DOD ACQUISITION REFORM

Military Departments Should Take Steps to Facilitate Speed and Innovation

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD struggles to promptly deliver capabilities to its warfighters. The 2022 National Defense Strategy emphasized increasing the speed of delivery to meet emerging threats. GAO found in July 2023 (GAO-23-106222) that leading companies iteratively develop cyber-physical products with speed.

House and Senate reports include provisions for GAO to assess the military departments' approaches to implementing DOD's adaptive acquisition framework and incorporating leading practices for product development. This report describes the departments' implementation of the framework and assesses the extent to which their approaches are designed to facilitate speed and innovation in acquisition. To do this work, GAO interviewed officials and reviewed relevant policies and guidance from DOD and the three military departments. GAO selected nine acquisition programs, including at least one from each department, and interviewed program officials and reviewed documentation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of six recommendations to the departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force to each revise acquisition policies and guidance for weapon systems and designate one or more new cyber-physical capabilities as pilot programs that provide lessons learned on using leading practices for each pathway. DOD concurred with four recommendations, and partially concurred with two to the Army, stating that the Army did not consider them fully applicable to a specific pathway. GAO maintains their applicability.

View GAO-25-107003. For more information, contact Shelby S. Oakley at (202) 512-4841 or oakleys@gao.gov.
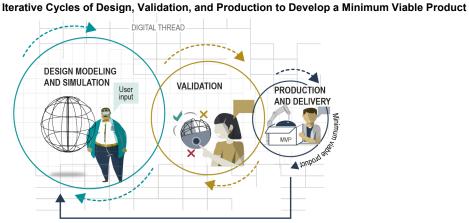
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) revamped its acquisition policies in 2020, with the intent to deliver innovative technologies to the user more quickly. These reforms, known collectively as the "adaptive acquisition framework," established four pathways that weapon system acquisition programs can follow: urgent capability, middle tier, major capability, and software.

Each military department issued policies in alignment with DOD's goals and framework, but these policies do not consistently reflect leading practices. In July 2023, GAO found that leading companies use an iterative development structure that includes continuous cycles of design modeling, validation, and production. These iterative processes enable the companies to get products that combine hardware and software—known as cyber-physical products—to market quickly. The continuous cycles allow the companies to gain specific knowledge, such as assurance that the design meets the most essential user needs.

Iterative Cycles of Design, Validation, and Production to Develop a Minimum Viable Product

Source: GAO analysis of leading company information; GAO (illustration). | GAO-25-107003

While military departments' policies for the software acquisition pathway fully incorporated an iterative development structure, GAO did not find a full structure of iterative development for the urgent capability, middle tier, and major capability acquisition pathways. For example, while Air Force and Navy urgent capability acquisition policies discussed how to refine requirements, they did not include other elements of iterative development such as information on applying user feedback to ensure the design meets essential user needs. Without revised policies and guidance on and examples of how programs can use an iterative development approach, programs across pathways are missing opportunities to deliver capabilities with speed and innovation.

The programs GAO reviewed had different understandings of iterative development. Moreover, some program officials stated that they did not think it applied to or was feasible for their program. A pilot program, resulting in practical examples of cyber-physical products that have used an iterative development structure, could provide future programs with lessons learned and opportunities to acquire weapon systems faster.

United States Government Accountability Office