THE INNOVATION TARGETING CYCLE

Time-Sensitive Innovation Fires Inside a Continuous Innovation Cycle

A Rapid, Continuous Process for Delivering Solutions to Warfighter Problems at Operational Speed

Version 2.0

Incorporating the Joint Concept of Innovation Operations (JCIO) Execution Framework

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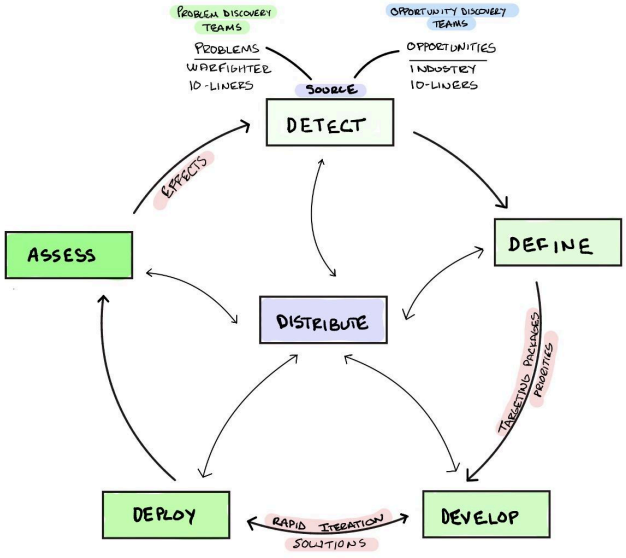
1. Executive Summary

The Department of War's 2025 reorganization of the defense acquisition system—redesignating the Defense Acquisition System as the Warfighting Acquisition System (WAS), establishing Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs), and creating service-level efforts like the Army's PIT, the Navy NRCO, the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL), AFWERX, and SOCOM's Sonic Spear—represent the most significant structural reform in defense acquisition in decades. These reforms are designed to accelerate the delivery of capability to the warfighter, and they address a real and urgent problem.

But speed of delivery, by itself, is incomplete. The WAS reforms are heavily weighted toward the *develop* and *deploy* phases of innovation—the steps where solutions are built and fielded. They do not systematically address the equally critical phases of *detecting* problems, *defining* them with precision, *assessing* whether solutions actually worked, and *distributing* findings across the force and industry. Without these phases, even the fastest acquisition system risks making the wrong things go faster.

The **Innovation Targeting Cycle (ITC)** is a six-phase, continuous process modeled on the Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate (F3EAD) intelligence targeting cycle that Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) used to dismantle terrorist networks in Iraq. The ITC is not a replacement for the Innovation Pipeline, the Warfighting Acquisition System, or the broader Innovation Operations construct described in the Joint Concept of Innovation Operations (JCIO). It is a **rapid, operational-tempo targeting process** that runs *inside* those larger constructs, providing the speed and feedback that turns institutional processes into something that outpaces the problems they are trying to solve.



The ITC's six phases—**Detect, Define, Develop, Deploy, Assess, Distribute**—compress the time between discovering a warfighter problem and delivering a solution, while constantly feeding operational results back into the cycle to generate new targets. Each rotation is designed to be small, fast, and decisive.

However, **the ITC is not self-sustaining**. It describes *how to run a cycle*; it does not provide the institutional architecture required to run that cycle continuously across echelons or to translate repeated tactical success into enduring operational advantage. For that, the ITC must be nested within the JCIO. This version of the document integrates the execution framework—the Innovation Targeting Fusion Cell, the Forward-Deployed Maintenance and Development Facility (FDMDF), and Innovation Operations Support (IOSpt)—that transforms the ITC from a conceptual model into a repeatable operational capability.

2. The Historical Precedent: JSOC and F3EAD

2.1 The Military Intelligence Targeting Cycle

The F3EAD intelligence targeting cycle—Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate—is a six-phase, continuous loop used by special operations and intelligence agencies to track, engage, and exploit high-value targets. It translates intelligence directly into tactical operations and back into intelligence to disrupt enemy networks. Each completed cycle ideally generates new targets and accelerates the tempo of operations.

But F3EAD does not exist in a vacuum. It is a *time-sensitive targeting and fires tool* that operates alongside—and depends on—the Joint Planning Process, the Joint Fires Process (both deliberate and dynamic targeting), and the Joint Intelligence Cycle. JSOC was able to execute F3EAD at extraordinary speed precisely because these other processes were running in parallel, providing the strategic context, named objectives, intelligence preparation of the environment, and command authorities that enabled rapid tactical execution.

2.2 McChrystal's Transformation of JSOC

When General Stanley McChrystal took command of JSOC in late 2003, the task force was built to execute a small number of high-fidelity raids—one or two a month. The problem was that Al-Qaeda in Iraq, under Zarqawi, was not a hierarchical organization that could be decapitated with a few precision strikes. It was a networked insurgency that adapted faster than the task force could cycle through its own process. By the time intelligence was collected, analyzed, pushed through approval chains, and turned into a

mission, the target had moved and the intelligence was stale. The task force was winning every raid but losing the war.

The transformation centered on collapsing the space between intelligence and operations. McChrystal fused them—literally putting analysts, operators, and interagency partners in the same room at the Balad operations center, running a nightly battle rhythm where every element of the cycle was represented.

The critical innovation was what happened after a raid. McChrystal built an industrial process for exploitation. Sensitive site exploitation teams accompanied operators on every raid. Captured electronics were imaged and transmitted to analysts within minutes. If exploitation revealed a time-sensitive lead, the task force could launch a follow-on operation that same night. The result: the task force went from roughly one raid per month to as many as ten or more raids in a single night, with each raid generating the intelligence for the next.

2.3 The Principle That Transfers

This is exactly the principle that transfers to innovation. The problem in most organizations is not that they cannot detect problems or develop solutions—it is that the functions responsible for each phase do not operate at the same speed or communicate in real time. The innovation equivalent of McChrystal's siloed intelligence-operations divide is the gap between the operators who experience problems, the requirements writers who formalize them, the acquisition professionals who procure solutions, and the testers who validate them. Each function operates on its own timeline, in its own building, with its own processes. By the time a solution is fielded, the problem has often evolved so that the solution is irrelevant.

F3EAD works because it compresses the time between discovering a target and acting on it, then feeds the results back in. Applying that same logic to problem-solving rather than enemy targeting gives you the Innovation Targeting Cycle.

3. The Innovation Targeting Cycle

The Innovation Targeting Cycle (ITC) adapts the F3EAD framework to the problem of delivering innovation at operational speed. Where F3EAD targets adversaries, the ITC targets *warfighter problems*—capability gaps, operational friction, emerging threats, and unmet needs. Where F3EAD generates kinetic effects, the ITC generates *innovation fires*—the deliberate employment of innovation capability to create operational effects.

Critically, the ITC is not the Innovation Pipeline renamed. The Innovation Pipeline (Source, Curate, Discover, Incubate, Transition) remains the methodology for structured problem discovery and solution development. The ITC is the **operational targeting process** that drives rapid, time-sensitive innovation fires—drawing on the Pipeline's methodology, the Warfighting Acquisition System's authorities, and the broader Innovation Operations construct's organizational architecture to deliver effects at the speed the warfighter needs them.

The relationship is analogous to how F3EAD relates to the broader intelligence and fires enterprise: F3EAD does not replace JIPOE, the Joint Targeting Cycle, or deliberate targeting. It operates within and alongside them, providing the rapid, iterative tempo for time-sensitive targets. Similarly, the ITC operates within the Continuous Innovation Cycle (CIC) described in the JCIO, providing the tempo for time-sensitive innovation problems.

3.1 Detect (Source)

F3EAD Parallel: Find. Identify problems as they emerge from the operational environment. This means building collection mechanisms that surface friction, failure, and unmet needs in near-real-time. Instead of scanning for adversaries, you are scanning for pain points: equipment failures, procedural breakdowns, capability gaps, recurring complaints, and workarounds that troops have invented on their own.

The key insight from F3EAD applies directly: you need *persistent surveillance of the problem space*, not occasional surveys. This is the innovation equivalent of "Unblinking Eye"—what might be called **Innovation Preparation of the Environment** combined with **Innovation Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIRs)**. Embedded Problem Discovery Teams, forward-deployed with tactical units, serve as the primary sensors. Opportunity Discovery Teams scan industry, academia, and technology reporting for emerging capabilities that could address known or anticipated needs. Commanders' assessments, structured after-action reports, maintenance data, 10-Liners, and informal channels all feed the detection function.

Execution through the Fusion Cell: ITC begins at the tactical edge. Units and Innovation Operations Forces (IOF) generate standardized reports—Innovation Contact Reports (INNO-SITREPs)—containing evidence (telemetry, artifacts, video, logs, operator narrative), context, urgency, and constraints. The Fusion Cell validates patterns across units and correlates with J2 reporting to confirm operational relevance and urgency. Detection is also where the novelty–counter-novelty competition is monitored: what is the adversary fielding, and what gaps does it create?

3.2 Define (Curate and Discover)

F3EAD Parallel: Fix. Just as “Fix” in F3EAD means confirming identity and location with enough precision to act, *Define* moves from a vague symptom to a clearly scoped problem statement. Most problem-solving fails at this stage because people act on the symptom rather than the root cause. This phase involves triangulating multiple data sources, distinguishing the specific problem from adjacent noise, and framing it tightly enough that a solution effort can address it: Is this a training problem, a design problem, a doctrine problem, or a leadership problem? Who is affected, under what conditions, and how severely?

Execution through the Fusion Cell: The Fusion Cell converts observations into an operational problem statement tied to campaign objectives and constraints. The Define output is an **“innovation target folder”** containing: problem statement; desired effect; constraints; time horizon; initial solution options; and the assessment/data plan. This is the entry point into the planning process—Commander’s Intent combined with course-of-action development with a substantial element of intelligence development.

A critical distinction for the ITC: in a time-sensitive targeting context, we are looking to make a best first bet and then use information gathered from that bet to move to follow-on targets. Each Minimally Deployable Prototype (MDP) should be its own loop through the cycle—not multiple iterations stuck inside one step. We are not conducting deliberate targeting; we are executing time-sensitive innovation fires where speed and feedback matter more than perfection.

3.3 Develop (Incubate)

F3EAD Parallel: Finish. Generate and deliver an effect. In F3EAD, “Finish” is not a planning action—it is an effect in the battlespace. The same logic applies here. Develop is not a contract action or an engineering change in the abstract; it is the production of an *innovation fire*—a deliberate intervention designed to create an operational effect. That effect could be delivered via a design modification, a procedural change, new equipment, updated training, a software patch, or a doctrinal adjustment.

The F3EAD principle of speed matters critically here: the cycle should favor a Minimally Deployable Prototype over a fully mature system. A 70% solution fielded in weeks beats a perfect solution fielded in years. But we must consider **weapon-target pairing**—what effect are we trying to achieve with this innovation fire? The answer determines who develops the solution (organic, institutional, or industrial), what acquisition pathway is used, and what level of compliance is required for initial deployment.

Execution through IOP/FDMDF: Development produces a **fieldable capability increment** (kit, configuration, software release, payload combination, or TTP package),

not a program milestone. The Innovation Operations Platform (IOP) and its forward-deployed physical node—the Forward-Deployed Maintenance and Development Facility (FDMDF)—execute integration, modification, limited validation testing, release packaging ("gold builds"), and fielding-kit production at speed. The Innovation Operations Support Element (IOSE), embedded with the Fusion Cell, converts validated demand into rapid contracting and fielding actions, preventing resourcing from becoming the pacing function. The temporal discipline of F3EAD is essential: do not get stuck in Develop while waiting for feedback. Incubate a minimal solution, deploy it, and cycle back through the entire ITC again.

3.4 Deploy (Deliver)

F3EAD Parallel: The operational effect. Push the solution to the point of need. At the tactical level, this means getting the fix into the hands of the operators who surfaced the problem, with adequate training and context. At the strategic level, deployment means giving the commander another option to use against the adversary or countering an adversary action.

Execution as controlled operational fielding: Deployment is a deliberate operational act. Fielding packages include the increment, install/config notes, employment guidance, safety/cyber artifacts as required, sustainment guidance for the trial period, and the data collection plan. IOF supports installation and user adoption; operational commanders retain employment authority. The Innovation Operations concept addresses the persistent problem of solutions dying before reaching operators through the IOP—the funded and supported technical and programmatic layer on which novel, pre-program-of-record, and developmental technologies reside as an armory from which innovation forces deploy. Each innovation does not need its own wrapper; it deploys onto a platform capable of supporting the unique needs of innovation capabilities.

Deploy also requires integration—time to deliver is paramount, with minimum compliance for initial deployment, rapid iteration to improve, and grading against mission success criteria with learning fed back into the cycle.

3.5 Assess (Exploit and Analyze)

F3EAD Parallel: Exploit and Analyze. Measure whether the innovation fire achieved its intended effect. Did the problem frequency decrease? Did new problems emerge as side effects? Did operators adopt the solution or reject it and revert to their workaround? This is the intelligence process portion of the cycle—generating new operational intelligence about the problem space, the solution's effectiveness, and the adversary's response.

Execution as evidence-based operational learning: Assessment is continuous and designed for speed. It focuses on operational outcomes, adversary adaptation latency, sustainment burden, integration friction, and risk-to-effect. The Fusion Cell owns cadence and publication; the IOP/FDMDF provides technical analysis. Assessment happens continuously—not as a post-mortem months after fielding. The ITC demands the same immediacy that McChrystal demanded from sensitive site exploitation: results are collected, analyzed, and fed back into the cycle in near-real-time. Assess determines whether to scale the solution, retain it at current levels, modify it, or kill it. It also anticipates the effect of adversary adaptation on the battlefield.

Honest assessment is critical because it prevents the organization from declaring victory prematurely and moving on while the problem persists. This is the innovation feedback loop—and it should happen frequently, in the middle of development, not only at the end.

3.6 Distribute (Disseminate)

F3EAD Parallel: Distribute. Share the findings and feed them back into the cycle. Solutions that work should propagate laterally to other units facing similar problems. Failures should propagate too, so others do not waste effort on dead ends. The output of one cycle becomes the input to the next—maybe the assessment revealed a deeper problem, or maybe the solution created a new one.

Execution as dual-path dissemination: “Distribute” must be defined precisely to avoid ambiguity and execution failure. In practice, it encompasses two distinct pathways with different tempos, authorities, and products:

Pathway 1: Operational dissemination (intel-style; hours–days). J2/J3 channels publish action-oriented bulletins and TTP updates, supported by FDMDF technical notes and configuration guidance. This disseminates adversary adaptations, effective countermeasures, engagement parameters, and TTP updates.

Pathway 2: Capability scaling candidate (CIC disposition; weeks–months). Assessed increments are submitted for CIC disposition (Invest/Retain/Modify/Kill). IOSpt executes scale actions; IOP/FDMDF maintains baseline coherence. This pathway is force-wide capability propagation, not lessons learned.

Dissemination serves a broader function within the Innovation Operations construct: it reduces knowledge barriers, enables constant communication across the force, and generates what might be called Rapid Information Requirements—the innovation equivalent of intelligence dissemination that ensures every unit operating in the problem space benefits from every other unit’s experience.

4. Executing the ITC: Organization and Command Relationships

Innovation Targeting must be executed as an operational function, not an acquisition workflow. Command relationships preserve operational ownership of priorities and employment risk while enabling rapid technical integration and institutional scale.

4.1 The Nesting Relationship

This concept establishes the following nesting relationship:

- **JCIO (Joint Concept for Innovation Operations)** provides the doctrinal framing, organizational constructs, and command relationships to execute InnOps as an operational activity.
- **CIC (Continuous Innovation Cycle)** provides operational management: prioritization, resourcing, and disposition decisions (invest/retain/modify/kill).
- **ITC (Innovation Targeting Cycle)** provides tactical execution at operational tempo to generate effects, evidence, and candidates for scaling.

This structure prevents the ITC from becoming “another pipeline” by ensuring innovation is (1) operationally owned, (2) technically enabled, and (3) institutionally governed for scale and termination.

4.2 Command Relationships and Control Logic

- **Operational commander (supported):** establishes priorities, accepts employment risk, authorizes operational tasking and use.
- **J3/G3-led Fusion Cell:** runs ITC at operational tempo; integrates across staff functions; produces tasking and rapid dissemination.
- **IOP(Innovation Operating Platform) technical control:** controls integration standards, configuration management, release packaging, and safety/cyber compliance.
- **FDMDF (Forward Deployed Maintenance & Development Facility):** the forward-deployed physical node of IOP enabling exploitation / integration / test / release at speed.
- **CIC governance:** adjudicates disposition—Scale/Retain/Modify/Kill—based on evidence.

- **IOSpt (Innovation Operations Support):** enables MT&E (Maintenance, Test and Evaluation) forward and investment decisions without owning operational employment.

This structure avoids the primary failure mode: innovation appearing to be “owned” by acquisition rather than commanded as a warfighting activity. Under the organizing document that divides the military into two chains of command (JP-1), the operational chain of command directs effects in the battlespace. The administrative chain of command—including acquisition organizations—contributes to the ways and means but does not control the targeting process. The ITC is an operational function. All effects must be executed via operational commanders.

4.3 The Innovation Targeting Fusion Cell

Purpose: Collapse cycle time by co-locating operators, intelligence, engineers, assessment, and acquisition enablement into a persistent operational node.

Location: Under J3 (current operations/future operations integration), synchronized to operational battle rhythm.

Responsibilities (by ITC phase):

- Detect (validate): fuse unit/IOF reporting with J2 indications along with external IS&T (Industry, Science and Technology) capability indicators
- Define: produce operational problem statements and desired effects. Distribute statements throughout the Innovation Ecosystem
- Develop: select solution pathways and task integration via IOP/FDMDF and vendors
- Deploy: coordinate controlled operational fielding with guidance and data plan
- Assess: manage rapid assessment and publish findings
- Distribute: execute dual-path dissemination and submit scale candidates to CIC

Minimum staffing: J3 lead; J2 analyst; J5 planner; J6 integration lead; J8 liaison; IOP/FDMDF technical lead; IOF liaison; IOSE liaison; assessment lead.

4.4 FDMDF as the Forward IOP Node

Purpose: Convert validated operational problems into integrated, fieldable increments. The FDMDF is not “maintenance.” It is the forward integration and release capability.

Functions: Integration/modification; exploitation of artifacts as applicable; limited validation testing sufficient for operational use; release packaging ("gold builds"); kit production; repair/reconfiguration; baseline control in coordination with IOP.

Control logic: The Fusion Cell tasks "what and why." The FDMDF executes "how," enforces configuration discipline, and can halt and triage unsafe/noncompliant releases.

4.5 Innovation Operations Support (IOSpt)

IOSpt is the acquisition and institutional enablement construct that mans, trains, equips, and scales the InnOps system required to execute ITC.

- **Innovation Operations Support Office (IOSO) (strategic/enterprise):** Aligned to portfolio acquisition leadership; sustains Fusion Cell/IOF/IOP/FDMDF capacity; maintains contracting vehicles and vendor readiness; executes CIC scale decisions; institutionalizes training/sustainment mechanisms.
- **Innovation Operations Support Element (IOSE) (operational):** Embedded or tightly aligned to the Fusion Cell; converts validated demand into rapid contracting/fielding actions; prevents resourcing and contracting from becoming the pacing function; coordinates with IOSO for surge and scale.

5. Echeloned Execution and Cycle Time

As with time-sensitive targeting and F3EAD, different functions are optimized at different echelons. Innovation cannot be centralized at the strategic level and remain timely; it also cannot remain purely tactical and scale across the force. The Department therefore executes ITC through three mutually supporting echelons:

5.1 Tactical Echelon (Units in Contact; Evidence Generation)

Cycle time: Days to weeks. Operational units and embedded IOF observe adversary adaptation, collect artifacts and telemetry, and generate the initial operational problem statement. They enable immediate local adaptation (TTP changes and limited authorized configuration adjustments), but they do not own enterprise integration or scaling. A forward-deployed Innovation Forces team identifies a problem, frames a solution, deploys a minimally viable fix, assesses its impact, and distributes findings—potentially completing multiple rotations in a single deployment.

5.2 Operational Echelon (ITC Engine; Fusion and Tasking at Tempo)

Cycle time: Weeks to months. The operational echelon houses the Fusion Cell, led by the operations directorate (J3) and integrated with the intelligence directorate (J2), plans directorate (J5), communications directorate (J6), and resources directorate (J8), with direct linkage to the IOP. This node runs ITC continuously, validates and refines problem definitions, tasks rapid integration through the FDMDF, coordinates controlled operational deployment, and executes rapid assessment. This echelon is the center of gravity for cycle time. Theater-level innovation operations run the ITC against priority problem sets identified through campaign design and JIPOE, with the IOP coordinating across components and partners.

5.3 Strategic Echelon (Governance, MT&E, and Scaling)

Cycle time: Months. The strategic echelon provides prioritization, disposition, MT&E, and force-wide investment. It does not run daily ITC iterations. It governs through CIC disposition decisions (invest/retain/modify/kill), maintains the Innovation Armory and IOP baseline coherence, and executes MT&E and scaling through IOSpt. Service-level cycles address systemic problems that require institutional solutions through policy and investment execution, with ITC outputs informing requirements, acquisition programs, and modernization priorities.

These cycles feed into each other. A tactical ITC rotation may reveal a systemic problem that triggers a service-level cycle. A service-level solution may enable faster tactical cycles. The IOP manages these overlapping cycles as a portfolio, ensuring that rapid changes at the edge remain connected to longer-term modernization and sustainment realities.

6. Battle Rhythm and Standard Artifacts

6.1 Battle Rhythm

A minimal, repeatable rhythm mirrors time-sensitive targeting: continuous intake and rapid dissemination; weekly fusion review and integration tasking; biweekly assessment review; monthly CIC disposition.

6.2 Minimum Viable Artifacts

To make ITC repeatable, the system must standardize a small set of products. These artifacts are deliberately lightweight. Their purpose is tempo, clarity, and continuity across rotations:

1. **Innovation Contact Report (INNO-SITREP):** Similar to the 10-liner used by the US Army REF. Tactical, industry or scientific input; evidence, context, urgency, constraints.
2. **Innovation Target Folder:** Operational problem statement, context, desired effect, options, assessment plan and prioritization.
3. **Fielding Kit / Release Package:** Increment + install/config + employment guidance + data plan.
4. **Rapid Assessment Note:** Results, adversary response, sustainment impacts, recommendation.
5. **CIC Disposition Memo:** Invest/Retain/Modify/Kill, with assigned executors and timelines.
6. **Operational Dissemination Product:** Intel-style bulletin/TTP update with required actions.

7. Governance, Authorities, and Risk Model

7.1 Governance Purpose

Governance converts ITC tempo into durable advantage. ITC produces candidates; CIC decides what scales and what dies; IOSpt executes scale actions and MT&Es the system.

7.2 Decision Forums

- **Warfighter Innovation Council (WIC):** Sets priorities and risk posture aligned to campaign objectives.
- **CIC Disposition Board:** Makes recurring Invest/Retain/Modify/Kill decisions based on evidence.

7.3 Authorities and Risk Acceptance

This concept assumes speed through clear risk ownership and technical control:

- **Operational commander:** accepts operational employment risk for prototypes/increments; authorizes tasking and use.
- **IOP/FDMDF:** enforces technical control (configuration, integration discipline, safety/cyber compliance) and can block/triage unsafe releases.
- **CIC governance:** decides disposition and resource allocation.
- **IOSpt:** executes investment decisions and MT&E actions.

This prevents two common failure modes: (1) innovation being forced into full program certification for every increment; (2) uncontrolled fielding creating unacceptable operational and sustainment risk.

7.4 Off-Ramps and Resource Reallocation

“Fail early” is operationalized via disposition decisions. “Kill” and “Modify” trigger mandatory actions: publish negative learning, update Armory baselines, recover resources, and document rationale to prevent rework.

8. The ITC Inside the Larger Innovation Construct

The Innovation Targeting Cycle is not a standalone process and it is not a replacement for existing innovation methodologies or acquisition systems. It is a rapid, operational-tempo cycle that runs inside and is supported by the broader Innovation Operations architecture. Understanding this relationship is essential to employing it correctly.

8.1 Relationship to the Warfighting Acquisition System

The Department of War’s 2025 acquisition reforms—the WAS, the PAE structure, the Pathway for Innovation and Technology, the SPEED and FoRGED Act provisions in the FY26 NDAA—provide the *authorities, resources, and organizational structures* that the ITC needs to operate. The PAEs’ consolidated authority over warfighting portfolios, the streamlined acquisition pathways (including middle-tier acquisition for rapid prototyping and fielding), and the Innovation Insertion Increments mandated for each PAE beginning in FY2028 are all enablers of ITC tempo.

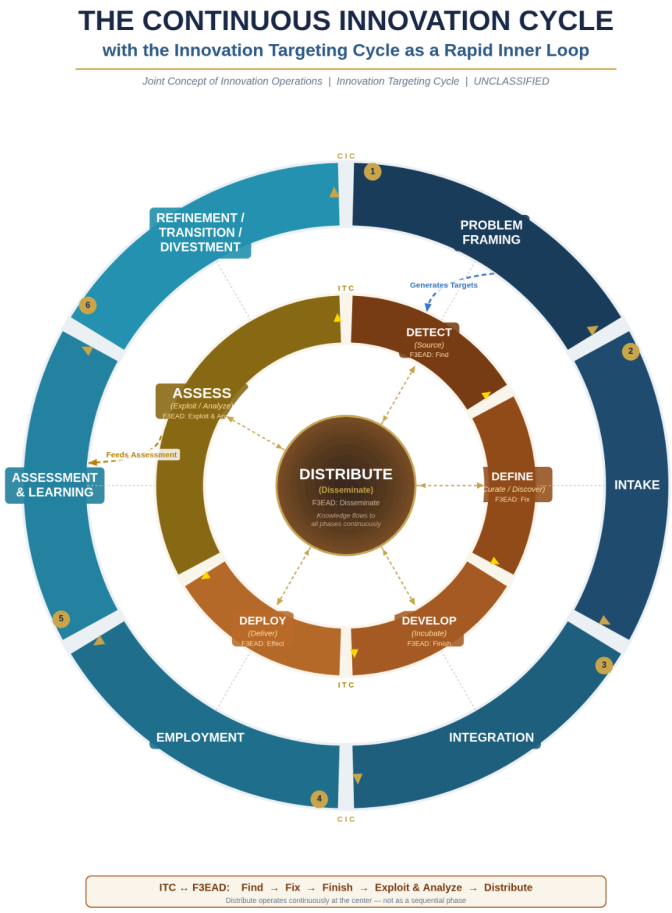
But the WAS reforms, as currently structured, are heavily weighted toward the Develop and Deploy phases. They assume that requirements will continue to flow through traditional channels. The ITC fills the structural gap by providing the **Detect, Define, Assess, and Distribute** functions that are currently left to ad hoc, out-of-tempo activities. The ITC is additive to the WAS—it does not compete with it. It provides the front end (Detect/Define) and back end (Assess/Distribute) that connect the warfighter’s reality to the acquisition system’s capability.

8.2 Relationship to the Continuous Innovation Cycle

The JCIO introduces the Continuous Innovation Cycle (CIC)—a six-phase operational mechanism (Problem Framing, Intake, Integration, Employment, Assessment and Learning, Refinement/Transition/Divestment) through which Innovation Operations

generate, refine, and employ Innovation Capability at theater tempo. The ITC operates as a *rapid inner loop* within the CIC, providing the time-sensitive targeting tempo for problems and solutions that cannot wait for the full CIC rotation.

Where the CIC manages the portfolio of innovation activities across the theater, the ITC targets individual problems with the urgency and discipline of F3EAD. The two cycles are nested, with the ITC's outputs feeding the CIC's Assessment and Learning phase, and the CIC's Problem Framing phase generating targets for the ITC.



8.3 Relationship to the Innovation Pipeline

The Innovation Pipeline (Source, Curate, Discover, Incubate, Transition) is the proven methodology for structured problem discovery and solution development. It remains the right framework for problems that require deep investigation, multiple stakeholder engagement, and deliberate development—what might be called *deliberate innovation targeting*. The ITC does not rename or replace the Innovation Pipeline. Instead, the Pipeline is a *feeder of capability* to the ITC, and the ITC is a *feeder of intelligence* back to the Pipeline.

8.4 Supported and Supporting Functions

A critical insight from military doctrine—and from the JCIO—is that the ITC must be understood in terms of **supported and supporting relationships**. Innovation Operations is not Fires—it is a broader construct within which Innovation Fires (including the ITC) can be either a supported or supporting function depending on the operational context. The ITC is an operational function. Acquisition organizations provide means to the fires process, but the acquisition chain does not control the ITC. This is not a bureaucratic distinction—it is fundamental to ensuring that innovation fires serve the commander's intent and campaign objectives, not institutional priorities.

9. Filling the Gap in the Department's Reform Architecture

The Department of War's acquisition reform momentum is real and significant. The redesignation to the Warfighting Acquisition System, the consolidation of PEOs into PAEs, the creation of PIT, the Wartime Production Unit, the FY26 NDAA's codification of portfolio-based acquisition, the January 2026 restructuring of the defense innovation ecosystem under a single CTO—these are serious structural changes that address real problems in how the Department develops and fields capability.

But the reforms share a common assumption: that the right problems are already known, that requirements will continue to flow from traditional channels, and that the primary bottleneck is in development and delivery. The Innovation Targeting Cycle challenges this assumption by making explicit that **problem detection, problem definition, solution assessment, and knowledge distribution are operational functions** that require the same organizational discipline, resourcing, and tempo as development and deployment.

Consider the current landscape:

- **Detect:** No organization within the WAS is explicitly chartered for persistent, forward-deployed problem detection. Requirements still flow primarily through staff-generated needs statements—processes that are slow, bureaucratic, and often disconnected from the tactical edge.
- **Define:** Problem definition is assumed to happen within the requirements process, but in practice, programs often begin with poorly framed problems that lead to solutions nobody asked for.

- **Assess:** Post-fielding assessment is ad hoc. There is no systematic, rapid feedback loop that tells the acquisition system whether what it delivered actually solved the problem.
- **Distribute:** Knowledge sharing across units, services, and commands remains inconsistent. Solutions that work in one theater may never reach units facing the same problem elsewhere.

The ITC addresses each of these gaps by treating them as integral phases of a targeting cycle, not as ancillary support functions. When combined with the WAS's development and delivery authorities, the result is a complete system that connects warfighter reality to institutional capability at every phase.

10. Historical Precedents: Forward-Deployed Innovation in Wartime

The Innovation Targeting Cycle is not a theoretical construct. Its logic has been practiced—imperfectly and incompletely—by several organizations that deployed forward and operated at the seam between warfighter problems and institutional solutions during the post-9/11 wars.

10.1 The Rapid Equipping Force (2002–2021)

The REF's operating model embodied the ITC's core logic. Any soldier could submit a problem via a simple "10-Liner." The REF Director held unique authority to validate requirements and had acquisition authority, compressing what normally took months into days. The REF aimed to deliver solutions within 90 days and in some cases provided capability in as little as 72 hours. Its Expeditionary Lab at Bagram Airfield was perhaps the purest expression of the Develop-Deploy cycle running at tactical speed. What the REF lacked was the full cycle. Its Assess and Dissemination phases were informal at best, and it was never connected to the broader acquisition system as an operational targeting function.

10.2 The Asymmetric Warfare Group (2006–2021)

AWG's model was fundamentally about the Detect-Define-Distribute phases of the ITC. Operational advisors embedded with both conventional and special operations units, observed enemy and friendly tactics, identified gaps, and disseminated solutions across the force. AWG's greatest strength was its Distribute function—capturing solutions and rolling them back into institutional Army training. What AWG lacked was authority over

the Develop and Deploy phases for material solutions, depending on handoffs to organizations like the REF or traditional program offices.

10.3 The Defense Innovation Unit (2015–Present)

DIU took a different approach: rather than deploying forward to warfighters, DIU deployed forward to industry. DIU's contribution to the Develop and Deploy phases has been significant. What DIU lacks is the front end and back end of the cycle. A 2025 GAO assessment found that DIU does not yet have performance goals and metrics to assess its progress—a direct reflection of the missing Assess phase.

10.4 The Lesson: No Organization Has Run the Full Cycle

Organization	Detect	Define	Develop	Deploy	Assess	Distribute
REF	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Informal	Informal
AWG	Strong	Strong	Non-material only	Limited	Informal	Strong
DIU	Ad hoc	Partial	Strong	Scaling issues	No metrics	Limited
WAS/PAEs	None	Via JCIDS	Strong	Strong	Ad hoc	Ad hoc

The REF was strongest where DIU was weakest, and vice versa. AWG excelled at the phases both others missed. But they were never integrated into a single cycle. The ITC codifies what these organizations learned through two decades of wartime experience into a complete, continuous process—one that can be embedded within the broader Innovation Operations construct and connected to the Warfighting Acquisition System's authorities and resources.

The Department disbanded both the REF and AWG in 2021. It has not replaced their forward-deployed problem detection and solution dissemination capabilities. The ITC is the framework for reconstituting these capabilities—not as niche organizations operating on the margins of the acquisition system, but as the operational targeting process at the center of it.

11. Implementation Approach

Phase 1 (0–90 days): Minimum Viable ITC Capability

Stand up the J3 Fusion Cell and IOSE; select a single operational use case; run at least one full ITC loop with assessed results and a disposition decision.

Phase 2 (90–180 days): Activate FDMDF Release Pipeline

Operationalize FDMDF as the forward IOP node; establish baseline configuration control and “gold builds”; implement repeatable fielding kits and dissemination products.

Phase 3 (180–365 days): Institutionalize Governance and Scaling

Formalize CIC disposition; establish IOSO at portfolio level; execute scaling playbooks and sustainment pipelines; harden dissemination and baseline control.

End state: ITC is a persistent operational capability with a standing fusion node, technical integration/release capacity, governance disposition, and MT&E/scaling execution.

12. Risks and Mitigations

- **Perceived acquisition ownership:** Mitigate with J3 placement and explicit supported/supporting decision rights.
- **Innovation theater (endless pilots):** Mitigate with CIC disposition gates and exit criteria.
- **Configuration divergence:** Mitigate with IOP technical control and FDMDF “gold build” discipline.
- **Dissemination too slow or too “lessons learned”:** Mitigate with dual-path distribution and release discipline.
- **Contracting/resourcing becomes a pacing function:** Mitigate with IOSE/IOSE readiness and standing vehicles.
- **Compliance friction blocks speed:** Mitigate by integrating safety/cyber/test into the IOP/FDMDF release pipeline and using commander risk acceptance for controlled fielding.

13. Conclusion

The Department of War has taken bold steps to accelerate the acquisition of warfighting capability. The Innovation Targeting Cycle is designed to make those steps count by ensuring they are aimed at the right targets.

McChrystal's JSOC did not succeed by building better weapons or hiring more analysts. It succeeded by collapsing the cycle time between intelligence and action, and by building an organization where every function operated at the same tempo within a shared operational rhythm. The task force went from one raid a month to ten raids a night not because it got faster at any single step, but because it eliminated the gaps between steps.

The same transformation is needed in defense innovation. The Innovation Targeting Cycle—running inside the broader Innovation Operations construct, drawing on the Innovation Pipeline's methodology, enabled by the Warfighting Acquisition System's authorities, and governed by the Continuous Innovation Cycle's operational framework—provides the rapid, continuous, feedback-driven process that turns structural reform into operational advantage.

But the ITC is not self-executing. To produce sustained operational advantage, the Department must field the system required to run the cycle continuously across echelons and convert tactical success into force-wide adaptation. This means standing a J3-led Fusion Cell as the operational tempo engine, activating the FDMDF as the forward integration and release node, and empowering IOSpt to man, train, equip, and scale the system while executing CIC disposition decisions. Without this organizational architecture, the ITC remains a conceptual model. *With* it, the ITC becomes a persistent warfighting capability.

The Department has reformed *how* it acquires. The Innovation Targeting Cycle provides the discipline for *what* it acquires, *whether* it worked, and *who else* needs to know. That is the difference between going fast and going fast in the right direction.

Appendix A: Key Terms and Acronyms

Term	Definition
Innovation Operations (InnOps)	A joint operational activity that integrates and employs novel capabilities, methods, and configurations to create operational effects and sustain adaptation advantage during competition and conflict.
Joint Concept of Innovation Operations (JCIO)	The overarching concept that defines the organizational constructs, command relationships, and operating architecture required to execute InnOps as an operational function.
Continuous Innovation Cycle (CIC)	The operational management cycle that prioritizes innovation problems, allocates resources, and executes disposition decisions (scale/retain/modify/kill) based on operational evidence.
Innovation Targeting Cycle (ITC)	The tactical execution loop for time-sensitive innovation problems: Detect → Define → Develop → Deploy → Assess → Distribute.
Innovation Targeting Fusion Cell	The operational-level, J3-led cross-functional cell that runs the ITC at operational tempo by integrating operations, intelligence, engineering/integration, assessment, and acquisition enablement into one decision-and-execution node.
Innovation Operations Platform (IOP)	The technical integration and release capability that enables rapid composition, integration, configuration control, and fielding of innovation increments into operational formations.
Forward-Deployed Maintenance and Development Facility (FDMDF)	The forward-deployed physical node of the IOP that executes integration, modification, limited validation testing, release packaging, and fielding-kit production at speed.
Innovation Operations Forces (IOF)	Forward teams embedded with operational units that enable detection, evidence generation, installation support, and rapid feedback to the Fusion Cell and IOP/FDMDF.
Innovation Operations Support (IOSpt)	The supporting construct aligned to the acquisition and institutional enterprise that mans, trains, equips, and scales the InnOps system and executes CIC scaling decisions.
Innovation Armory	A curated catalog of validated capability increments, configurations, and fielding kits available for rapid employment and recomposition.
Disposition Decision	A CIC governance decision for an ITC output: Invest, Retain, Modify, or Kill.