration across multiple stakeholders.

Where It Broke

The system failed during testing, and no one owned the fix. The company lacked the resources to fix and continue testing the system, while the host lacked the authority or funding to step in.

This resulted in:

- Failed equipment remaining in place
- Restricted access to facilities
- Degraded relationships between stakeholders

Outcome

The testing effort introduced friction rather than momentum, which jeopardized future collaboration.

What It Reveals

The system is not designed to handle failure during experimentation, creating risk for both operators and industry.

Case Study 6: Fragmented Transition Ecosystem

Context

A transition organization expanded from supporting a single service to engaging across multiple services.

What Worked

The organization increased access to opportunities and developed relationships across Army, Navy, and Air Force stakeholders.

Where It Broke

Each service maintained distinct processes, cultures, and acquisition pathways. Engagement strategies that worked in one service did not translate to others. Organizational churn further disrupted continuity and obscured ownership.

Outcome

Efforts to scale engagement increased coordination burden without improving transition outcomes.

What It Reveals

The defense innovation ecosystem is not a unified system, but a collection of loosely connected systems.

Counterexample: When Transition Succeeds

Context

A capability aligned early with a clearly defined operational need and was introduced to relevant stakeholders within an existing innovation initiative.

What Worked

- Early access to decision-makers
- Clear articulation of mission need
- Defined contracting pathway

Where It Succeeded

Alignment was actively engineered across stakeholders, enabling rapid movement from engagement to contract.

Outcome

The capability transitioned efficiently into a funded effort supporting operational use.

What It Reveals

Transition success is not accidental—it happens when program leaders deliberately align capability, demand, and a contracting pathway.

Pattern Analysis

The case studies are not isolated failures. They show the same patterns repeating across different programs.

Taken together, they point to a simple conclusion: the system is good at generating interest, but unreliable at turning that interest into contracts.

The Matchmaking Fallacy

Across multiple programs, a lot of effort goes into connecting technologies with the right stakeholders: introducing companies to operators, getting them into the right rooms, and lining up access to test environments. That work matters, and when it happens, it generally is quite impactful.

The problem is what comes next. The case studies show a consistent gap between making the connection and actually moving something forward. A company can get in front of the right people, generate real interest, and even get invited into testing . . . yet still go nowhere.

Cases 2 and 4 make this clear. In both, the front end worked—the match was right and the interest was real. Even then, the effort stalled. What was missing was a path to contract and a mechanism to sustain it.

The assumption seems to be that once the right people are connected, the rest will follow. In practice, that often is not true. Making the connection is necessary, but it is not sufficient to get something into use.

Contracting Friction: Time-to-Test vs. Time-to-Approval

A consistent source of delay is the gap between how fast technology moves and how long it takes to get it on contract or into a test environment. Government acquisition pathways run on schedules that take months, sometimes longer. Most innovative companies operate on timelines measured in weeks. That mismatch shows up quickly.

Cases 1 and 4 illustrate the impact. Even when everyone agrees a capability should move forward, it can take so long to start work or secure access to testing that momentum fades. Awards sit idle, and testing windows don’t line up. Iteration slows down or stops.

Over time, delays like this change behavior. Companies adapt to the system instead of the mission, stretching timelines and holding back development because they must. What starts as a timing issue becomes a constraint on progress.

Ownership Gaps: Engagement Without Accountability

When no one owns the transition, it usually does not happen. Operators engage early and often, but they lack contracting authority. Program offices control funding, but they aren’t always present when technologies are being evaluated. Intermediaries connect people and

opportunities, but they don't control execution. The result is predictable: the effort falls into the gap between them.

Cases 1 and 2 show this clearly. The capability worked, operators were interested, and there was a path forward in principle. What was missing was someone responsible for getting it across the line. Without that, momentum turns into drift; follow-ups go nowhere and next steps never materialize.

Companies often try to push the effort themselves, but they lack the authority to move it. This isn't a failure of effort; it's what happens when accountability is missing. Until someone owns the transition, the rest of the system has no reason to act.

Incentive Misalignment: Activity vs. Outcome

Programs built to support innovation often reward activity more than results. Accelerators, SBIR efforts, and similar initiatives put real effort into getting companies in the door—running cohorts, hosting events, making introductions, and moving firms through phases (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). That work matters, but it is only the front end of the process. Too often, it becomes the goal rather than a means to transition.

Case 1 shows how this plays out in practice. The capability worked, operators were interested, and there was a clear case to move faster. Instead, the program held to its structure. Progress meant staying on schedule, not getting to contract. The signal to everyone involved was clear: keep the process moving.

Over time, that signal shapes behavior. Programs optimize for throughput and participation because those are the metrics that matter. Finishing the job—getting something into use—becomes secondary. The result is a system that can point to high levels of engagement without producing much in the way of fielded capability. This dynamic helps explain why strong early momentum so often fails to carry through to execution.

Budget Timing Misalignment: Readiness vs. Funding

Another recurring problem is timing. Technology development doesn't move on fiscal cycles, but funding does, and the two rarely line up. A capability can prove it works at exactly the wrong moment—after funds are committed, outside a budget window, or without any way to move money quickly enough to act on it. You see this in Cases 1 and 3: the interest is real, the capability is ready, and there is a clear use case, but there's no funding available when it matters. Nothing moves.

Unlike contracting delays, this problem is easy to miss because it looks like a pause rather than a failure. In practice, it often ends the effort. By the time funding becomes available—if it does—the team has moved on, priorities have shifted, or the company has redirected its focus. These aren't technical misses; they're timing misses, and they show how even well-aligned efforts can stall for reasons that have nothing to do with performance. The next issue builds on this: even when funding and timing do line up, there is often no clear mechanism for turning demand into action.

Demand Signal Suppression: Interest Without Advocacy

Operational demand for new technology is usually real, but it rarely turns into action. Operators recognize what works, point to clear use cases, and often ask for more. That shows up consistently in Cases 1 and 2.

The problem is that this demand rarely moves beyond informal. Interest comes through conversations, follow-up emails, and requests for additional demos, but does not convert into

requirements, funding, or a contract. Operators don't have a direct way to translate what they see in the field into actionable acquisition decisions.

As a result, demand gets stuck at the tactical level. A capability can be proven and wanted, but still go nowhere because the people who need it aren't the ones who can buy it.

This creates a gap between validation and execution. The system allows operators to confirm that something works, but it doesn't give them a way to carry that signal forward.

Synthesis

Across all cases, the break doesn't happen at technical validation—it happens after, when a proven capability has to turn into action. The system has improved its ability to find solutions and get them in front of the right people, but it still struggles with what comes next. Ownership remains unclear, funding doesn't line up when it matters, and getting new technology to contract takes too long. Taken together, these issues create a consistent pattern: momentum builds early, then fades before anything is executed. The problem is not a lack of innovation; it is the system's inability to carry it through.

What Actually Works

The patterns identified in the previous section highlight systemic barriers to transition. However, they do not suggest that transition is impossible. Across multiple engagements, a consistent set of practices emerges that significantly improves the likelihood of successful transition.

The following are practical interventions that operate within the existing system.

Direct, Unfiltered Feedback Loops

One of the most useful things in this process is straightforward feedback from operators to companies. Companies need actual input on what works, what doesn't, and whether it is worth pursuing.

For many companies, direct, honest feedback from operators in the field is every bit as valuable as building the technology in the first place. But early demos often get positive reactions, followed by things going quiet. That creates a false sense of progress and leads companies to continue investing time and effort without knowing whether they're on the right track.

When programs provide clear, direct feedback—positive or negative—it changes that dynamic. Companies can adjust quickly, spot gaps early, and decide whether to keep pushing or move on. That saves time on both sides.

This kind of feedback doesn't guarantee transition, but it does something just as important: it filters out what isn't going to work and sharpens what might.

Early Identification of Contracting Pathways

Efforts that move forward focus on the contracting path early, not at the end. In the cases that stall, contracting doesn't come up until after a demo, when momentum is already fading. In the ones that work, someone starts asking the basic questions up front: who would sponsor this, what vehicle could it go on, and how long would it realistically take?

That early clarity shapes everything that follows. It changes how the capability is presented, who gets involved, and whether the effort is worth continuing at all. Even if the path is not fully worked out, having a plausible way forward keeps the effort grounded in reality.

When stakeholders skip that step, the effort usually runs out of road after early success.

Assignment of a Transition Owner

Successful transitions almost always have a clear owner. In cases that move forward, a specific person or organization is identified with clear responsibility for getting the effort across the line.

That role goes beyond a technical point of contact. It means having enough authority—formal or informal—to push the effort across organizational boundaries, stay engaged over time, and take responsibility for the outcome. In practice, this "quarterback" function is often informal, but it shows up consistently when something works.

When no one fills that role, the effort stalls. Responsibility spreads across stakeholders, follow-ups lose urgency, and next steps don't materialize. Momentum fades because no one is accountable for keeping it moving.

When someone does take ownership, the dynamic shifts. Coordination improves, timelines tighten, and obstacles get worked instead of sitting. This is what turns early interest into sustained progress, and without it, even strong efforts tend to stall.

Early and Sustained Operator Engagement

Operator engagement works best when it starts early and continues throughout the effort. In the efforts that move forward, interaction with end users is an ongoing part of the process.

That engagement shapes the capability as it develops. Operators weigh in during early evaluation, give feedback during testing, and stay involved as the system evolves. The result is a capability that better reflects how it will actually be used, and a user community that is familiar with it.

This does two things. It improves the fit between the capability and the mission, and it builds trust with the warfighters who might eventually use it. Both matter. A technically sound solution that no one recognizes or trusts is unlikely to move forward.

Operator engagement on its own does not guarantee transition. Without it, though, capabilities tend to lose relevance or visibility before they ever get close to contract.

Intermediary-Driven Navigation

Many of the efforts that move forward have one thing in common: someone is helping navigate the system. In practice, that role is often filled by intermediary organizations that understand both the technology side and how the DoD actually works.

Their value goes beyond making introductions. They help companies get in front of the right stakeholders, find the right places to test, and work through the contracting options that come after. Just as important, they stay involved, keeping the effort moving as it crosses organizational boundaries and stalls out.

That continuity matters. Without it, momentum fades between meetings, handoffs, and delays. With it, progress tends to hold.

This support is especially important for small and non-traditional companies, which usually lack the time and internal resources to figure out the system on their own.

Building Transition Conditions Early

These elements tend to show up together, not in isolation. A representative example helps illustrate how they combine in practice.

In one case, a company developing AI-enabled mission planning software engaged early with operational stakeholders through structured introductions and targeted events. Instead of

relying on a single demonstration, the company interacted repeatedly with military end users, with feedback incorporated across multiple rounds of testing. That kept the capability aligned with how it would actually be used.

At the same time, PNDC staff kept the effort moving—getting the company in front of the right units, preparing it for engagements, and aligning the capability with mission priorities as it evolved. They also maintained continuity between engagements, so progress didn't stall.

The result was steady movement. The company moved into operational testing, began integrating with mission-relevant data environments, and picked up follow-on opportunities. More importantly, the company maintained momentum, translating early interest into continued progress.

The takeaway is straightforward: transition cannot merely be something that happens at the end. It takes shape early, when engagement, ownership, and a viable path to contract are all in place and sustained.

Synthesis

Across these examples, the pattern is clear: transition doesn't require a new system, but it does require someone to make it happen. The pieces already exist—contracting paths, operators, funding—they just don't come together on their own.

When teams line those pieces up early by identifying a path to contract, staying engaged with operators, and assigning clear ownership, momentum holds and the effort moves forward. When they don't, even strong technologies stall after early success.

Transition isn't automatic. Someone must drive it.

Recommendations

The issues in this paper aren't about missing authorities or lack of innovation. The system already has what it needs. The problem shows up at the moment a capability has to move from interest to contract.

Big structural changes are not required to fix this. There are practical steps that can make the system work better in that moment.

The recommendations below are grouped into three categories: actions that program managers, contracting offices, and transition partners can implement immediately; program-level adjustments that require changes within specific initiatives; and broader shifts in how the DoD approaches transition.

Tier 1: Low-Friction, Immediately Implementable Actions

These actions require minimal new authority and can be implemented within existing programs and organizations.

Require Early Identification of Contracting Pathways

Programs should identify potential contracting pathways at the outset of engagement, not after demonstration. Even provisional clarity on how a capability could transition helps align expectations and decision-making throughout the process.

Assign a Transition Owner

Every effort should have a clearly designated individual responsible for driving transition from demonstration to contract. This role must extend beyond technical oversight and include responsibility for coordination, stakeholder alignment, and follow-through.

Enable Operator Demand Signaling

Program offices and contracting organizations should create clear ways for operators to formally express demand for the capabilities they evaluate. This can include letters of support, structured feedback tied to acquisition processes, or other documented endorsements that influence funding decisions.

Set Realistic Timeline Expectations

Programs should explicitly communicate expected timelines for testing, contracting, and transition. Aligning expectations early reduces friction and prevents false signals of progress.

Tier 2: Structural Adjustments

These changes require modification of program structures or policies but can be implemented within existing authorities.

Allow Phase Compression in SBIR and Similar Programs

Programs should permit accelerated progression when technical performance and operational demand justify it. Forcing adherence to fixed timelines despite demonstrated readiness creates unnecessary delay.

Tie Program Success to Transition Outcomes

Innovation programs should measure success based on transition metrics—such as Phase III awards, contract obligations, or fielded capability—rather than engagement metrics alone.

Create Flexible Funding Bridges

Introduce mechanisms that allow funding to be applied when technologies are ready, rather than when fiscal cycles dictate. This could include reserve funds, rapid reprogramming authority, or bridge funding between phases.

Clarify Responsibility Across Organizations

When multiple organizations are involved, program leaders should clearly define who owns each part of the transition. This reduces coordination friction and prevents ownership gaps.

Tier 3: Strategic Shifts

These recommendations reflect broader changes in how the DoD approaches transition.

Treat Transition as a Distinct Phase

DoD leadership and program offices should treat transition as its own phase of the life cycle, with defined ownership, dedicated resources, and clear metrics. They should not assume it will happen automatically after prototyping or experimentation.

Align Incentives with Execution, Not Engagement

Program leaders should reward getting capabilities into use, not just starting activity. That means adjusting evaluation criteria, funding structures, and reporting to prioritize completed transitions.

Institutionalize the "Quarterback" Function

Program offices and transition partners should assign and formalize a transition owner for each effort. That role coordinates across organizations and keeps the effort moving to contract.

Synthesis

These recommendations don't require a new system. The authorities, funding mechanisms, and pathways already exist. The problem is what happens when something must move to contract.

Consistency is what is missing. Ownership isn't always clear, funding doesn't show up when needed, and contracting takes too long to keep momentum. When those pieces don't line up, even strong efforts stall.

The issue isn't a lack of pathways, it's that no one owns them, funding rarely arrives at the right time, and getting something on contract is harder than it should be.

Conclusion

Across programs, services, and contracting pathways, the same pattern shows up: failure in defense innovation rarely occurs at technical validation. It happens at the moment when a proven capability has to turn into action.

The case studies in this paper show how that plays out. Technologies generate operator interest, perform in testing, and align with mission needs—but still fail to move forward. The problem isn't whether the capability works. It's what happens next. Contracting paths are unclear, funding doesn't line up, responsibility is diffuse, and operator demand stays informal. Momentum builds early, then fades before anything is executed.

These outcomes are not one-offs. They repeat because they reflect how the system behaves.

At the same time, the analysis shows that transition does happen under the right conditions. When someone identifies a path to contract early, owns the effort, stays engaged with operators, and keeps the work moving across organizations, progress holds. None of this requires new authorities—it requires using the system deliberately.

The DoD has improved its ability to find and test new technology. It has not improved at moving that technology into use. The issue isn't innovation—it's follow-through.

Fixing the last mile doesn't require redesigning the acquisition system. It requires clarity, ownership, and timing at the point where something has to get on contract. Until that becomes consistent, promising capabilities will continue to stall.

The last mile is not a mystery. It takes early ownership, a clear path, and someone pushing it forward.

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