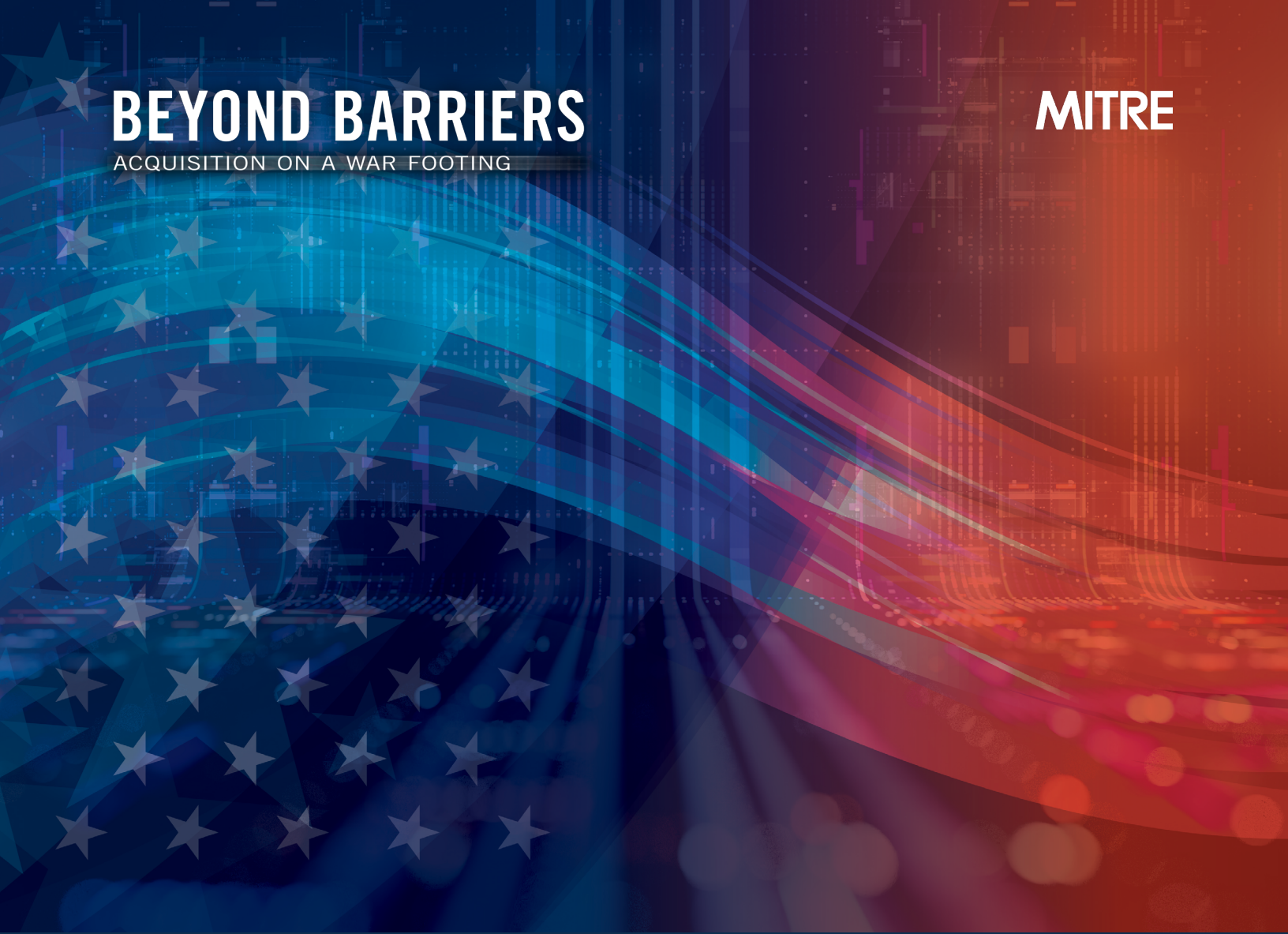




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Accelerating the Fielding of Capabilities for Combatant Commands:

Designating Combatant Commanders as Executive Agents for Joint Operational Problems

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper informs the position to designate any given Combatant Commander (CCDR) as an Executive Agent (EA) for a resourced Joint Operational Problem (JOP) as identified by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC) and the Joint Force Requirements Process (JFRP).

As senior Joint Force Commanders, CCDRs best understand how to integrate and employ capabilities to address JOPs in their specific theater. EA designation^[1] would allow CCDRs to ultimately review, change, and confirm the prioritization of capabilities for JOP resourcing as well as direct the resourcing towards integration requirements to ensure they are developed in a joint manner. Although last year introduced transformative acquisition initiatives aimed at improving the fielding of capabilities for warfighters, CCDRs rely on external processes to meet their joint needs, even for JOPs, often leading to Service-centric solutions with joint integration as an afterthought. Having CCDRs assigned as designated EAs for resourced JOPs would ensure capabilities are delivered to the Joint Force without undue integration delays or domain bias.

REFLECTING ON RECENT ACQUISITION TRANSFORMATION

Calendar year 2025 was one of the most consequential years for warfighting acquisition reform in a generation, consisting of a series of White House Executive Orders, Secretary of War (SecWar) memos, and legislative acts^[2]. These efforts culminated into the replacement of the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System and release of the Department of War (DoW) Acquisition Transformation Strategy (ATS). These reforms strengthen the U.S. Military Services' ability to rapidly meet warfighter needs, particularly through newly established Portfolio Acquisition Executives with expanded authorities to help CCDRs meet decision-making and requirements objectives. Additionally, Section 873 of the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provided new authorities for Combatant Commands (CCMDs) to conduct experimentation, prototyping, and technology demonstrations to accelerate the development and fielding of proven capabilities to meet operational needs. A recent survey indicates general confidence in the direction in which the DoW acquisition system is heading^[3].

Despite these reforms, CCMDs still depend on the resourcing processes of individual Services to address their needs, resulting in capabilities with domain bias and joint integration as an afterthought as Services prioritize their own readiness. This issue results in significant after-the-fact investments, therefore CCMDs rely on Services to add integration requirements into the next budget cycle while the warfighter continues to conduct “swivel chair” analysis^[4, 5, 6]. Even CCMD Experimentation Authority does not come with resources. This emphasizes the reliance on the Services that may be more interested in their specific domain capabilities over Joint needs^[7].

“COMBATANT COMMANDS STILL DEPEND ON THE RESOURCING PROCESSES OF INDIVIDUAL SERVICES TO ADDRESS THEIR NEEDS—RESULTING IN CAPABILITIES WITH DOMAIN BIAS AND JOINT INTEGRATION AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT.”

The ATS acknowledges that current acquisition pathways are not designed for integrated capabilities and systems-of-systems architectures. It recognizes that resourcing integrated, joint portfolio capabilities is important in the acquisition process^[8]. The new JFRP addresses this with the Mission Engineering Integration Activity to evaluate promising approaches through prototype development and integration. This delivers operationally credible, scalable capabilities to address JOPs prioritized by the JROC, using a separate funding pool^[9]. Though CCDRs have input into developing JOPs, only a few are selected by the Requirements and Resourcing Alignment Board (RRAB) for resourcing^[10, 11]. In short, this is akin to each CCDR submitting an Integrated Priorities List. CCDRs remain reliant on a separate entity to prioritize their joint needs, lacking the ability to resource their own capability gaps. Lastly, the reliance on the Services for delivering capabilities to meet resourced JOPs reinforces the challenge with achieving Joint Command & Control (JC2) with Service-centric capabilities. Even establishing a JC2 program office for joint integration of capabilities^[12] would still require an operational demand signal to prioritize resourcing and development. These management arrangements do not fully address the challenges described in this paper, a key tenant for EA designation.

ACCELERATING OPERATIONAL IMPACT WITH EXECUTIVE AGENT DESIGNATION

This paper informs the position that these challenges can be addressed by assigning CCDRs with EA designation to direct resourcing for JOPs, which are considered complex^[13]. Understanding that JOPs are challenges across the Joint Force, they can be decomposed by capability type, specific gap, and/or where it is most geographically or functionally prevalent to the CCDR's AOR, allowing for more than one EA designation per JOP. More than one CCDR may share the same JOP but may have different capability and integration needs for their AOR. On the other hand, having only one EA designation per resourced JOP may be sufficient as joint integrated capabilities delivered for a JOP in a priority AOR may be immediately employable to another.

Such designation would provide CCDRs with the authority to prioritize JOP resources for capabilities that are most prevalent in their AOR while ensuring they are delivered in a joint and integrated manner. This can include the ability to direct resources towards integration requirements for systems and platforms to achieve JC2. CCDRs would also be able to direct prototyping efforts and “Valley of Death” resources and can allow for rapid transition of capabilities, especially when paired with CCMD Experimentation Authority^[14]. This process supports the goal to “deliver integrated, joint capabilities to the CCMDs” as expressed in the ATS^[15] and comports with the JFRP that requires prioritization of JOPs^[16].

“DESIGNATING COMBATANT COMMANDERS AS EXECUTIVE AGENTS FOR JOINT OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEEDED BALANCING OF DEPARTMENT OF WAR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES, SERVICE READINESS, AND COMBATANT COMMAND JOINT NEEDS.”

EA designation, assigned by SecWar or Deputy SecWar but can be delegated (in part or in full) by the EA, requires the ability to deconflict capabilities and coordinate complimentary efforts from the Services, in which CCDRs may need additional resources to execute. However, there is precedence for similar authority. The U.S. Pacific Command has demonstrated success through the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), which has been re-authorized annually since the FY2021 NDAA. PDI has been instrumental in prioritizing and delivering capability improvements to the AOR and enabling the command to move faster, with Joint Fires Network as a joint example^[17].

The authors of this paper also analyzed acquisition authority. However, this requires significant administration, and they are not currently resourced to execute that type of authority. CCMDs do have

pathways with acquisition organizations to transition capabilities with lifecycle funding^[18], making EA designation just as effective. Additionally, CCMD acquisition authority requires legislation whereas EA designation does not. This makes the latter a much feasible pathway that works within existing processes—the JROC prioritizes JOPs, the RRAB selects JOPs to resource, and the Services identify and develop the capabilities to address JOPs. Designating CCDRs as EAs would allow them to prioritize the resourcing of JOP capabilities (to include JC2 requirements) that the Services would deliver so they can be employed in a joint and integrated manner that is prevalent in the AOR. This arrangement would contribute to the needed balancing of DoW strategic priorities, Service readiness, and CCMD joint needs^[19].

CONCLUSION

Assigning EA designation to CCDRs enables an agile structure that would drive innovation for JOPs^[20], serving as a demand signal from the operational level for technology developers.

They would be empowered warfighters who can prioritize resources towards capabilities based on near-term threats and challenges across the Joint Force. This can narrow the “Valley of Death” and accelerate the fielding of joint and integrated capabilities. Lastly, this supports the ATS’s objective of rapidly generating new kill chains by delivering integrated, joint portfolio capabilities in a coordinated manner that aligns with operational demands. Designating CCDRs as EAs for JOPs increases options for the DoW to accelerate the development and fielding of capabilities and fulfill the ATS’s and JFRP’s intent of faster, joint centric warfighter delivery.

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