

Drone Wars at Ten #3: What's Next? A Peek at the Future

By [Chris Cole](#)

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In this final post to mark our 10th birthday, I want to peek a little into the future, looking at what we are facing in relation to drone warfare in the coming years. Of course predicting the future is always a little foolish - perhaps especially so in the middle of a global pandemic - but four areas of work are already fairly clear: public accountability over the deployment of armed drones; the push to open UK skies to military drones; monitoring the horizontal and vertical proliferation of military drones and opposing the development of lethal autonomous weapons, aka 'killer robots'.

Public accountability over the deployment of armed drones

Most immediately, there is an need to discover where British armed drones have been deployed outside of action against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. All the MoD will currently say is that [RAF Reapers have been undertaking missions outside of Operation Shader, but refuse to give any other details](#).

The deployment of UK Reaper drones for unknown purposes and without public accountability or oversight (or any seeming interest) by MPs is very worrying. Not only is it right that there should be [proper public and parliamentary oversight over the deployment of military force](#), but such secret deployments also lays open the possibility of the UK being held responsible for military action when it is not actually involved.

The UK should not be following the US down the path of secret drone deployments and unaccountable use of armed force. Although there is a clear desire by the government and the Ministry of Defence to treat drones akin to special forces and simply not discuss them, this must be resisted. It is vital that proper parliamentary and public accountability over the deployment of British armed drones is established now, else unaccountable deployments will become the norm over the next few years.

Opening UK skies to military drones

Another area that is likely to be a focus of our work over the coming years is the push to open UK airspace to military drones. The MoD have initiated proceedings to allow the UK's new armed drones, which the UK is choosing to call 'Protector' to fly initially in and around the area where RAF Waddington is situated in Lincolnshire as a first step to gaining authorisation to fly it in unsegregated airspace across the UK (see left). There are serious safety, privacy and civil liberties concerns about this proposal and we are determined that there should be proper public engagement in the decision to open UK skies to military drones. The fact that the [MoD have already pressurised the Civil Aviation Authority \(CAA\)](#)

[into changing safety procedures](#) to allow the flight of a military drone into the UK bodes ill.

Campaigners in the US are arguing that when it comes to opening their airspace to military drones, the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) has been '[captured by the Pentagon](#)'. It is notable that here in the UK, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) are attempting to pass decisions about whether military drones are safe to fly 'beyond line of sight' to the Military Aviation Authority (MAA), a wholly owned agency of the Ministry of Defence, and not in any way an independent regulator. Meanwhile the CAA have announced that its [new chair is to be Sir Stephen Hillier, the former Head of the RAF](#).

The government are likely to insist that the UK must open our skies to military drones to enable RAF crews to train with these systems. Once permission is granted, however, it is likely that the UK will begin training the aircrews of other nations on these systems within UK airspace, no doubt a money spinner for the MoD, but further supporting and enabling the proliferation of armed drones.

The next generation

While the UK is currently acquiring the latest, updated version of the Predator drone – the Protector – work is continuing, behind the scenes on the next generation of armed drones. BAE Systems' advanced stealth drone, [Taranis](#), has reportedly ended its development journey and is sitting quietly somewhere in a hangar. Officially, at least, lessons learned from developing, building, trialling and testing this advanced drone are simply being fed into the UK's next generation aircraft, the [Tempest](#), which according to official reports, may end up being 'optionally manned'.

However, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the work done on Taranis (and the vast sums spent on it) are being used to develop a Taranis-like drone in secret. Just last autumn, Aviation Week revealed that [a US drone developed in secret had become operational](#) and it's possible that a similar secret drone development programme is underway within the UK, although at this stage it is pure speculation.

Separate from this, the UK is investing and developing a number of smaller, [swarming drone projects and a separate 'loyal wingman' drone programme](#). Both of these projects are to enable other states air defences to be overwhelmed in order to carry out armed attacks.

It is very important that there is proper scrutiny of these developments and their impact on peace and security is examined and evaluated. Government and industry spokespeople will insist that these systems must be developed in order to increase security and save lives. It is vital that these claims are contested. Researchers are already pointing out that some types of [swarming drones could be considered a weapon of mass destruction](#), while others suggest they could be developed to target a particular ethnicity in an [act of genocide](#).

Autonomy, AI and LAWS

Taranis and early swarming drones, mentioned above, rely to some degree on being able to operate autonomously and raise concerns about the ethics and legality of autonomous weapons. Beyond those specific systems however, there are now real worries that the building blocks for the development of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) are being put in place.

Drone Wars is a founder member of the [Killer Robots Campaign](#) and we see much of the work being done around developing future combat drones as a gateway to the development of these weapons. In 2018 we published [Off the Leash](#), a detailed report into the development of autonomous military systems in the UK and we are continuing to investigate and research developments both here in the UK and globally.

Although many envisage and fear a Terminator-style, fully autonomous weapons systems, what is more concerning over the next decade is the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the intelligence and targeting chain. General Atomics are developing and promoting systems that use AI to '[transform data into actionable intelligence](#)' for drones, while BAE Systems, another key drone manufacturer want to '[expedite machine learning adoption across the US defense and intelligence communities](#)' through using AI to turn '[unstructured and semi-structured data into relevant and actionable intelligence for its customers](#)'.

While some of this may no doubt be hyperbole and marketing spin, the push to use AI to search through thousands of hours of drone surveillance video and other electronic data in order to be able to 'find, fix and finish' targets is all too real and all too dangerous. Lessons from the [killing of innocent civilians due to misreading of intelligence and data](#) are simply not being learned.

Grateful thanks

So, there is much work to be done over the next few years, but it has been good to take some time to reflect and to mark the decade's work.

It is also right to say a few words of thanks. In particular, I want to name and thank the wonderful [Angela Broome](#), sadly no longer with us, but without whom there would be no Drone Wars. Also to thank my past and present colleagues – Mary, Peter, Joanna and Tim; our Steering Committee Pat, Ann, Dave, Penny, Max and Haifa, and our institutional funders. There are, of course, a great many other people who have contributed and helped in many different ways – far too many to name – but to all those who have contributed time and ideas, who have assisted in research and helping us think through strategy, who have participated in debate and discussion, and who have contributed financially, I am deeply grateful. Onwards.

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Articles by: **Chris Cole**

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