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Toward an AI-Powered Logistics Grid for Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul: Why the DoW Must Become a Digital OEM to Win the Sustainment War

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Toward an AI-Powered Logistics Grid for Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul: Why the DoW Must Become a Digital OEM to Win the Sustainment War

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Abstract

The Department of War (DoW) faces a critical readiness crisis, with billions spent annually on Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) failing to keep advanced weapon systems operational. By examining trends in contract obligations, technical data access, and operational availability across aviation, ground, and maritime systems, this study correlates declining platform availability with low levels of government access to technical data and a shift toward contractor-led MRO. These findings highlight that systemic sustainment challenges are rooted in the government's lack of access to technical data, which precludes competitive sourcing and independent organic repair.

Such reliance is operationally perilous in an era of contested logistics, where distributed sustainment and rapid repair are essential for victory. This paper makes the case that the DoW must recognize sustainment as a data problem and transform MRO through a three-step process: (1) establish the DoW as a Digital OEM through access to technical design files; (2) fuse technical data with AI-enabled software for predictive and prescriptive maintenance; and (3) deploy a decentralized logistics grid leveraging additive manufacturing and distributed sustainment hubs closer to the point of need. Realizing this vision enables the DoW to regenerate combat power at the speed and distance required by modern conflict.

Introduction

The Department of War (DoW) spends billions each year to field and maintain the world's most advanced weapons yet struggles to keep them operational. Aircraft sit grounded, ships remain pierside, and vehicles are cannibalized for parts (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2023a, 2025b; U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General [DoDIG], 2023). Not a single tactical aircraft variant met its mission-capable target in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 (GAO, 2024b). Submarines returning from deployment can wait years for repairs to begin (Eckstein, 2020). Billion-dollar platforms are, too often, idle assets.

This is the state of readiness in peacetime. The situation will compound dramatically in a protracted conflict or contested environment. And the consequences will be much more dire. There are multiple factors that contribute to this crisis and many well-intended attempts to solve it. Yet persistent readiness shortfalls suggest these efforts are treating the symptoms of a deeper, more systemic challenge: Military maintainers and logisticians do not have access to the technical data they need to keep weapons ready and in the fight.

Without access to the technical data, the government cannot competitively source parts, authorize alternative suppliers, or repair systems independently. It outsources not just maintenance, but also control to contractors. The DoW has become a tenant in its own supply chain.

This arrangement is operationally perilous. In an era defined by strategic competition and contested logistics, the difference between victory and defeat will be determined by which side can sustain combat power over time. Modern conflict will not pause for parts to be transported from CONUS depots or for contractor schedules to align with operational requirements. Physical inventory, whether stockpiled or in transit, is itself a vulnerability that will be exploited by our adversaries. The Regional Sustainment Framework was designed with this in mind. Future wars demand distributed maintenance and repair across allied facilities and forward positions (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2024). Yet that vision is impossible when the government lacks the authority to authorize repairs or manufacture spares at the point of need.

The future of readiness is not a warehouse or centralized repair depot. It is not a vulnerable stockpile of physical parts awaiting deployment. It is a secure library of certified digital files, transmissible globally and manufacturable locally. It is smarter data stewardship and utilization. In this model, lead time is measured in data transmission speeds, not shipping schedules. Inventory is theoretically unlimited. The strategic vulnerabilities that undercut the DoW's current maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) model is replaced by the resilience of distributed production.

Realizing this vision requires the DoW to transform its approach to MRO in three decisive steps:

1. **Transform the DoW into a Digital OEM:** Secure access to technical data via digital blueprints as a non-negotiable condition of procurement.
2. **Fuse Data for MRO Intelligence:** Fuse technical data with AI-enabled commercial software to forecast failures, coordinate procurement, and prescribe solutions at machine speed.
3. **Operationalize the Grid:** Deploy a decentralized AI-powered logistics network with additive manufacturing at the point of need—transforming centralized maintenance and repair depots into distributed sustainment hubs.

The Operational Reality an AI-Powered Logistics Grid Enables

A mission-critical hydraulic actuator fails on an F-35 operating from a forward base in the Indo-Pacific. Today, that aircraft is grounded pending retrograde to a CONUS depot or OEM facility—a process measured in weeks or months.

In an AI-powered logistics grid, the response is fundamentally different: Within seconds of the failure, sensor data is compared against a government-owned digital blueprint. An AI model diagnoses the root cause and correlates it against global inventory, supplier capacity, and manufacturing hub availability. The system prescribes the optimal path: additive manufacturing at an allied depot in Japan using a certified digital file. The part is printed, inspected, and installed within 48 hours. The OEM is not consulted. The supply chain is not stressed. The aircraft returns to mission-capable status at a fraction of the traditional cost and timeline.

The future of MRO lies not in more funding or better wrench-turning, but in smarter data ownership and utilization. For decades, the DoW has wrestled with sustainment challenges while the underlying incentives and data structures remained unchanged. The DoW has a choice. It can continue managing sustainment as a logistics problem, or it can recognize sustainment as a data problem and seize the authority required to solve it.

The cost of inaction is both financial and strategic. Sustainment consumes roughly 70% of a weapon system's total life-cycle cost—meaning the DoW spends twice as much to maintain these platforms as it did to procure them (GAO, 2024a). Yet expensive platforms that cannot be sustained cannot deter and cannot be used by the Joint Force. In a future conflict that will be defined by speed and distance, the side that can repair and regenerate combat power at the point of need holds a strategic advantage.

The Modern Sustainment Challenge

The United States possesses the world's most robust Organic Industrial Base (OIB)—a network of depots and arsenals staffed by skilled maintainers who form the backbone of warfighting readiness. Beyond the OIB, thousands of maintainers and sustainers keep the force operational day-to-day. Yet neither workforce is equipped with the data and data infrastructure they need to effectively do their jobs. Consequently, the department has been forced to rely on an expensive, contract-heavy MRO model.

Since FY2016, the DoW has spent over $286 billion for MRO *in contract obligations alone*—an average of $29.4 billion each year.[1] Importantly, these figures exclude costs associated with the bulk of the DoW's Operations and Maintenance budget, such as government personnel, facility construction and maintenance, base support, training, and day-to-day operations. To put these figures in perspective, the global commercial aviation sector, with a fleet size of around 30,000 aircraft, annually averaged $80 billion on MRO over this time period (Oliver Wyman, 2022, 2024). This means the DoW's spending on MRO awards alone amounts to over a third of the size of the entire commercial aviation MRO market. Still, this enormous investment has not bought ready systems and platforms.

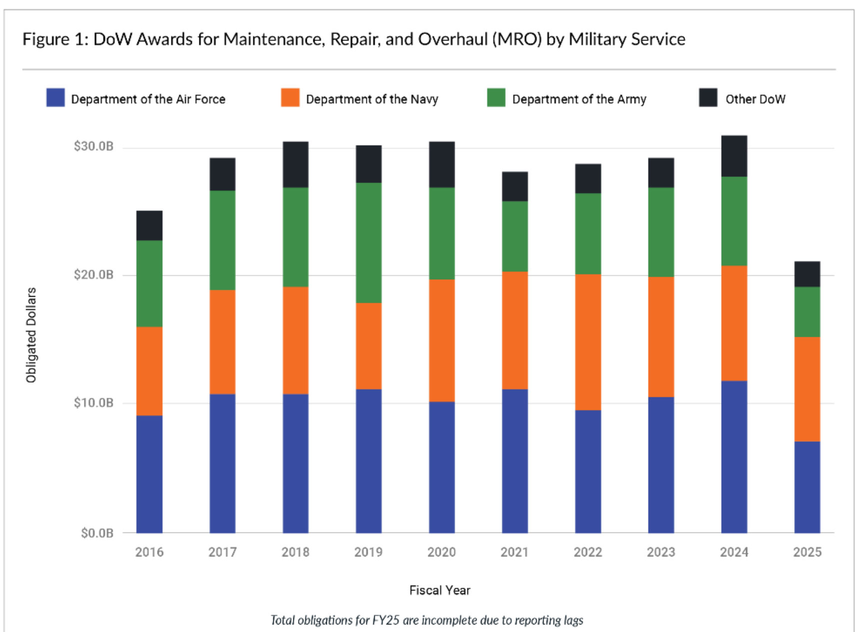

Figure 1. DoW Awards for MRO by Military Service

[1] Numbers represent obligated dollars via contract awards and, therefore, are not inclusive of all DoW MRO spend, such as costs associated with government personnel, construction and facility maintenance, transportation, capital equipment, and other depot operating costs.

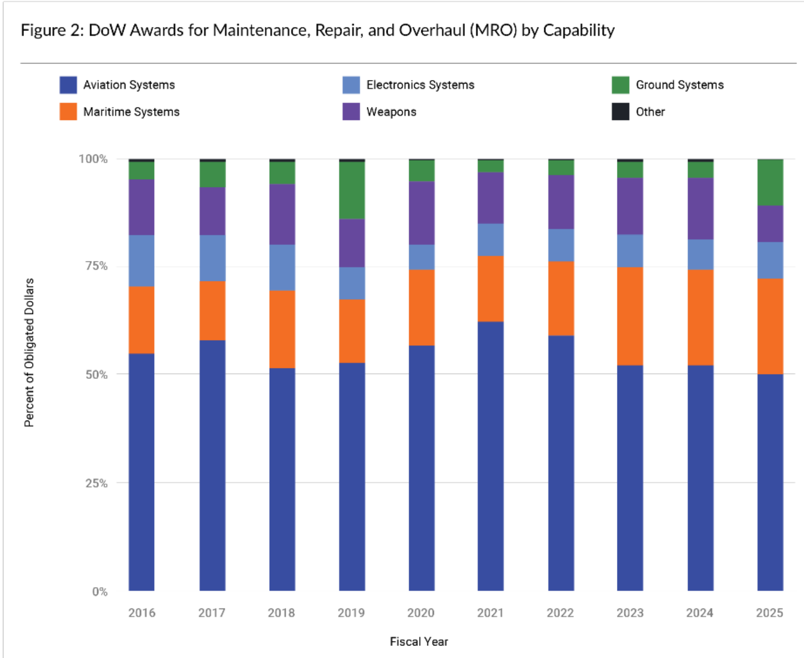

Figure 2. DoW Awards for MRO by Capability

Instead, mission-capable rates have declined, particularly among aviation systems, which account for more than half of all MRO dollars awarded each year. Half of the aircraft reviewed by the GAO (2022a, 2023a) failed to meet their annual mission-capable goal in any fiscal year between FY2011 and FY2021. For tactical aircraft, the situation is particularly critical: None of the aircraft variants reviewed met their mission-capable goals in FY2023 (GAO, 2024b). Critical fifth-generation platforms, such as the F-35, have struggled significantly, failing to meet reliability and maintainability goals and resulting in operational availability rates around 55% against a 90% objective (GAO, 2023d).

In peacetime, this is a budgetary inefficiency. In wartime, it is a critical failure point.

Increased Reliance on Contractors and Decreased Reliance on the Organic Industrial Base for MRO

In recent years, the DoW's response to sustainment complexity has been to delegate it via Contractor Logistics Support (CLS), Performance-Based Logistics (PBL), and similar life-cycle sustainment contracts (Light et al., 2024). In doing so, the DoW seeks to transfer risk and leverage specialized industry expertise to maintain its platforms and weapons systems. While intended to improve readiness, these contracts deepen the DoW's dependency on OEMs and obscure visibility into the sub-tier supply chain. They further reduce government access to the underlying technical data, making it difficult to validate costs, manage risks, or introduce competition. The result is that the DoW often outsources sustainment while retaining the ultimate risk of failure. This structural reliance prevents the organic base from developing the institutional muscle memory required to repair systems independently during a crisis.

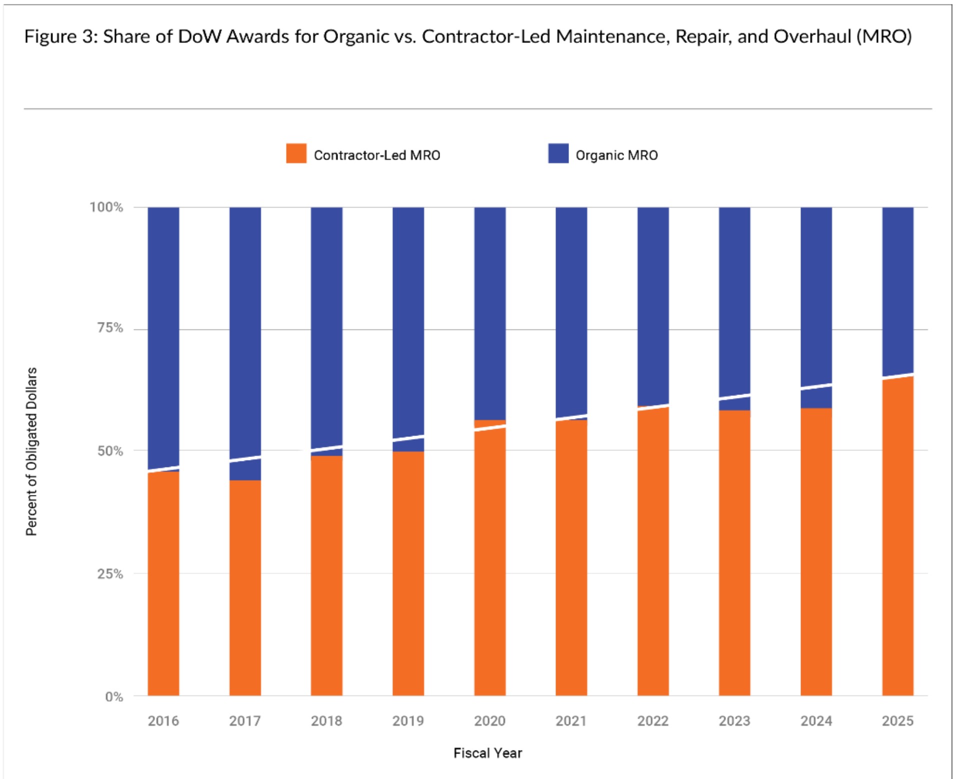

Figure 3. Share of DoW Awards for Organic vs. Contractor-Led MRO

Figure 3 reveals a decisive shift toward contractor-led sustainment, with contracted MRO (including awards for CLS and PBL) growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 5.7%. Dollars awarded for organic MRO stagnated over this time but declined relative to all MRO dollars awarded. In FY2016, less than half of all dollars went to contractor-led MRO. In FY2025, 64% of awarded dollars went to contracted MRO. This trend reveals a self-reinforcing cycle: As contractor dependency grows, the government further loses access to the data, systems, and supply chain visibility it needs to sustain its own weapons.

Data Fragmentation and Systemic Silos

The foundation of any predictive enterprise is unified, high-quality data. However, the DoW's MRO ecosystem is built on a patchwork of legacy systems that are inoperable across programs, platforms, and services. Critical data—from part failure histories and supplier lead times to depot capacity and mission capable rates—reside in disconnected silos (GAO, 2022b). This fragmentation prevents the aggregation and correlation necessary for accurate readiness forecasting.

The F-35's Autonomic Logistics Information System (ALIS) exemplifies this challenge. Since FY2010, the DoW has awarded Lockheed Martin $2.4 billion to sustain and modernize ALIS. Despite this investment, the system has been publicly criticized for being frustrating and inefficient, requiring maintainers to use manual workarounds for tasks that should be automated (Clark, 2019). Data fidelity and usability issues became so severe that ALIS required a complete re-architecture into the Operational Data Integrated Network (ODIN) at additional cost (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2024).

This is not an isolated case; it is emblematic of a defense-wide struggle to establish a standardized, unified data foundation to optimize and use data at scale. The DoW's perennial struggle to achieve sound financial management is similarly tied to the fragmentation and poor oversight of the underlying business systems that manage assets and logistics (GAO, 2023b). In this environment, even the best-intentioned CLS or PBL arrangement struggles to achieve true efficiency because it lacks the necessary data for predictive forecasting.

Technical Data Authority: The Missing Foundation for Competitive Sustainment

Data fragmentation and increased reliance on contractor-led MRO are symptoms of a deeper structural challenge: The government lacks access to the technical data underlying its weapon systems. Contractors legitimately protect their intellectual property, but without access to technical data, the government cannot authorize alternative suppliers, validate costs, or repair independently (GAO, 2025a). This dependency creates a structural barrier to competitive sustainment and operational flexibility.

Often, when a critical component fails, DoW maintainers are not authorized to fabricate a replacement or conduct the repair themselves without the technical data (DoDIG, 2022). They must wait for a vendor to respond or resort to cannibalizing other platforms, a practice that increases maintenance workload, degrades the long-term health of the fleet, and creates significant risks for long-term operational availability (GAO, 2023d). It also means that the government often lacks alternative sources to fill supply gaps.

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall cited the F-35 as a “painful” lesson in this regard, noting that its “total system procurement” model ceded intellectual property rights to Lockheed Martin, effectively preventing the government from cost-effectively upgrading the platform or leveraging competition for repairs (*Posture of the Department of the Air Force*, 2024).

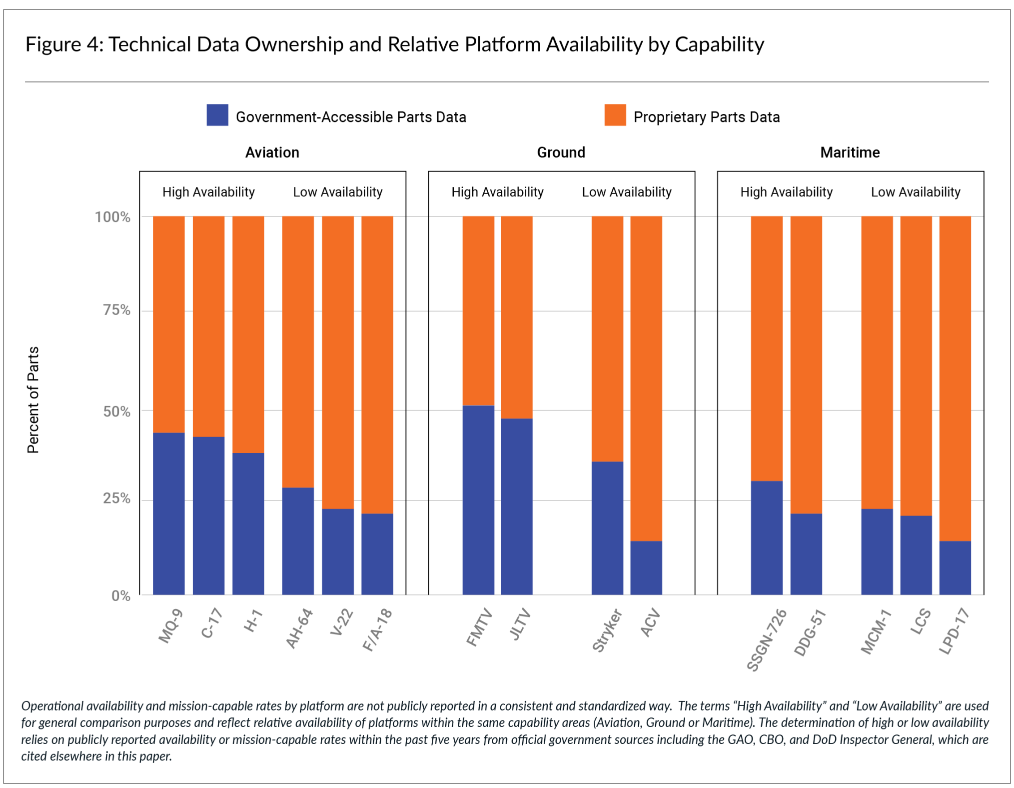

Figure 4. Technical Data Ownership and Relative Platform Availability by Capability

Figure 4 reveals the pervasive lack of government access to technical data across Aviation, Ground, and Maritime capabilities. Across all platforms in Figure 4—whether high or low availability—the government lacks access to technical information for the majority of parts. In most cases, government-accessible part data is well below 50%. In addition, programs with lower availability tend to correlate with a lower degree of government data access. The F/A-18 Super Hornet, Stryker Combat Vehicle, and Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) exhibit some of the lowest levels of government data access. Such platforms also have particularly low operational availability or mission-capable rates (CBO, 2022; GAO, 2022a, 2023a, 2024b, 2025b).

MRO on the F/A-18 Super Hornet is a clear illustration of this problem. The Navy could not repair or establish an alternative source for generator converter units because the contractor would not share the necessary technical data and would not respond to a request for pricing the data package (DoDIG, 2019). Similarly, the DLA could not acquire a specific communication antenna because the government could not access technical drawings, and the sole-source manufacturer was experiencing a 13-month production delay, making the part impossible to source (DoDIG, 2019).

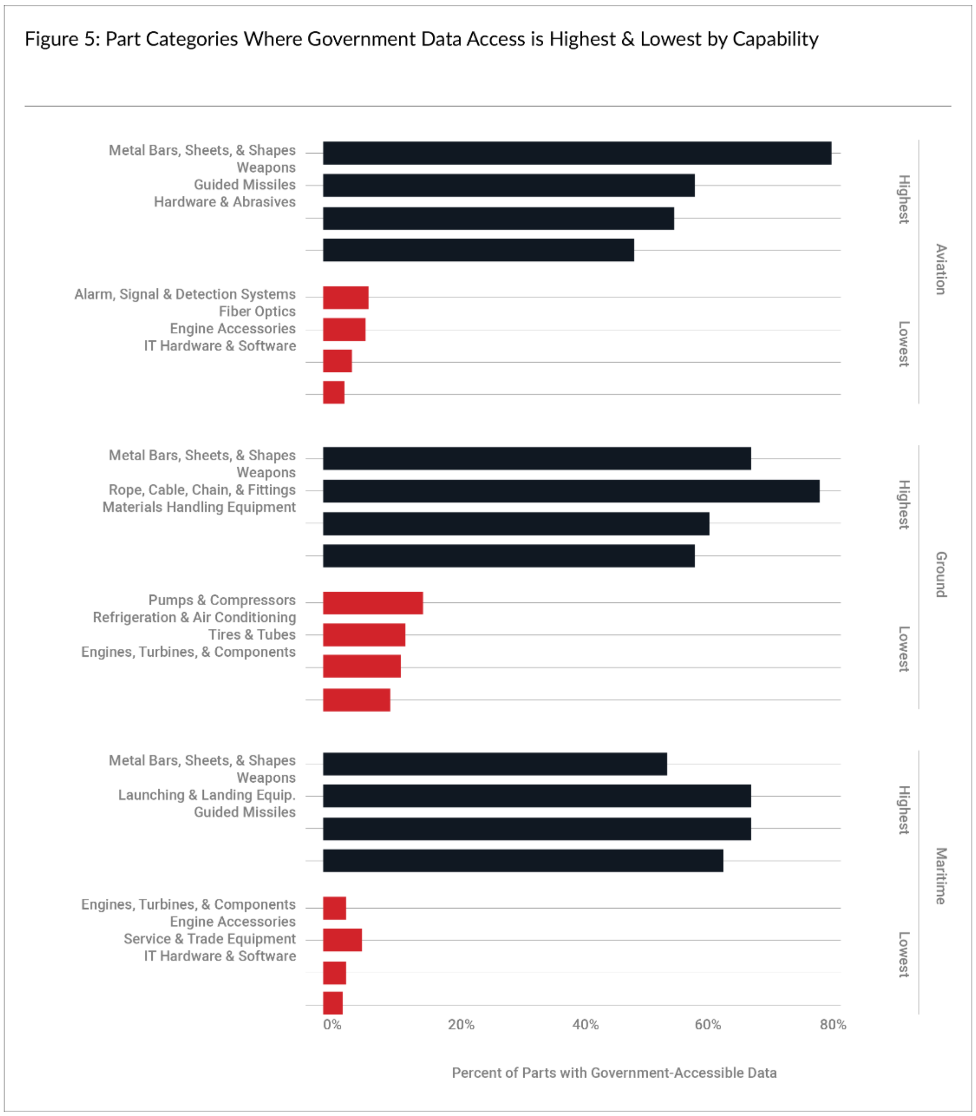

Figure 5. Part Categories Where Government Data Access is Highest & Lowest by Capability

The problem is most acute where it matters most. As shown in Figure 5, the government's access to data is lowest for the most complex and technologically advanced components. While the DoW may have access to data for basic structural materials, it consistently lacks access to critical subsystems such as engines and avionics. When the government attempts to obtain access to this proprietary data, which is often owned by subcontractors rather than the prime contractor, it can be met with refusal or extremely high prices for the data rights (Light et al., 2024). This is the technical equivalent of owning the blueprint for a car's frame, but not for its engine or transmission, making independent repair or competitive sourcing for the most vital parts impossible. As a result, parts become backordered, and platforms sit idle.

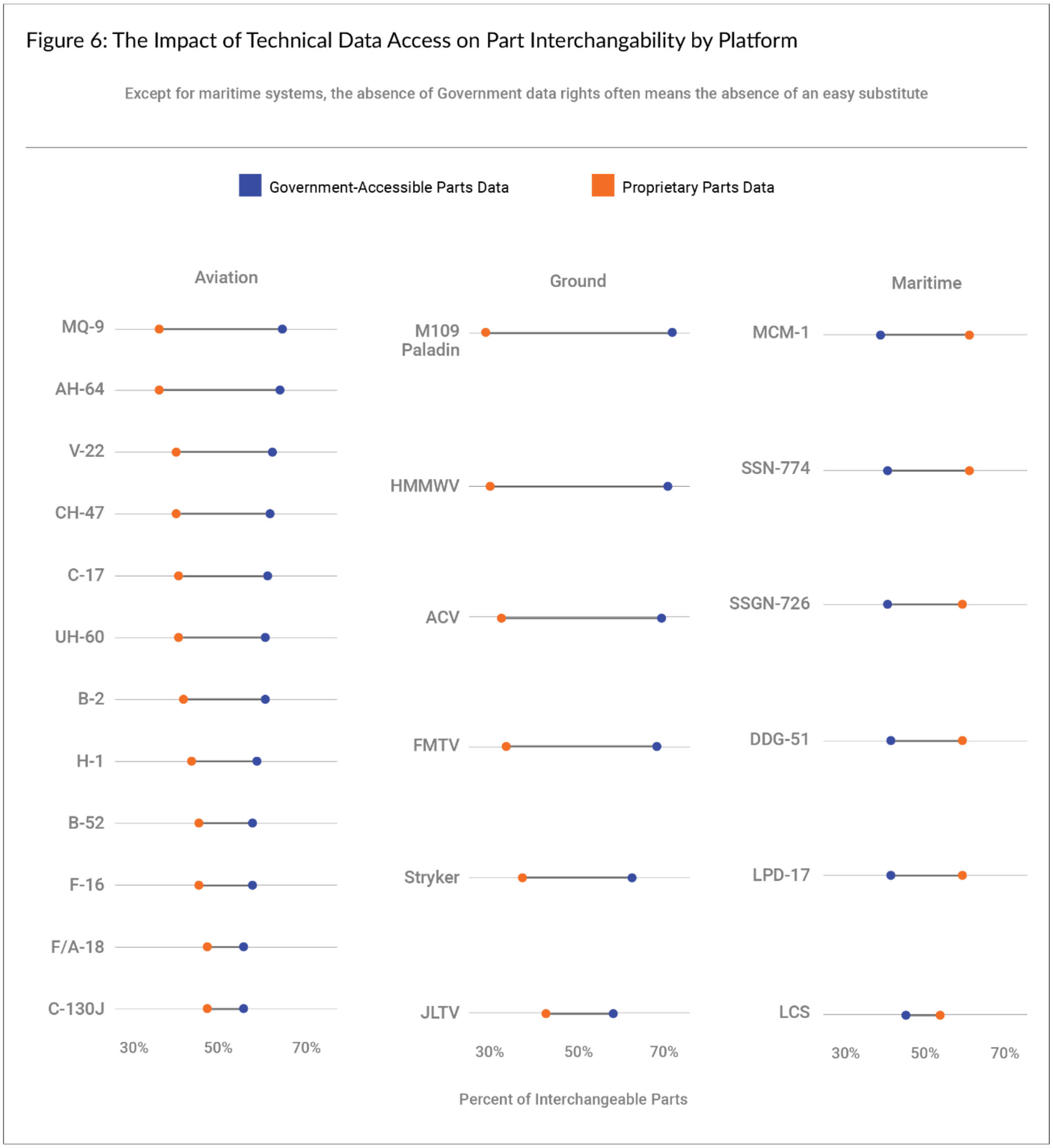

Figure 6. The Impact of Technical Data Access on Part Interchangeability by Platform

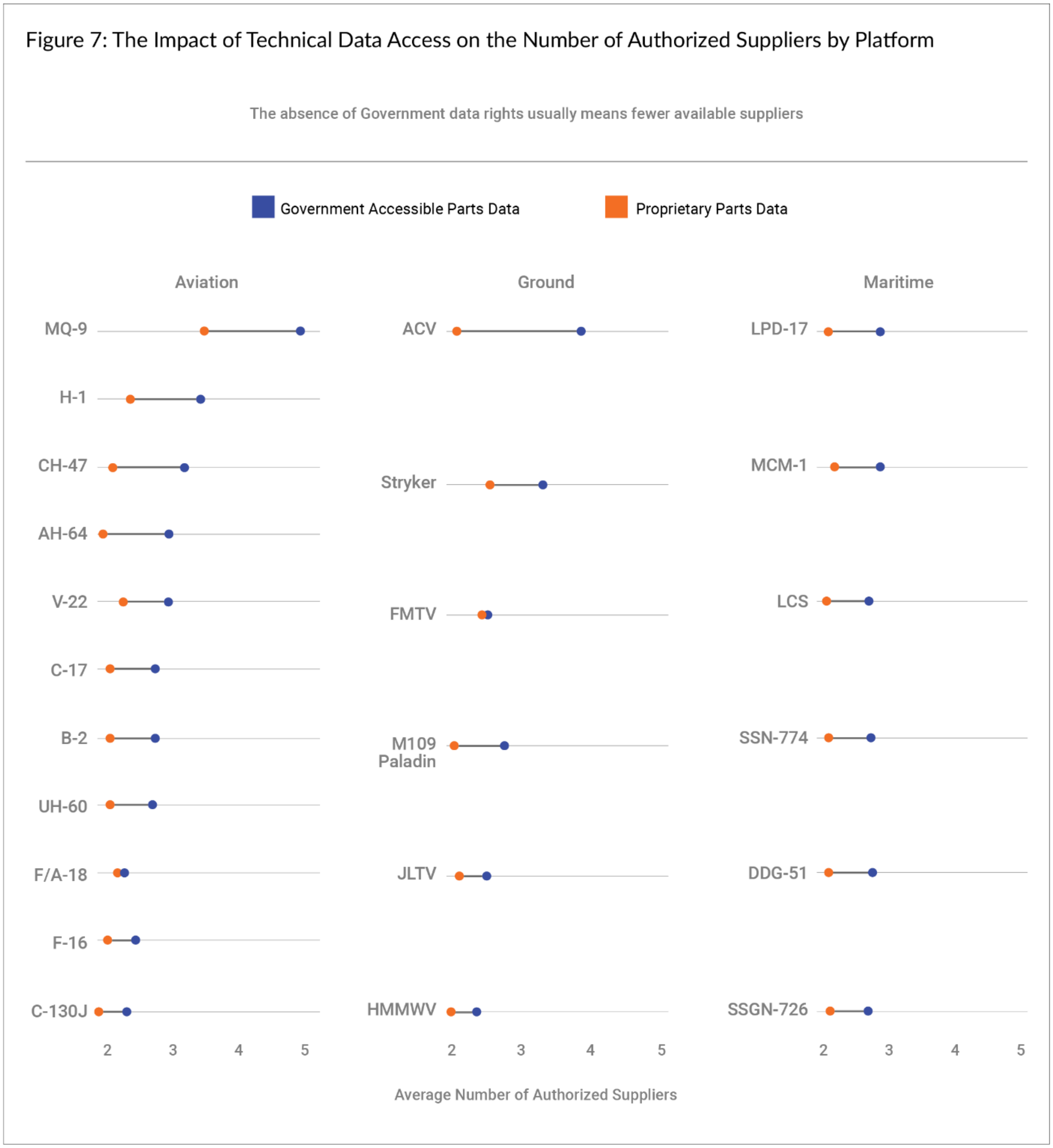

Figure 7. The Impact of Technical Data Access on the Number of Authorized Suppliers by Platform

When the government lacks access to technical data, it often lacks alternative parts and alternative suppliers to fill supply gaps. Figure 6 shows that when the government has access to a part's data, there is a much greater chance that an interchangeable substitute is available. Conversely, when a part's data is proprietary and inaccessible to the government, it is less likely that it can be swapped with an interchangeable substitute. The exception to this finding is for Maritime systems, which suggests that even with government-accessible data, the unique and highly specialized nature of naval components makes finding substitutes difficult.

Figure 7 reveals a consistent pattern across Aviation, Ground, and Maritime platforms: Parts with government-accessible data have a greater number of authorized suppliers than their proprietary counterparts. The reverse is also true. This lack of competition is not a failure of logistics; it is a failure of acquisition strategy that reverberates for decades.

Transforming the MRO Enterprise

The DoW must address the cause of persistent sustainment problems, not just the symptoms. The DoW cannot fix MRO one depot or one contract at a time. Incremental reforms have failed because they address symptoms rather than the underlying structure. True transformation requires three integrated steps that fundamentally reorder the relationship between the government, its data, and the industrial base.

Step 1: Transform the DoW into a Digital OEM

Transforming the MRO enterprise begins with data. The DoW's 2025 Acquisition Transformation Strategy recognizes that the government cannot deliver capabilities to the American warfighter at pace to deter and defeat our adversaries without greater access to and utilization of the technical data underlying its systems. It calls for "owning the operator's manual of our systems so government and military mechanics can repair our weapon systems without reliance on others," which ensures that organic depots and contractors alike can repair systems (DoW, 2025). Members of Congress have attempted to address this challenge with "right to repair" amendments to the NDAA with limited success (GAO, 2025a; Hultz, 2025). A more balanced and sustainable approach is needed that will empower the DoW to improve the speed and flexibility by which it can deliver for the warfighter.

Securing access to technical data via digital blueprints accomplishes three critical goals:

1. **It Breaks Vendor Lock:** It enables robust competition for sustainment, allowing organic depots and innovative commercial partners to repair, replace, and upgrade components.
2. **It Empowers the Organic Industrial Base**: It gives government depots the information they need to fulfill their statutory mandate, turning them into centers of excellence and innovation.
3. **It Creates the Foundation for an AI-Powered Logistics Grid:** It provides the standardized, complete, and trusted data that is the absolute prerequisite for systematic predictive maintenance or AI-driven logistics.

Step 2: Fuse Data for MRO Intelligence

Once the DoW has access to the core technical data, AI-enabled commercial software must fuse it with real-world procurement, supplier, and operational intelligence to unlock predictive and even prescriptive capabilities. MRO intelligence is the output of this fusion, unlocking a range of capabilities, including:

- **Predictive Maintenance Planning:** AI models can instantly forecast maintenance demand from usage data and prescribe the optimal sustainment path, eliminating human lag time. An AI model could have prospectively identified, for example, the long-term consequences of the F-35's engine cooling problem. The Pentagon knew the F135 engine was operating beyond its design parameters but accepted an estimated $38 billion in future maintenance costs to avoid initial program delays (GAO, 2023c). An AI-powered analysis could have quantified that future risk in today's dollars, arming program managers with the evidence to demand a design change.
- **Cross-Program Optimization:** AI can identify shared components, suppliers, and risks across hundreds of programs—turning fragmented maintenance into system-level

insight. This system-level insight allows the DoW to manage its industrial base as a strategic portfolio, anticipating bottlenecks and coordinating procurement in ways that are impossible today.

This integrated intelligence transforms maintenance from a slow, reactive sustainment function into a readiness driver, enabling true predictive readiness and supporting distributed operations.

Step 3: Operationalize an AI-Powered Logistics Grid for Contested Operations

By establishing authority as a Digital OEM and integrating MRO intelligence, the DoW can build the sustainment enterprise required for modern conflict: a decentralized logistics grid and MRO network. Leveraging MRO intelligence, the grid can autonomously manage a global network of certified industrial bases and additive manufacturing hubs. It can determine whether a part should be repaired at a U.S. or allied depot, procured from pre-positioned stock, or additively manufactured at the point of need using a government-accessible digital data file.

This is not speculative. The technology exists (Charkaluk & Szmytka, 2025). What has been missing is the data access to deploy it. By becoming a Digital OEM, the DoW unlocks this capability across the entire sustainment enterprise.

From Physical Inventory to Digital Readiness

Becoming a Digital OEM means asserting, through policy and acquisition practice, that the government must have access to the complete technical data package for every weapon system it procures. This does not suggest that the government must mandate this access for free, but it means refusing to pay twice—once for the weapon and then later for the privilege of maintaining it. Realizing this vision does not require a wholesale upheaval of the defense industrial base's business models or a complete dismissal of legitimate intellectual property rights. Instead, existing frameworks—specifically within Title 10—present a logical starting point for modernizing the DoW's approach to MRO. Updating how the law treats technical data authority within these statutes is a pragmatic first step toward the Digital OEM model, ensuring that the transition to a distributed logistics grid is both strategically decisive and respectful of the vital partnerships that define the U.S. industrial base.

Above all, any legislative or policy changes must reflect the 21st century reality that access to critical data is as strategically vital as physical infrastructure or exquisite lethality.

With this foundation of data, AI-enabled software becomes the engine of transformation. By fusing technical blueprints with maintenance data and real-world supply chain intelligence, the DoW can finally shift from reactive repair to predictive readiness. It can identify risks before they cascade into fleet-wide groundings. It can dynamically route maintenance to the optimal location—whether that's an organic depot, an allied facility, or an additive manufacturing hub embedded with forward forces. It can make decisions at machine speed that currently require weeks of coordination.

This is the vision that makes the Regional Sustainment Framework operationally viable. In a protracted conflict, the victor will not be the side with the largest stockpiles, but the side that can regenerate combat power faster than it is destroyed. An AI-powered logistics grid, underpinned by government-accessible technical data and best-in-class commercial software, turns that requirement from aspiration into reality.

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