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We Cannot Wait

Three Imperatives for Industry Partners as the Army Transforms

by MAJ Ryan Crayne, USA, and MAJ Blake Estlund, USA

Introduction

In the most colorful of language, which we will not reprint here, Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll impressed on his audience at AUSA's 2025 Annual Meeting & Exposition that the Army and its industry partners simply cannot "wait to innovate until American Soldiers are dying on the battlefield."[1] The pace of technological change is no longer measured in decades, but in months, and sometimes weeks. Our adversaries are not just adapting—they are accelerating. They are exploiting artificial intelligence, robotics, autonomy, advanced manufacturing and commercial technology at a speed that outpaces traditional defense structures. The Army is responding with sweeping reforms to its acquisition system, its requirements process and its sustainment enterprise. But even with these internal changes, one truth remains: **The Army cannot transform alone. It needs industry partners to match its urgency**. The Army is reorganizing how it defines requirements, consolidating acquisition authorities, accelerating prototyping and dismantling processes that slowed modernization for a generation. It is restructuring program offices, emphasizing rapid acquisition pathways and pushing decision-making closer to the problem. These reforms are meant to unlock speed, but they cannot be achieved if industry continues to operate on traditional timelines, legacy business models, or proprietary sustainment structures. As the Army changes, industry must change with it. That is the challenge and the opportunity, for every Army industry partner reading this. To meet that demand, the Army needs industry partners who are ready to lean into three specific shifts in how we work together.

The Army is reorganizing its acquisition structure and dismantling processes that slowed modernization for a generation—but these reforms cannot succeed without our industry partners changing the way that they operate as well.

The Army's modernization depends on three interlocking imperatives that require industry commitment.

First, we need collaboration from the outset. The Army cannot afford requirement cycles that run for years without industry input. Early dialogue, rapid and iterative experimentation and co-development will shorten capability improvement timelines and produce solutions that are both technologically viable and operationally relevant.

Second, we need a sustainment model that gives Soldiers the ability to repair, modify and adapt systems at the point of need. This requires shared technical data, open architecture and a commitment from industry to design for long-term adaptability rather than long-term dependency. When the force can sustain what it fields, industry gains recurring upgrade opportunities and a more resilient customer.

Third, we need speed to be treated as a requirement. That means transparent supply chains, interoperable designs that work with allies from day one and contracting approaches that allow the Army to move as fast as commercial technology evolves. Industry has a decisive role in enabling this tempo.

The Army is changing fast. We need partners who are willing to change with us. Those who embrace collaboration, shared sustainment responsibility and rapid, transparent development will help shape the next era of U.S. military advantage. As Secretary Driscoll made clear, we cannot wait, and neither can you.

Collaboration Early and Throughout

For those who work with them, the Army's "acquisition" and "modernization" processes can sometimes seem oxymoronic in their names. A major reason has been the divide between those who set requirements and those with the technical expertise to build them. The Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS) exacerbated this problem through years of layered reviews that slowed requirements, delayed funding and spread accountability across multiple organizations.[2] Secretary of the Army Driscoll put one of the final nails in the JCIDS coffin when he said, "Our bureaucratic inefficiencies actually enable our adversaries."[3] The DoW is now dismantling JCIDS and replacing it with a structure built for speed and direct collaboration; internally, the Army is restructuring commands to facilitate this move today.

Previously, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology (ASA/ALT) operated 12 Program Executive Offices, while Army Futures Command (AFC) managed requirements and Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) integrated these requirements into institutional doctrine. That fragmentation is ending. ASA/ALT, with the newly formed Transformation and Training Command (T2COM), merges AFC and TRADOC while adopting a dual-support framework that unifies requirement generation and acquisition authority. This structure consolidates efforts into six Program Acquisition Executives (PAEs), each responsible for a major capability area aligned to Army Warfighting Functions. These PAEs, supported by Capability Program Executives, will have the authority to align resources, accept prudent risk and make modernization trades directly with senior leaders.[4] PAEs are also staffed with embedded enabler support, including contracting, testing, science and technology, and programming roles. Centers of Excellence Commanders at our major training installations are supporting this as well by serving as deputy PAEs to bring deeper technical insight into every decision.[5]

Army leaders are already framing this structural shift as a shared project with industry. At the inaugural AUSA LANDEURO Symposium in Wiesbaden, General Christopher Donahue, Commanding General of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, underscored the need for early, sustained collaboration with industry partners: "With industry, we can tell you exactly what we need. Very specifically, what we would like you to start to look at is anything that we develop has to be interoperable with allies."[6] From an acquisition perspective, Patrick Mason, Acting Principal Deputy to the ASA/ALT, reinforced this view. His comments harken back to the days of World War II and the "arsenal of democracy." He argued that the Army must integrate with industrial partners "here on the continent of Europe, over in the Indo-Pacific, and as well as within the United States" to "scale with speed" and meet demands across a dynamic global environment.[7] A collaborative effort at this scale feels like a Super Bowl halftime show, but it doesn't need dancing sharks or Alicia Keys. It does, however, need our industry partners to start making key changes to their business practices and design methodology with collaboration in mind.

Industry must design alongside operators from the start. Ukraine demonstrates why this approach works in their post-2022 acquisition model. By integrating frontline feedback and commercial innovation, Ukraine brought troops, engineers and private firms together at the point of need. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, this shift enabled Ukraine to field new drone variants in six to eight weeks, with software updates

reaching units "within days." What previously took years is now measured in months or weeks, particularly for unmanned systems where rapid iteration saves lives by addressing defects and operational needs in real time without waiting for slow approval cycles.[8] While the U.S. system differs from what's been happening in Ukraine, the Army is nevertheless adopting the principles of engaging directly with frontline Soldiers. The U.S. Army continues to leverage the "Trail Boss Construct" as a way to facilitate end-to-end collaboration between Soldiers and industry partners. In this construct, a dedicated Army acquisition representative is the "Trail Boss" who works directly with vendors during Soldier feedback events and testing.[9] Acting as a single point of coordination, this "Trail Boss" links industry partners, engineers and operational units to capture real-time Soldier feedback in training events. For industry partners, this is the direction of travel. Companies that build their development cycles around early Soldier touchpoints will shorten timelines, lower rework costs and produce solutions that meet operational demands from the outset. This same collaborative logic applies when we zoom out on our map and look at our allies.

Collaboration cannot stop at national borders. General Donahue's call for a "collective defense industrial base" among NATO allies and partners highlights the importance of **multinational co-production and shared technical standards**.[10] NATO is doubling down on its commitment to foster interoperability and collaboration. NATO's recent pledge in 2024 to expand industry capacity highlights allied leaders' agreement to increase large-scale multinational procurement and to reinforce interoperable standards. Further still, action plans among NATO allies are being signed to codevelop and coproduce capabilities and military consumables such as ammunition. Maintaining momentum across borders demands early alignment on shared technical standards during the design stage, not after systems are near completion. While reciprocal defense procurement agreements and end-user certificate processes help enable cooperation, these can sometimes take months or years to finalize, requiring senior government acquisition leaders to certify. The hourglass sands of potential conflict are flowing too fast for these barriers. These hurdles show that many modernization challenges remain statutory and procedural rather than technological. For private sector partners, this should be seen as an opportunity rather than a constraint. As allies aggregate demand for common hardware and software, companies that design to multinational standards from the outset will be positioned to support the United States and a broader alliance.

Industry partners who build their development cycles around early Soldier touchpoints will shorten timelines, lower rework costs and produce solutions the Army is looking for today and planning to partner with into the future.

Although much reform has already happened to make our processes more collaborative, a lot more remains to be implemented today and beyond. The extant **open forums, industry events and design expositions are the collaborative engines that are currently driving change**. Events like AUSA's Annual Meeting & Exposition and similar forums allow vendors to connect with Army leaders and each other before requirements take final shape, helping with early identification of feasible solutions and integration challenges. To deepen this engagement, companies should host reverse industry days that bring PAEs, Army teams and other supporting sub-vendors into their facilities.[11] Showing prototypes, production timelines and supply-chain constraints gives the Army the information needed to refine requirements, shape realistic acquisition strategies and accelerate capability delivery.

True reform will make collaboration routine, enabling the Army, industry partners and allies to design and adapt together. Our joint and multinational collaboration should rival, if not exceed, I dare say, Aerosmith and Run DMC's efforts when they were walking that way. The U.S. Army, our nation's allies and industry partners have to move faster than a walk; the stakes demand we run. Collaboration, however, does not end once a system is fielded. The real test comes when units have to keep it running under pressure.

Repair, Retool, Redesign

While collaboration enables modernization, the Army and its industry partners must also sustain what they build together. For too long, exclusive control of technical data, software and design rights has left the Army dependent on vendors for basic repairs and long-term sustainment. This model, forged during the Global War on Terror, now delays maintenance, forcing units to rely on field service representatives for tasks Soldiers should be able to perform themselves. In future large-scale combat operations, forward contractor support cannot be assumed, and materiel sustainment from industry partners will be even further contested. A model built for yesterday's wars will not survive tomorrow's. Neither the force nor its industry partners benefit from a system that slows repairs, drives up costs and constrains innovation. The next critical adoption that industry partners must champion is **a model that facilitates the Army's right-to-repair, retool and redesign**. The unfortunate drawbacks of our current sustainment model show up in very concrete ways that you can see daily in flight lines and motor pools.

Neither the force nor its industry partners benefit from a system that slows repairs and constrains innovation. Industry partners must champion a model that gives the Army the ability to repair, retool and redesign what it delivers.

Secretary Driscoll detailed examples of where proprietary control and inflated pricing have left critical assets grounded. Currently, a replacement fin for a Black Hawk external fuel tank costs $14,000 through a vendor contract. Army engineers, using 3D scanning and additive manufacturing, reproduced the component for $3,000 while also making it 300 percent stronger.[12] In another example, the failure of a small display knob on the same aircraft required a $47,000 replacement of the screen assembly because the vendor would not supply the knob alone. Maintainers worked to fabricate it for $15—a 313,000 percent savings on the markup.[13] These examples are more than fiscal anecdotes; they represent a design failure and expose the cumulative effect of vendor-locked sustainment. Aircraft sit grounded, vehicles await backordered components, and critical systems go unmaintained while units pay premium costs for proprietary parts or rely on outside contracted maintainers to retool products. It is also worth noting that, in a contested environment like the Indo-Pacific, where extended supply chains and denied logistics are expected, such inefficiencies like these cannot be fixed at the onset of conflict. These vulnerabilities need to be addressed now, and industry partners play an outsized role in making this happen.

To reverse decades of vendor dependency, industry partners should begin codifying a **first right-to-repair** for the Army in major defense contracts. This policy would guarantee that the Army receives the technical data packages, design drawings and diagnostic software required to service and adapt its equipment independently. Where full data release is not feasible, tiered-access models should provide government engineers and depots with the information necessary for field-level maintenance and parts reproduction. There are already examples of junior leaders struggling to source repair parts and having to turn toward the local market when they are far-forward in places like the Indo-Pacific.[14] Maintenance supply lines showing signs of strain during peacetime are a poor indicator of what repair part sourcing would look like during a conflict. Thankfully, efforts already underway at the Army's Communications and Electronics Command, such as technical manual cataloging, are making the first steps of this paradigm shift a reality.[15] Soldiers stand ready, wrench in hand, waiting for vendors who are ready to help make this a reality. Enabling Soldiers to repair industry hardware and software is the first step; facilitating their ability to improve and create components is the next.

Equally critical is the institutionalization of **additive manufacturing** and other advanced production methods across the Army's organic industrial base and into defense contracts and relationships. The Black Hawk case study explained by Secretary Driscoll demonstrates how 3D printing can reduce repair times from months to days while also improving quality and reducing cost. Scaling this capability across forward sustainment hubs would allow Soldiers and engineers to fabricate components close to the point of need—an indispensable advantage in dispersed, contested theaters where few military depots reside. Currently, Army Materiel Command (AMC) is collaborating with the National Institute for Aviation Research at Wichita State University to develop 3D-printed, short-duration repair parts.[16] Ancillary parts being created by AMC, such as fittings, hoses or mounts, are the ideal places where industry partners can support the Army in pushing forward internal fabrication by providing specifications, guides and the greenlight to begin this work. An industry partner that facilitates Soldiers' repair and enhancement of their products is an acquisition program manager's unicorn vendor. Not mythological, however, is the private sector's ability to design their products with these facets, along with modular design.

Because of the rapidly changing nature of products, software and requirements, **modular design principles must be adopted today**. According to the DoW's Office of Systems Engineering and Architecture, "a modular approach involves a highly cohesive, loosely-coupled architecture that allows severable major system components . . . to be incrementally added, removed, or replaced throughout the life cycle."[17] This design strategy enables not only faster upgrades and competition among vendors, but also lowers sustainment cost. Open approaches will make modernization more flexible and will make sustainment more resilient, especially when it comes to digital and software acquisition. Previous policies instituted under Secretary Wormuth related to software modularity and acquisition continue to be pivotal in the way the Army digitally transforms. Software acquisition uses its own pathway for contracting that is designed to be adaptable to changing requirements and allow progressive evolution, a model that hardware acquisition can look to mirror as well.[18]

By adopting right-to-repair provisions, accelerating the use of additive manufacturing and adopting modular design principles, the Army and its industry partners can build a sustainment model that works better for both sides. The intent is not to distance the Army from industry, but to create a model that keeps equipment in the fight so that industry can focus on innovation, upgrades and long-term system evolution. A collaborative approach to sustainment creates recurring opportunities for vendors across a system's life cycle while giving the Army the flexibility needed in dispersed, contested environments. Even with better collaboration and smarter sustainment, none of this matters if the Army and its partners cannot move fast enough to outpace the threat.

Speed as a Requirement

Even with some recent improvements, the Army's modernization efforts continue to be constrained by systemic obstacles rather than by the absence of innovation. The Defense Acquisition System includes programming, acquisitions and requirements, which are separate but mutually supporting activities that have historically prioritized caution over performance. Oversight mechanisms intended to ensure accountability have often paralyzed decision-making, discouraging program managers from taking calculated risks. As a result, aligning funding, confirming requirements and awarding contracts have taken years, while private-sector firms delivered comparable technology in months. The Army definitively does not have time to waste. **Speed itself has become a strategic requirement**.

The need for speed is not just for Naval Aviator hot shots. It is a joint requirement and has been repeatedly underscored by senior leaders. General Alexus Grynkewich, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, warned that the Alliance "cannot afford to wait" for capabilities to materialize years after requirements are identified.[19] Further comments from Army Secretary Driscoll outlined how outdated acquisition cycles and rigid funding mechanisms specifically undermine agility. He explained that the Army's budgeting process, divided into thousands of narrowly defined line items set years in advance, deprives leaders of the flexibility to shift resources to emerging priorities.[20] The obstacles preventing us from achieving speed in acquisition are not technological, but procedural. To achieve true modernization, the Army must institutionalize speed through reordered priorities, rapid acquisition pathways and transparent industry partnerships. Industry's willingness to adapt to this model will determine their success and whether the Army can deliver capability at the tempo the future fight demands.

When discussing speed, one should heed the wise words of the velocity-inclined scholar who once said, "If you ain't first, you're last." While Ricky Bobby was talking NASCAR, the point is actually more true in military technology acquisition. There is no silver medal ceremony in warfighting. The Army is making reforms to recognize that they cannot be in second place when it comes to acquiring technology, and industry partners must be informed on these changes. While new processes still require the Army to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars and to balance cost, schedule and performance metrics of a program to achieve the best capability, the force is taking another look at what's most important.[21]

New initiatives are prioritizing schedule and speed over cost in some projects, and that is most visible in the Army's new Transformation in Contact (TiC) events. TiC events are Soldier-driven evaluations designed to put emerging technology into formations early, giving the Army a way to field and refine capabilities, while also creating a new, tempo-driven development environment for industry. Lieutenant General Joseph Ryan, the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, said, "The Army will plan to spend $1 billion on Transformation in Contact events, between 2025 and the end of fiscal year 2027."[22] These events place vendors side-by-side with Soldiers and unit leaders, gathering real-time feedback, identifying shortcomings and making adjustments on the spot. For industry, TiC is both a proving ground and a demand signal. Companies that arrive early with prototypes and minimum-viable-products rather than multi-year developmental PowerPoint slide decks will integrate faster, learn alongside Soldiers and influence requirements before they harden. TiC is one visible example; underneath it sits an entire set of rapid pathways that industry needs to understand and be ready to leverage and operate from the inside.

Speed itself has become a strategic requirement, and industry partners who transparently arrive with prototypes and understand rapid acquisition pathways will help the Army deliver capability at the tempo the future fight demands.

Industry must understand and align with the Army's rapid acquisition pathways to accelerate delivery. The Army is increasingly relying on rapid pathways such as the Middle-Tier Acquisition (MTA)[23] and Urgent Capability Acquisition (UCA)[24] pathways to field critical capabilities. These pathways are built for iterative prototyping, early Soldier feedback and accelerated fielding, not prolonged deliberate milestones of traditional acquisition. To move at this pace, industry partners must be prepared to operate inside these frameworks. That means becoming familiar with rapid contracting tools such as Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs) and Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs), both of which allow the Army to pull technology into programs far faster than Federal Acquisition Regulation–based contracting.[25] Companies that arrive with solutions, documentation and business practices aligned to these authorities will move through the system more quickly

and with fewer redesign demands. These pathways also depend on real-time transparency. Programs using rapid acquisition authorities are expected to provide clear performance and cost metrics to oversight bodies and PAE leadership through digital reporting tools and live dashboards. Vendors who can supply accurate, up-front data reduce uncertainty and help the Army to leverage existing streamlined acquisition pathways.

These pathways only work at full speed when the Army and its vendors share the same picture of risk, cost and capacity. This is because **transparent partners are fast partners**. Vendors should expect to disclose their second- and third-tier suppliers, production timelines and material sources at the outset, not only at the contracting phase. Early visibility prevents the kind of hidden dependencies and bottlenecks that routinely slow modernization efforts. As the Congressional Research Service notes, many of the most serious supply-chain vulnerabilities stem from "non-transparent lower-tier suppliers," which introduce avoidable delays, foreign dependencies and sourcing risks.[26] When companies let the Army kick the tires and peak under the hood early, the Army can assess risk, adjust plans and accelerate fielding, even helping a vendor adjust. If vendors expect to be invited to the modern and accelerated acquisition poker table, they should also be willing to play with some of their cards face up. This level of upfront clarity avoids late-stage surprises, strengthens accountability and allows both the Army and industry to move faster and with confidence.

A risk-averse system designed to avoid failure is not the one needed to keep pace with adversaries who iterate rapidly. By embracing faster pathways, increasing visibility across the supply chain and building a culture that accepts informed risk, the Army can deliver capability at the tempo required. The future fight will favor the side that learns and adapts fastest. All of this brings the conversation back to where it started: what kind of partners the Army needs, and what kind of opportunities that creates—for those willing to move at this new pace.

Conclusion: We Cannot Wait

The Army faces a moment where technological pace and operational risk demand a different kind of partnership with industry partners. We desperately need a relationship defined by early engagement, shared sustainment responsibility and rapid delivery. The private sector will play a decisive role in whether the force can modernize at the speed the future fight requires.

Collaboration must become the starting point, not an exception. The Army cannot define needs alone and then ask industry to match them years later. Companies that enter the process sooner and bring forward options, prototypes and designs for allies will help the Army move faster and more effectively. Just as important: We must shift our sustainment model to allow the Army to repair, retool and redesign systems at the point of need. Firms that design with repairability and modularity in mind will remain central to modernization efforts throughout a system's life cycle. Products we build together and can repair or redesign on our own don't matter, however, if they are delivered too late. Industry partners can accelerate the Army's tempo through an understanding of its acquisition opportunities, rapid pathways and the transparency required to utilize them. The Army is transforming and moving toward a new acquisition partnership model, and we need our partners to keep pace. The ultimate cost of idleness will be paid by our citizens in the wasting of our country's treasure and by our Soldiers in a profligate spilling of their blood. Which is why . . . we cannot wait.

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Major Ryan Crayne is an AUSA Scholar and a U.S. Army Marketing and Behavioral Economics Officer who has served in leadership and combat roles in the 1st Infantry Division, 75th Ranger Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, and the United States Military Academy at West Point. He holds an MBA from the University of Michigan and has publishing interests centered around recruiting, retention and the Army profession. MAJ Crayne is also a LTG (Ret.) James M. Dubik Writing Fellow, and he currently serves as the Marketing Innovation lead at the Army Enterprise Marketing Office.

Major Blake Estlund is a U.S. Army Acquisition Officer currently serving as an Assistant Product Manager, Project Manager Self-Propelled Howitzer Systems. He previously served as an Assistant Army Capability Manager, Line-of-Sight Communications. He deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve *and holds an MA in business leadership.*

Notes

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