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America's "Mini Air Force": Long-range drones directed against China

By Michael Richardson
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[Excerpts]

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SINGAPORE: A recent offer by the Seychelles to refuel and replenish Chinese naval ships on anti-piracy patrols in the northwest Indian Ocean was seen as the latest sign of China's expanding naval power.

But it obscured an even more significant development: U.S. deployment of a mini-air force of long-range, remotely-piloted aircraft from a network of airfields in the Seychelles, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula...

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Use of the civilian airport in Victoria by several U.S. Reaper drones underscores a development that is changing the nature of military and intelligence operations in many Asia-Pacific countries as well as the West. Reapers can fly nearly 1,850 km from base, conduct their mission and return home. If armed, they can unleash Hellfire missiles as well as guided 227-kg bombs...

Increasing reliance on drones indicates that the future of airpower is likely to be largely unmanned, as governments seek to reduce combat casualties and remove as many of their expensive manned warships and aircraft as possible from hostile range.

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The U.S. military has become so concerned at China's rapidly growing arsenal of anti-access and area-denial weapons that just over two years ago it authorized the navy and air force to collaborate on ways to off-set the Chinese challenge to America's capacity to project power

and sustain its alliances and military partnerships in Asia.

In a 2010 report, Dr. Andrew Krepinevich, president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington, wrote that with the spread of advanced technologies and their exploitation by other countries, especially China and to a lesser extent Iran, U.S. ability to "preserve military access to two key areas of vital interest, the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf, is being increasingly challenged."

To move out of harm's way, the United States aims to deploy sea-based drones on its aircraft carriers in the Pacific by 2018. "They will play an integral part in our future operations in this region," according to Vice Admiral Scott Van Buskirk, commander of the U.S. 7th Fleet in the Pacific and Indian oceans. "Carrier-based unmanned aircraft systems have tremendous potential, especially in increasing the range and persistence of our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, as well as our ability to strike targets quickly."

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U.S. deployment of land-based drones has expanded rapidly in the past few years. Widely used in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have also been flown extensively over Pakistan in the hunt for militants, despite periodic protests from the government.

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Although the biggest, such as Global Hawk, can easily fly across the Pacific and remain aloft for days, many are small and can be hand-launched to provide troops with instant video imagery of the battlefield, day or night. The U.S. Army is already buying 1,300 radio-controlled Raven planes each year. They are the size of a large model aircraft.

The California company that makes them has also started mass production of a new tube-launched, man-portable drone for the U.S. Army. In addition to surveillance, it will also work as an explosive-packed kamikaze missile that can be armed and locked on target by the controller to attack dug-in or fortified infantry positions, enemy missile teams and mortar emplacements.

As electronic systems for small drones are miniaturized and improved, production costs are falling and capabilities increasing. Ravens currently cost around $56,000 each. By contrast, the U.S. Predator drone, widely used for surveillance and attack in Afghanistan and Pakistan, costs at least $5 million, and another $5,000 an hour to fly. The Predator is about the size of a piloted light aircraft.

…The Australian government plans to buy up to seven high-altitude, long-endurance Global

Hawks from the U.S. at an estimated cost of up to AU$2 billion. The opposition wants to increase the number to 15. Japan and South Korea are also talking to the Pentagon about possible bulk buys of Global Hawks.

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Critics contend that drone proliferation may lead to unauthorized operation in foreign airspace, mounting civilian casualties and collateral damage, strained inter-state relations, and eventually result in the technology falling into the hands of terrorists. But despite possible risks, drones seem set to play an expanding military and intelligence role.

One firm that tracks defense and aerospace markets says global spending on research and procurement of drones over the *next* decade is expected to amount of more than $94 billion, including $9 billion on remotely piloted combat planes.

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