

# Persistent Challenges Require New Iterative Approaches to Delivering Capability with Speed

GAO-25-108528

June 11, 2025

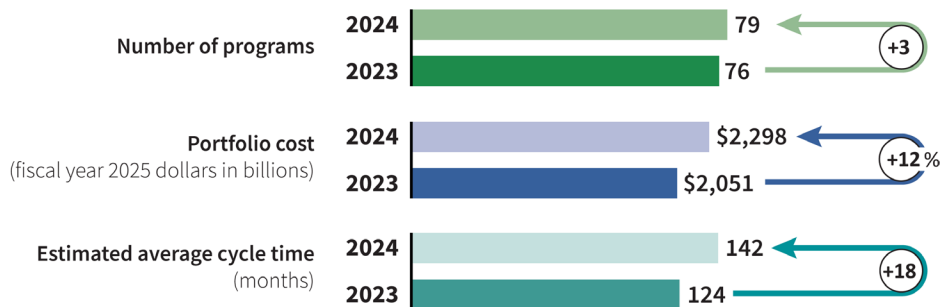
A testimony before the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

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## What GAO Found

In June 2025, GAO reported that the Department of Defense (DOD) plans to invest nearly \$2.4 trillion to develop and acquire 106 of its costliest weapon programs. Yet the expected time frame for major defense acquisition programs to provide warfighters with even an initial capability is now almost 12 years from program start. These time frames are incompatible with meeting emerging threats. While DOD and Congress have made efforts to identify efficiencies, more radical change is needed.

### Major Defense Acquisition Programs Continue to Delay Capability Deliveries



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-108528

DOD remains deeply entrenched in a traditional linear acquisition structure—characterized by rigid, sequential processes—that has proven inadequate in adapting to evolving threats and integrating emerging innovation. In a linear acquisition, the cost, schedule, and performance baselines are fixed early. Thus, programs develop weapon systems to meet fixed requirements that were set years in advance. This risks delivering a system—sometimes decades later—that is already obsolete. In contrast, leading companies use iterative cycles to design, validate, and deliver complex products with speed. Activities in these iterative cycles often overlap as the design undergoes continuous user engagement and testing, which allows the product to get to market quickly.

DOD has made efforts to address problematic aspects of the defense acquisition system, particularly for furthering innovation. For example, it established the Defense Innovation Unit to further commercial technology adoption and provides various financial flexibilities. However, these remain largely workarounds to address problems that result from the current acquisition system, rather than enduring solutions that fix the underlying system itself.

GAO's recent and ongoing body of work on practices used by leading companies could provide a blueprint for reform.

## Why GAO Did This Study

Despite recent reforms, DOD remains plagued by escalating costs, prolonged development cycles, and structural inefficiencies that impede its ability to acquire and deploy innovative technologies with speed. The 2022 National Security Strategy and the 2022 National Defense Strategy make clear that the acquisition processes that DOD has used in the past are too slow to address emerging threats of the future. An April 2025 executive order states that a comprehensive overhaul of DOD's acquisition system is needed to deliver state-of-the-art capabilities at speed and scale.

This testimony addresses (1) DOD's ongoing challenges to delivering weapon systems within cost, schedule, and performance parameters, and (2) how leading practices for product development can inform changes to the defense acquisition system. This statement draws largely from GAO's 2025 annual assessment of DOD's major weapon systems ([GAO-25-107569](#)) and GAO's leading practices for product development ([GAO-23-106222](#)). It also leverages GAO's extensive body of work on DOD weapon systems acquisitions and recent reports on individual weapon systems and innovation and flexibilities in DOD procurement efforts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations to DOD in these areas, including that newer future major weapon acquisition programs include leading practices for product development during early program stages, and that DOD updates acquisition policies to incorporate certain of these practices. DOD has generally concurred with these recommendations but has not fully implemented them.