

CAA Opens UK Skies to Military Drones

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Global Research, August 05, 2021

[Drone Wars UK](#) 4 August 2021

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has granted permission to US drone company General Atomics to conduct experimental flights of its new SkyGuardian drone in UK airspace. The MoD is buying 16 SkyGuardian drones, but renaming them as ‘Protector’. This is the first time that large military drones will be allowed to fly in the UK outside of segregated airspace and the decision will be seen as a breakthrough by the drone industry, who will see it as the beginning of opening UK skies to a whole host of drones to fly ‘beyond visual line of sight’ (BVLOS).

The news came in an ‘[airspace alert](#)’ issued by the CAA following the announcement that temporary airspace rules were to be put in place around the bases where the drone will be based. The terse, one-sentence paragraph in the alert said:

“The CAA has also completed an in-depth review and issued the authorisation to General Atomics operate within the UK.”

The lack of detail reflects the lack of transparency about the process to allow General Atomics to use its largely untried and untested ‘Detect and Avoid’ (DAA) equipment in the flights.

General Atomics has developed its DAA equipment to supposedly replicate an on-board pilot’s ability to ‘see and avoid’ danger. This is the bedrock upon which all air safety measures are built and – as we [reported back in 2018](#) – regulators at the CAA were deeply sceptical as to whether remote technology can replace an on-board pilot in busy airspace such as UK skies. Test flights of the drone in the US last summer, which were due to fly over San Diego, were [routed away from city](#) after apparent concerns from US safety regulators.

While the CAA is charged with responsibility for air safety, it says it also has a duty to implement government policy, which, under pressure from the drone industry, is to open UK airspace to large drones. Sir Stephen Hillier, former head of the RAF, was appointed as Chair of the CAA in August 2020. However, although the use of drones is fast normalising, the technology to fly drones beyond visual line of sight is still far from mature and such drones repeatedly crash as [the data we collate on military drone crashes demonstrates](#).

A poll of 2,000 people commissioned by our sister organisation, [UK Drone Watch](#), earlier this year found that [67% were worried about the safety implications of BVLOS drone flights](#), while 70% agreed that if such drones were allowed to be flown in the UK, they should be flown in segregated airspace away from other aircraft.

While the MoD has had to go through [a public consultation process](#) to put in place a Temporary Danger Area (TDA) around RAF Waddington and RAF Lossiemouth to enable the drone to take-off and land, there has been no public consultation or information released about how the CAA made the decision to allow large drones to fly in UK airspace using DAA technology. We will continue to press the CAA to release more details about how and why it made this decision.

Chris Cole, Coordinator of Drone Wars UK said:

“We are extremely disappointed that the CAA has given the go-ahead to General Atomics to conduct experimental flights of its new drone in UK airspace without any public consultation. While no doubt under pressure from those with a vested interest in expanding drone operations, as public regulator the CAA should absolutely prioritise safety and, given the public concern about such operations, at the very least, be open and transparent about its decision making process. “

As well as testing the new DAA equipment, the flights are also seen by General Atomics as a sales opportunity, with other nations being invited to observe the test flights.

Drone Wars UK and a number of other national organisations are organising protests against the US drone's flights in the UK. Do join us on Saturday 14 August at RAF Waddington and Saturday 18 October at RAF Lossiemouth. [More details here.](#)

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