

Providing Acquisition Authority to Combatant Commands in the DoD

The pace of need for combatant commands (CCMDs) often exceeds the pace of delivery from the defense acquisition community. Addressing urgent and dynamic operational capability gaps requires a more responsive and flexible approach than the acquisition process typically accommodates.

The current acquisition system is widely viewed as slow and inefficient, unable to respond to the pace of change in the operational environment. Delegating acquisition authority to CCMDs is one way to provide more tailored and timely responses to theater-specific requirements. CCMDs primary acquisition needs are typically software intensive capabilities, and Automated Information Systems/ Services that require integration to provide a global or joint capability. These capabilities typically support the CCMDs in the areas of Planning, Battlespace Awareness, Command and Control (C2), Combatant Command Planning, Cyber Security, Fires, Targeting, Logistics and ultimately support advanced decision making for the Joint Force Commander (JFC) down to the Joint Task Forces (JTF). This paper presents several options for what this authority might look like and addresses the challenges and risks of each. It offers a recommended way ahead that aims to give CCMDs more direct influence in the acquisition process and thus faster access to the capabilities they need.

Background on DoD Acquisition Authority

Currently, most CCMDs do not possess independent acquisition authority (USSOCOM and USCYBERCOM are exceptions and discussed as examples below). Another unique example is US Transportation Command's Program Executive Office (PEO-T) responsible for managing acquisition programs and providing program-related support to USTRANSCOM's mission. Otherwise, CCMDs, rely on the military services and acquisition agencies to provide capabilities that address their operational needs. This structure often results in delays, inefficiencies, and misalignment between requirements and procurement timelines.

CCMDs operating in dynamic and contested environments, such as the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), require the ability to procure mission-critical capabilities swiftly. Without the flexibility to acquire the resources they need, CCMDs risk being outpaced by emerging threats and unable to execute their missions effectively.

Key Questions

- Why is the current defense acquisition system unable to meet the needs of Combatant Commands (CCMDs)?
- How might acquisition authority be delegated to CCMDs, and how might they address operational capability gaps?
- What lessons can be learned from existing precedents, such as SOCOM, JRAC, and experimentation programs, to inform future acquisition strategies for CCMDs?

Specific Authorities Needed for CCMDs

Granting CCMDs acquisition authorities requires movement in several key areas. First, they need the ability to sign contracts and agreements, including the use of mechanisms such as Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs) and Other Transaction (OT) authorities. These tools would reduce administrative bottlenecks and ensure that CCMDs can act quickly.

Budget authority is another critical factor, as CCMDs must be able to allocate, prioritize, and manage the funding for these contracts. A more agile funding structure would allow them to respond to crises and emerging threats without working through lengthy and bureaucratic budget cycles.

Establishing these authorities would require considerable changes to legislation and policy. The full list of practical steps necessary to delegate and implement these authorities effectively is beyond the scope of this brief paper, but the magnitude of the challenge should be kept in mind.

In addition to those authorities, the DoD must provide clear guidance to define the scope of each CCMD's contracting and purchasing power—several versions of which are described below. Similarly, ensuring proper oversight, accountability, and regulatory compliance will be crucial in maintaining the integrity of delegated acquisition activities.

Options for Delegating Acquisition Authority to CCMDs

Delegating acquisition authority to CCMDs could happen in several ways. One approach is **full delegation**, in which CCMDs are

granted independent acquisition authority, allowing them to procure whatever systems and capabilities they determine necessary. While this option maximizes flexibility and responsiveness, it also requires the most significant changes to legislation, policy, and appropriations. Further, it introduces the most risks and challenges, including the need for staffing, funding, and retaining a dedicated acquisition cadre within each CCMD, with the appropriate training and tools necessary to perform this function within the command. Finally, it carries the highest risk of developing systems that are redundant and/or incompatible with the other efforts across the DoD enterprise.

A second approach is **partial delegation**, where each CCMD is provided with limited authority for acquiring certain types of command-specific capabilities, for predefined scenarios and missions. This option aims to strike a balance between autonomy and oversight, while mitigating some of the risks inherent in full delegation. Nevertheless, this also requires considerable coordination and would require major adjustments to legislation, policy, appropriations, and workforce allocations. For example; SOCOM acquisition authority established in 1987 acquires about \$2B annually across a portfolio of approximately 20 programs (no CAT 1 programs as of January 1, 2018), with an acquisition workforce of 500 people (including civilian and military personnel), and 8 PEOs.¹ An exhaustive appreciation of the implementation of this capability and resources necessary to achieve this option may be gleaned through assessing the process from establishment to maturation of SOCOM's Major Force Program (MFP) 11 authority.

A third option is an **integration or hybrid model**, which would involve establishing closer, formal connections between each CCMD and existing acquisition organizations, removing some of the bureaucratic barriers and middlemen that currently add delays and complexity to the process. This aims to enhance collaboration and increase each CCMD's involvement in procurement decisions. This model ensures each CCMD has a stronger voice in the acquisition of relevant systems, without having to make significant changes to law, policy, appropriations, or workforce structures. It maintains regulatory safeguards and leverages existing coordination and deconfliction structures to minimize redundancy and ensure interoperability and sustainability. This is starting to occur organically in the evolution of geographic CCMD relationships with organizations like Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), Joint Rapid Acquisition Cell (JRAC) and the implementation of Competitive Advantage Pathfinders (CAP) run from the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment in a newly created Acquisition Integration and Interoperability Office.

In addition, between 2004 and 2010, US Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) was granted Limited Acquisition Authority (LAA) under specific provisions of the law to facilitate its mission of improving joint interoperability and advancing warfighting concepts. This authority allowed the command to rapidly prototype, test, and field experimental capabilities that could enhance joint operations. The goal was to bridge the

1. United States Special Operations Command Acquisition Authorities, updated 9 July, 2018 by Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>

gap between concept development and operational implementation, especially in scenarios where traditional acquisition processes were too slow to meet urgent needs. A [GAO report from 2006](#) offers a generally positive assessment of this experiment, noting “During the first 2 years, fiscal years 2004 and 2005, JFCOM used LAA for six projects. Five were completed 2 to 17 months after being approved... these projects accelerated capabilities to the warfighter by providing 60- to 80-percent interim solutions rather than waiting years for a 100-percent solution.” The report also observes that JFCOM relied on external organizations for contracting and acquisition activities, and notes some challenges with securing necessary funding and sustainment support.

Challenges, Barriers, and Risks

As mentioned previously, delegating acquisition authority to CCMDs is possible but introduces challenges. The effort required to address current legal and policy constraints is considerable. Once those hurdles are cleared, the CCMDs would also need to establish internal structures that give them access to the infrastructure and skills necessary to comply with the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and DoD acquisition instructions.

From a technical perspective, independently acquired capabilities must integrate with other components in the joint force. If CCMDs acquire new systems independently, there is a risk of delivering systems that are not interoperable or are redundant with other capabilities.

Financial oversight and accountability present another significant challenge,

as any increase in acquisition authority must be accompanied by financial reporting as well as measures to mitigate risks such as inefficiencies, mismanagement, or fraud.

Finally, CCMDs currently lack acquisition expertise, making workforce development and training essential components of any delegation strategy. Adding a cadre of acquisition specialists to each CCMD would increase the size and complexity of those organizations.

Precedents and Case Studies

The United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is an example of a CCMD with acquisition authority and a track record of successful delivery (and USCYBERCOM recently implemented a similar model). SOCOM cracked the code on how to integrate acquisition professionals with operators, demonstrating how decentralized procurement can enhance mission effectiveness. It does so in several ways. First, SOCOM is relatively small and has a focused mission—operationally and developmentally. SOCOM acquisition efforts are limited to SOF-specific capabilities, and the developers and operators are literally down the hall from one another. SOCOM should generally be considered an example of Option Two above (partial delegation). It is worth noting that SOCOM spent over a decade establishing and staffing this organization.

The GAO issued a report titled “[An Analysis of the Special Operations Command’s Management of Weapon System Programs](#),” which made the following observation: “SOCOM has undertaken a diverse set of acquisition programs that are consistent with the command’s mission to provide

equipment that addresses the unique needs of the Special Operations Forces.... About 88 percent of the programs are relatively small, have short acquisition cycles, and use modified commercial off-the-shelf and non-developmental items or modify existing service equipment and assets... About 60 percent of the acquisition programs SOCOM has undertaken since 2001 have progressed as planned, staying within the original cost and schedule estimates.”

The JRAC, which is responsible for addressing Joint Urgent Operational Needs (JUONs), represents a hybrid model, leveraging existing acquisition structures, authorities, and pathways, while enabling rapid procurement in close coordination between acquisitions and warfighters in CCMDs. This approach emphasizes partnerships between the operational and developmental communities, ensuring that emerging requirements are understood, aligned, and addressed quickly. Note that since the JRAC lacks a dedicated budget line, they must reprioritize and reprogram funds from existing programs, an ad hoc process that is slow and disruptive to existing programs.

According to an [article in AFCEA’s Signal Magazine](#), “The JRAC has been instrumental in fielding a wide array of capabilities from ballistic protection for individual soldiers to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, including aerostats, which have become essential in providing situational awareness in Afghanistan.”

Combatant Command Experimentation Programs (e.g. CAP), such as those implemented by USINDOPACOM for the Joint Fires Network (JFN) effort, provide another valuable precedent. These

initiatives allow for pilot programs tailored to specific regional and operational needs (aka command-specific capabilities), offering a controlled environment to test and refine new acquisition models before broader implementation. This also leverages acquisition expertise without the need for new legislation, policy, appropriations, or organizational shifts.

needs while avoiding unnecessary duplication or mismanagement.

Establishing this hybrid model begins with three steps. First, establishing clear guidelines for building stronger partnerships between each CCMD and acquisition organizations. Second, establishing mechanisms for cross-CCMD collaboration to avoid

redundancy and inefficiencies. Third, bring systems engineering discipline to ensure interoperability of each CCMDs' systems. Once established, the table below provides a set of guidelines and screening criteria to ensure the CCMDs acquisition efforts are appropriate to the mission and scaled / supported as needed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The integration / hybrid model is likely to be the most realistic, feasible, and effective solution for the CCMDs to have more influence over and to expedite capability delivery to keep pace with evolving threats. It provides CCMDs with greater influence over procurement decisions while maintaining oversight and regulatory compliance and without requiring extensive new legislative and policy efforts, and without having to establish new acquisition expertise and oversight mechanisms within the CCMDs. This approach ensures that CCMDs can respond rapidly to mission-critical

CCMD Acquisition Decision Guidelines

NEED	SUITABILITY	MEANS
Is there a well-defined mission need?	Is there a near-term solution available? <i>(i.e. non-development item, commercial solution, existing prototype)</i>	Does the CCMD have the necessary acquisition capacity and expertise?
Is the mission unique to this CCMD?	Does mission engineering demonstrate the value of the capability?	Is sufficient budget in place? <i>(to include multi-year budget commitment, if appropriate)</i>
Is the mission urgent/near-term?	Does the effort require minimal integration, logistics, and sustainment?	Are plans in place for operations, and sustainment?
Is the need not met by existing acquisition programs?	Is it either a software-only capability or an attributable product? Is there little-to-no system integration required?	

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