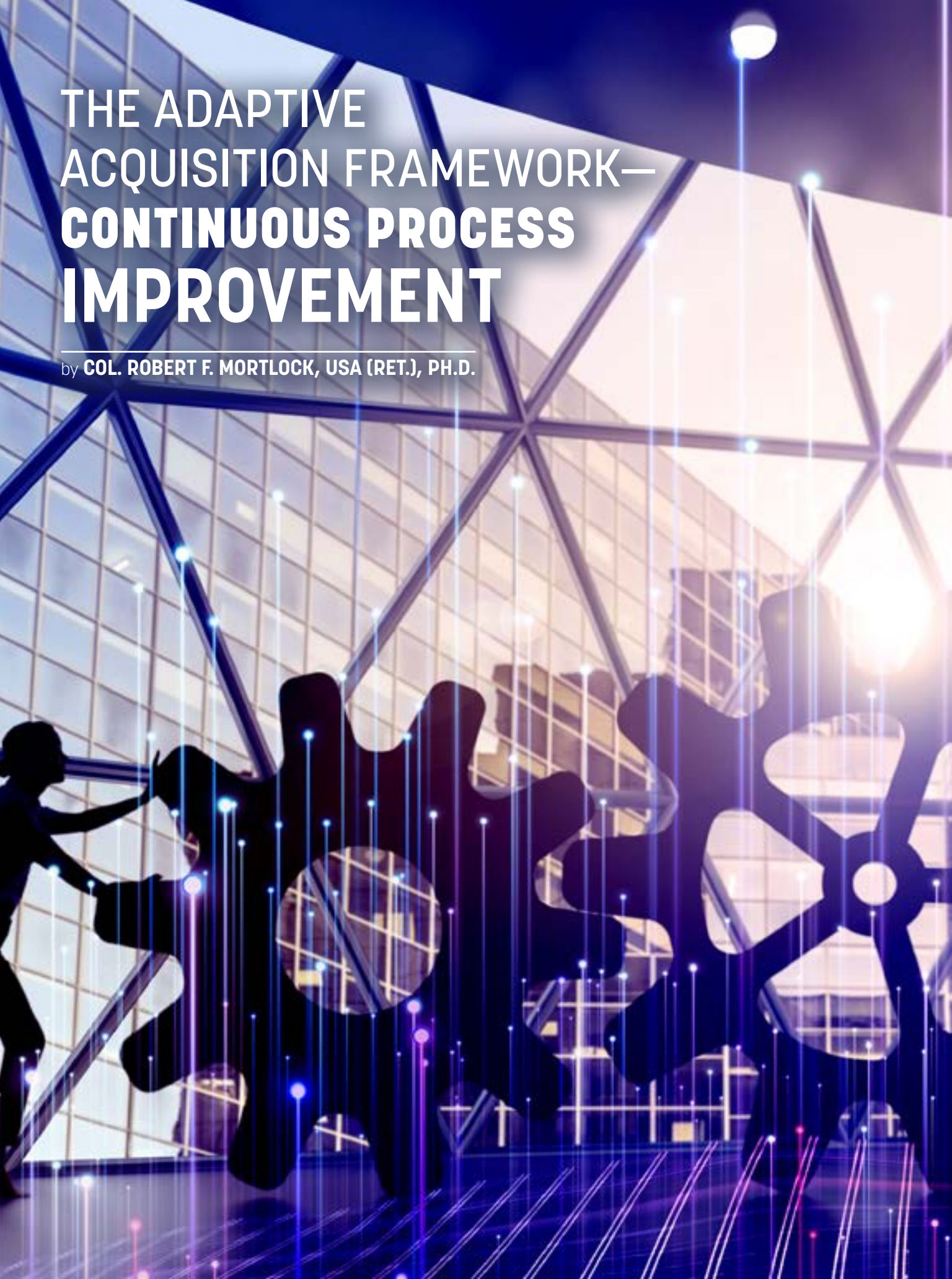


# THE ADAPTIVE ACQUISITION FRAMEWORK— CONTINUOUS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

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**D**efense acquisition faces many criticisms: unresponsive, too complicated, too process-oriented, and too bureaucratic. Annual Government Accountability Office assessments repeatedly report that numerous acquisition programs are behind schedule, over budget, or fail to deliver the required capabilities. The root causes of these failures are well documented: unstable requirements, unstable budgets, too much schedule risk, immature technologies, or immature manufacturing processes.

To partially address these failures, the DoD recently updated the defense acquisition 5000 series regulations, most notably by adoption of the Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF). Just as the acquisition reform initiatives emphasize the need for flexibility, responsiveness, and continuous improvement, these policy documents require due consideration of recommended changes.

I propose that two AAF improvements would increase clarity and dispel misperceptions. The first change would highlight the inherent responsiveness of the Major Capability Acquisition pathway, and the second recommendation would clarify the rapid fielding option within the Middle Tier of Acquisition pathway.

### Defense Acquisition Policy Reform Documents

The updated DoD Directive (DoDD) 5000.01, *The Defense Acquisition System*, dated Sept. 9, 2020, and the DoD Instruction (DoDI) 5000.02, *Operation of the Adaptive Acquisition Framework*, dated Jan. 23, 2020, outline important policy reforms affecting delivery of capabilities to Warfighters. The AAF formalized six different pathways that can be leveraged by program managers (PMs) to develop appropriate, tailored acquisition approaches.

The first overarching policy from DoDD 5000.01 is “Deliver Performance at the Speed of Relevance.”

This policy implies that the milestone decision authority (MDA) and PM are empowered to tailor acquisition approaches by using the various AAF pathways. Another DoDD 5000.01 overarching policy is “Be Responsive,” which is defined as operating so that “advanced technology will be integrated into developmental prototypes and production systems, and deployed to the operational community *as soon as possible* [emphasis added].” It adds that, “Approved, time-phased capability needs, matched with available technology and resources, will enable incremental acquisition strategies and continuous capability improvement.”

### Major Capability Acquisition Pathway

The DoDI 5000.02 states that the AAF should operate “with the objective of delivering effective, suitable, survivable, sustainable, and affordable solutions to the end user *in a timely manner* [emphasis added].” PMs and MDAs are encouraged to leverage a combination of AAF pathways.

The problem is that the Major Capability Acquisition (MCA) pathway, intended “to acquire and modernize military unique programs that provide enduring capability,” is presented as a structured, linear, waterfall approach with sequential phases. This representation is misleading and creates the impression that the MCA pathway conflicts with the two overarching policies: “Deliver Performance at the



U.S. Army Sgt. Kobi Englund assigned to the 40th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division investigates the Soldier Borne Sensor, a unmanned aerial system designed for reconnaissance on Fort Bliss June 9, 2023. Soldiers from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team can skillfully deploy the Soldier Borne Sensor, providing real-time intelligence on enemy positions and minimizing risk during recon missions.

Source: U.S. Army photo by Spc. Trevares Johnson  
Photo cropped to show detail.

Speed of Relevance” and “Be Responsive.” The MCA pathway incorporates responsiveness, flexibility, and tailorability in acquisition approaches. The key is understanding the importance of the Materiel Development Decision (MDD).

DoDI 5000.85, *Major Capability Acquisition*, updated Nov. 4, 2021, inadequately explains the significance of the MDD and how it relates to delivering performance at the speed of relevance. DoDI 5000.85 states that “the MDD is the mandatory entry point into the major capability acquisition process and is informed by a validated requirements document.” Furthermore, the MDA determines “the acquisition phase of entry and the initial review milestone.” However, the policy docu-

**PMS AND MDAS ARE ENCOURAGED TO LEVERAGE A COMBINATION OF AAF PATHWAYS.**



ment does not explain how the MDA should make that decision nor does it highlight the links to DoDD 5000.01 overarching policies. At the MDD, the MDA decides the initial milestone based primarily on the following three critical factors:

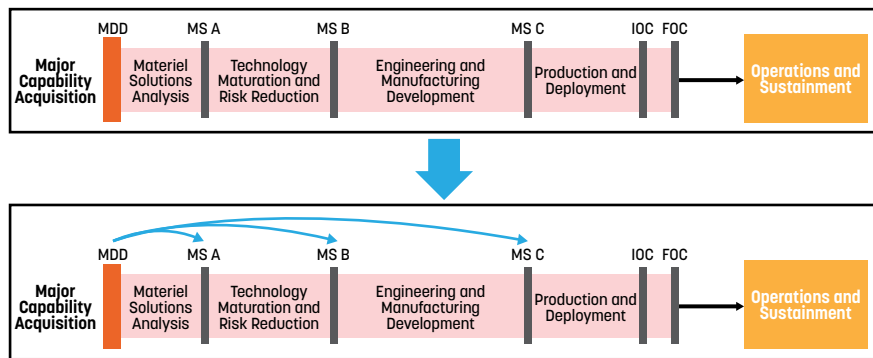
1. The urgency of the need (the required date for initial operational capability from the validated requirement).
2. The technology readiness level of critical technologies and manufacturing readiness level of critical processes (assessed from the proposed design and proposed manufacturing processes needed to achieve the desired capability from the validated requirement).
3. The availability of resources (primarily funding, as well as capacity/capability of the industrial base).

A change to the MCA pathway is proposed in Figure 1. This change highlights the importance of the MDD and how the MCA pathway is inherently responsive and delivering at the speed of relevance.

Can an acquisition program using the MCA pathway rapidly progress from Milestone A to Full Operational Capability? Absolutely. And acquisition literature is replete with countless examples of acquisition programs of record that have delivered enduring warfighting capabilities in a timely manner. If there is an urgent need, available resources, mature technologies, mature manufacturing processes, and capable industrial base vendors with capacity, the MDA can authorize the PM to go from MDD to Milestone C and begin production and deployment. If, however, the required capability needs extensive system integration or maturation of manufacturing processes, the more appropriate action is to go from MDD to Milestone B.

Finally, if the critical technologies are immature, a technology maturation and risk reduction phase is most appropriate. Can the MDA authorize a program to begin at Milestone C with

**Figure 1. Major Capability Acquisition Pathway**



Note. FOC = Full Operational Capability; IOC = Initial Operational Capability; MDD = Materiel Development Decision; MS = Milestone.

immature technologies and manufacturing processes? Yes. However, the likelihood of success and delivery of an enduring capability is minimal. Many examples are examined in acquisition literature that clearly convey the imprudence of programs rushed to failure and eventually canceled with no delivered capability.

To deliver at the speed of relevance and be responsive, a program must enter the MCA pathway at the most appropriate milestone based on the critical decision factors. Adding the arrows showing the three options available within the MCA pathways (Figure 1) highlights this inherent flexibility.

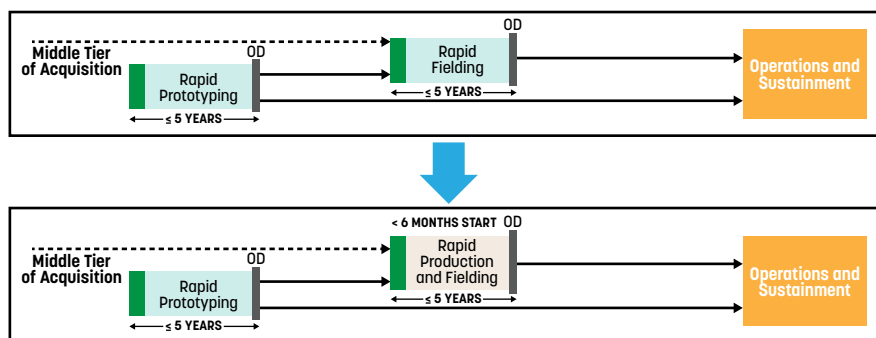
### Middle Tier of Acquisition Pathway

The second recommended improvement of the AAF depicts and names the Rapid Fielding option within the Middle Tier of Acquisition (MTA) pathway. According to both DoDI 5000.02 and DoDI 5000.80,

**Operation of the Middle Tier of Acquisition**, dated Dec. 30, 2019, the purpose is to “rapidly [emphasis added] field production quantities of systems with proven technologies that require minimal development. The objective of an acquisition program under this path will be to begin production within 6 months and complete fielding within 5 years of the MTA program start date.” Within the Rapid Fielding option, there are the following two proposed improvements:

1. Change the name of the option from “Rapid Fielding” to “Rapid Production and Fielding” to capture both the purpose and objective of this MTA pathway option.
2. Add a clarification phrase “< 6 months start” above the Rapid Production and Fielding block to distinguish the “< 6 months start” from the “< 5 years” completion timeline. Without this addition, it is difficult to distinguish this pathway as faster than using the Urgent Capability Acquisition

**Figure 2. Middle Tier of Acquisition Pathway**



pathway (timeline “< 2 years”) or the MCA pathway, which could go from MDD straight to Milestone C (to enter Production and Deployment phase). Figure 2 shows these proposed improvements to the MTA pathway.

### An Improved AAF

Adoption of the AAF was a step in the right direction in addressing the root causes of past acquisition failures and achieving the overarching policy objectives of DoDD 5000.01. Adoption of the changes proposed in this article would demonstrate that acquisition regulations and policies are also adaptive, flexible, and committed to continuous improvement.

Figure 3 displays the improved AAF. These changes directly support

the priorities and guidance that Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Dr. William LaPlante has clearly stated: “production is readiness” and “production is what matters,” and defense acquisition must pivot to “production, production, production.”

These improvements to the depiction of the MCA and MTA pathways stress the importance of production phases within the AAF pathways, responsiveness of the AAF pathways, and delivering capability at the speed of relevance.

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## DAU RESOURCES

- [AAF DoD Quick Reference Guide](#)
- [DAU AAF Online Section](#)

**Figure 3. The Proposed, Improved Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF)**

