

“If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.” Albert Einstein

## **The Best Laid Plans – The critical role of strategic planning in I&MS capabilities acquisition in the era of “Accelerating Change”**

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### Introduction

In an era of upheaval, limited resources, and great power competition, it can often feel like all we have time to do is react as we lurch from crisis to crisis. If we are barely keeping up, is the incorporation of strategic planning into our capabilities acquisition processes an unaffordable luxury? How do we accelerate change in this environment? Can we innovate our way out of this conundrum?

For better or worse, there is no substitute for good strategic planning. The fundamentals of good old fashioned “acquisition planning” are NOT roadblocks to the solutions we seek. In fact, these processes are consistent with senior leader’s intent as expressed in everything from CSAF’s *Accelerate Change or Lose*<sup>2</sup> and corresponding Action Orders to the AFIMSC Strategic Plan.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, effective strategic planning is a critical part of how our enterprise succeeds. We have amazing strategic planning tools in our acquisition planning tool belt that will work whether we are acquiring the “same old stuff” or the newest, shiniest, most “bleeding edge” capabilities.

Effective strategic planning for Installation and Mission Support (I&MS) acquisitions requires considering four important questions: (1) what is the I&MS challenge being addressed (i.e. “What are we trying to do here?”); (2) what are the capabilities needed to act on those challenges (i.e. “What do we need to do those things?”); (3) how do those capabilities fit into the bigger I&MS enterprise (i.e. “How is this going to work with what I’ve already got?”); and (4) what are the most effective ways to acquire those capabilities (i.e. “How are we going to get the things we need to do what we need to do?”)? Grappling with these questions also helps us to avoid the muddled thinking, and poor results, that come from failures to “think things through”, substitute aspirations or goals for strategy, and/or conflate doing something new with doing something helpful.<sup>4</sup> From our perspective as acquisition counsel, we see a trend where

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, or its components.

<sup>2</sup> General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “Accelerate Change or Lose”, 31 Aug 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC), *Strategic Plan 2021*, 9 Apr 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy* (Profile Books, 2017), 32; 53-54.

acquisition discussions at times focus more on the final, “How are we going to get these things?” question and less on the first three questions. In an era where accelerating change is a strategic imperative, it is increasingly dangerous to ignore the first three questions. Arguably, in our current environment, shortchanging these foundational questions leads us to miss opportunities to innovate

(1) What is the I&MS challenge being addressed?

A strategy should be a set of analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that provide “a cohesive response...to a high-stakes challenge.”<sup>5</sup> But if a challenge “is not defined, it is difficult or impossible to assess the quality of the strategy.”<sup>6</sup> For AFIMSC, our challenges are defined by strategic guidance that comes from the President, and, in turn, is further defined in guidance provided at each level of command. For example, CSAF’s *Accelerate Change or Lose* emphasized the increasingly competitive, dangerous, and contested environment in which we now operate with the return of Great Power competition.<sup>7</sup> The 2021 AFIMSC Strategic Plan, in turn, applied higher-level strategic planning guidance to shape how the I&MS enterprise supports the Air and Space Forces. In particular, it identified the three overarching challenges, i.e. Lines of Effort (LOEs), that align our efforts with higher-headquarters priorities: (1) Increase lethality and readiness; (2) Strengthen Airmen and Families; and (3) Pursue organizational excellence.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of strategic acquisition planning involves understanding how a requirement contributes to a capability needed by the I&MS enterprise to support the warfighter – i.e. what are we trying to do and why are we trying to do it.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the need for strategic acquisition planning extends down to everyone in the I&MS enterprise who works on identifying and acquiring capabilities. This process does not just make good business sense – it is mandatory. DoD policy tells us that the objective of our entire defense acquisition system “is to support the National Defense Strategy, through the development of a more lethal force based on U.S. technological innovation and a culture of performance that yields a decisive and sustained U.S. military advantage...”<sup>10</sup> FAR Part 2.101 even defines an acquisition as beginning “at the point when agency needs are established...”. It further defines acquisition planning as including the development of “the overall strategy for managing the acquisition.” FAR Part 2.101(b)(2).

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<sup>5</sup> Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 41.

<sup>7</sup> General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “Accelerate Change or Lose”, 31 Aug 2020, pages 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC), *Strategic Plan 2021*, 9 Apr 2021, page 3.

<sup>9</sup> Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Defense Directive 5000.01, *The Defense Acquisition System*, 9 Sep 2020, para 1.2.

FAR and non-FAR based acquisition pathways can be used to acquire innovative capabilities. However, planning needs do not go away when non-FAR based acquisition pathways are used. For example, even under an Other Transaction Authority (OTA) agreement, the “most important part of the team’s planning activities is defining the problem, area of need, or capability gap.”<sup>11</sup> If we shortchange this part of strategic acquisition planning, we will miss innovative solutions because we are not focused on the entire challenge.

## (2) What are the capabilities needed to act on those challenges?

Any challenge faced by the Air and Space Forces, and, in-turn, by AFIMSC, needs to be addressed by applying effects from the right mix of capabilities. It is more important than ever that we identify, develop, and field those capabilities within timeframes that allow us to both stay ahead of our adversaries and within the resourcing/force structures provided by Congress.<sup>12</sup> Conceptually, this challenge is not unique to the Air and Space Forces or even the military. Good strategy in any organization requires the identification of critical objectives that can be positively affected by available resources.<sup>13</sup> In the case of our organization, the need for effective identification of capabilities is addressed in LOEs 1 and 2 of the 2021 AFIMSC Strategic Plan, which require us to ensure the Air and Space Forces have the funding and capabilities required to conduct their missions and maintain work-life balance.<sup>14</sup>

Again, our governing acquisition guidance is entirely consistent with our operational guidance. For example, FAR 2.101(b)(2) tells us that acquisition “includes the description of requirements to satisfy agency needs...” and that acquisition planning includes an integrated coordination process to plan for “fulfilling the agency need in a timely manner and at a reasonable cost.” FAR 7.105(a) requires that written acquisition plans discuss the need, acquisition history, and then “[s]pecify the required capabilities or performance characteristics of the supplies or the performance standards of the services being acquired and state how they are related to the need.” Similarly, DoDD 5000.01 tells us that “[a]pproved, time-phased capability needs, matched with available technology and resources, will enable incremental acquisition strategies and continuous capability improvement.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, *Other Transactions Guide*, Nov 2018, Version 1.0, 11.

<sup>12</sup> General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “Accelerate Change or Lose”, 31 Aug 2020, page 6; General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “CSAF Action Orders To Accelerate Change or Lose, Action Order D, 4 Dec 2020, page 4.

<sup>13</sup> Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*, 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC), *Strategic Plan 2021*, 9 Apr 2021, page 3.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Defense Directive 5000.01, *The Defense Acquisition System*, 9 Sep 2020, para 1.2(f).

As detailed above, non-FAR based acquisition mechanisms, such as OTAs, also require the Government team to identify the need or capability gap to be filled.<sup>16</sup> This phase of strategic acquisition planning allows us to ask the questions about what new capabilities might exist, or what new uses of current resources might help us meet our challenges. In our efforts to “accelerate” we cannot afford to miss the critical thinking opportunities to which we are directed by this phase of planning. Thus, this work is not “wasted time” – it is crucial to an innovative Air and Space Force.

### (3) How do those capabilities fit into the bigger I&MS enterprise?

It has always been good acquisition strategy to resource programs in a manner that is consistent and coordinated across the I&MS enterprise.<sup>17</sup> Tight coordination can, at times, even function as partial substitute for resources.<sup>18</sup> These days, such a coherent enterprise-wide approach is imperative in light of increasing threats, budget pressures, sustainment costs, and modernization challenges.<sup>19</sup> The 2021 AFIMSC Strategic Plan recognizes this dynamic and innovation’s role in making it work. In particular, LOE 3 requires us to “mature our organization and processes, while getting capabilities to the warfighter at the speed of relevance.”<sup>20</sup> The applicable acquisition guidance also requires this type of well-integrated approach. For example, FAR 7.105(a)(2), provides that the Government’s statement of need should state “all significant conditions affecting the acquisition, such as – (i) Requirements for compatibility with existing or future systems or programs; and (ii) Any known cost, schedule, and capability or performance constraints.” Similarly, AFPD 63-1, para 2.3, requires programs to have validated capabilities and have been vetted through a requirements approval process.<sup>21</sup> This part of the analysis still needs to be performed when innovative capabilities are acquired using non-FAR based acquisition pathways such as OTAs. Resource issues do not go away no matter how innovative and shiny the acquisition or acquisition pathway.

New uses for existing resources is also a category of “innovation” that deserves our thought and attention. Innovation does not always mean a new resource. Sometimes it means re-thinking the current resources, directives and guidance to determine whether there are innovations hiding in plain sight. That is likely why many examples of successful OTAs highlighted by the DoD are for acquisitions that made aspects of an existing system function significantly better or identified an existing need for which better capabilities were found.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, *Other Transactions Guide*, Nov 2018, Version 1.0, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 134.

<sup>19</sup> General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “Accelerate Change or Lose”, 31 Aug 2020, page 5.

<sup>20</sup> Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC), *Strategic Plan 2021*, 9 Apr 2021, page 3.

<sup>21</sup> Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 63-1, *Integrated Life Cycle Management*, 7 Aug 2018, para 2.3

<sup>22</sup> Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, *Other Transactions Guide*, Nov 2018, Version 1.0, 6, 9, 12, and 27.

#### (4) What are the most effective ways to acquire those capabilities?

As anyone who has ever been part of an acquisition team has experienced, the success or failure of a project is often closely tied to how well the contracting or agreements process goes. However, the federal acquisition process can be charitably, and pretentiously, described by some as byzantine. The acquisition process is also being impacted by the shift of critical and innovative technologies being derived from the Government sector to residing in the private sector.<sup>23</sup> As a result, we now have to increasingly consider the use of non-FAR based acquisition methods, such as OTAs, to acquire innovative capabilities. But these alternate pathways can add both flexibility **and complexity** to the acquisition process since there is far less guidance on how things are supposed to be done. Thus, making smart, well-considered, choices regarding which acquisition pathway to use, and how to use it, is a critical part of the strategic planning process for I&MS capabilities development.

Justifiably so, many innovation efforts have focused here: on the “How do we get what we want?” stage of acquisition planning. There is a lot of value in reviewing our current processes to weed out unnecessary, redundant or overly cautious approaches to acquisitions. That said, there is still a lot of value in using the first three acquisition questions to determine which acquisition tools are the most attractive based on how much we have been able to define and refine our requirements. Strategic acquisition planning also helps us identify which requirements can be easily acquired using the traditional methods which have been streamlined over the years (i.e. Commercial Item and Simplified Acquisitions), and which requirements truly need to use a non-FAR based acquisition pathway (such as an OTA).

One criticism of acquisition planning has been the considerable guidance related to the format of acquisition planning and how that impacts the ability to accelerate our acquisitions. That criticism is not unfounded. There is significant guidance in both FAR and DoD regulations about the format of the formal acquisition plan. However, “acquisition planning”, as discussed above, is about much more than achieving compliance with formatting instructions. An expanded practice of strategic planning in the context we have discussed here would serve AFIMSC well going forward. When strategic planning becomes the hallmark of our operations, we begin to lean into the strategic mindset discussed by General Brown. Moreover, incorporating the four strategic planning questions into our routine examination of operations and acquisition opportunities allows us to identify innovative solutions and capabilities to meet new and ongoing challenges, evaluate current resources for new uses, and move quickly to the acquisition solutions best suited to meet those challenges.

#### Conclusion

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<sup>23</sup> General Charles Q. Brown, Air Force Chief of Staff, “Accelerate Change or Lose”, 31 Aug 2020, pages 4-5.

Running the I&MS enterprise is a tough job that is just going to get tougher. We must move from a mindset where acquisition planning is only seen as a time consuming addition to the process, into a strategic planning mindset that allows us to do the work required by the acquisition planning regulations. This work should be done in an ongoing way as part of the strategic planning process for any capabilities development. The good news is this work, if done well, will yield great rewards for our programs. These rewards not only include greater success with the acquisition and fielding of capabilities but also in a more innovative approach to the challenges we will continue to face. The Air and Space Force acquisition team (mission partners, mission focused business leaders and lawyers) is the best in the world! We have the tools to do what it takes to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. But we need to shift our mindset a few degrees and use our existing tools in new and innovative ways. We need to use acquisition planning as the strategic force enhancer that it should be.