

Drones which “make their own decisions”: Towards Global Unmanned Warfare?

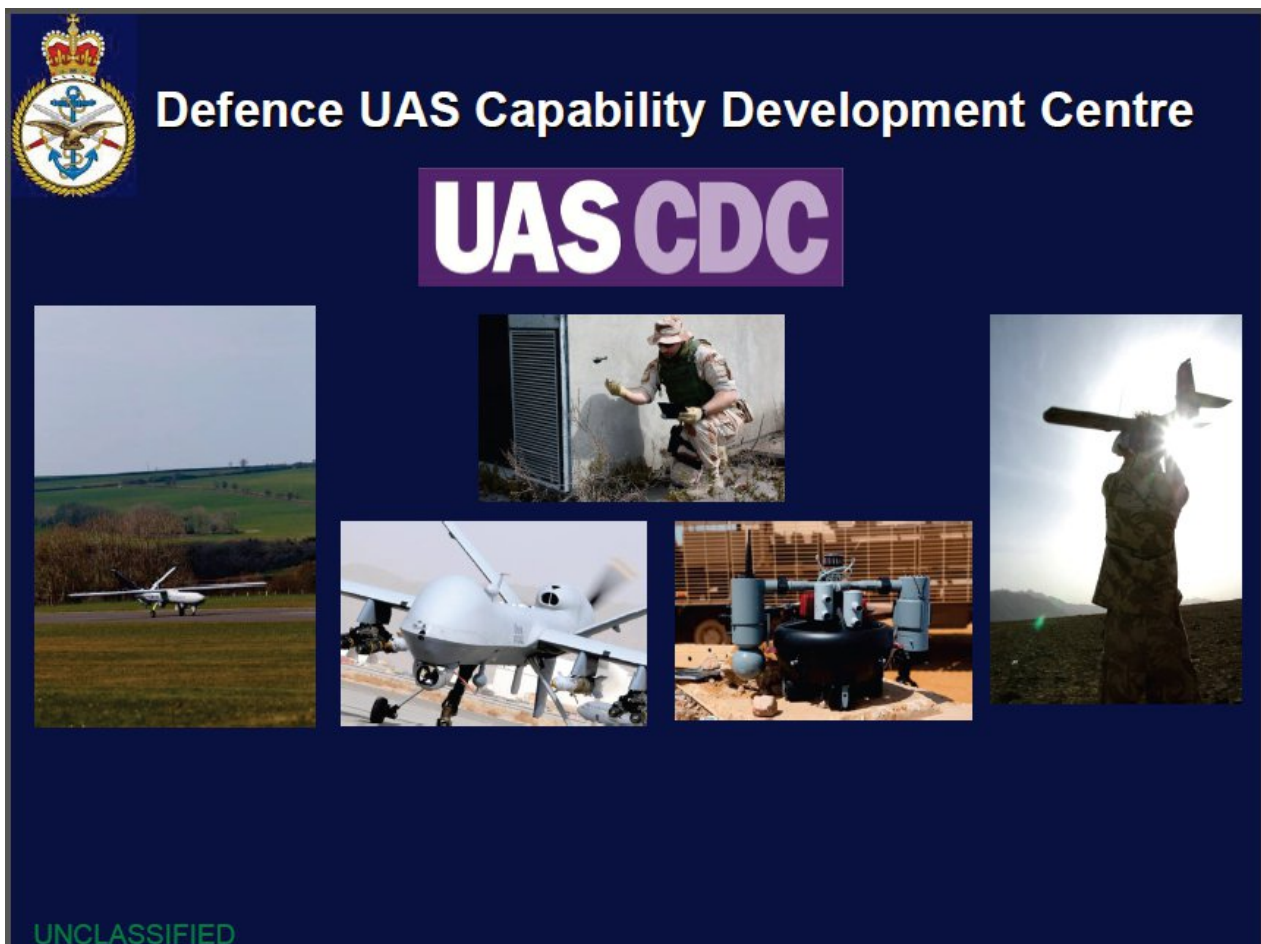
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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

A number of announcements made in the past two weeks to coincide with the Farnborough airshow show the quickening pace of developments around the use of drones and unmanned systems. Perhaps the most significant was the [UK MoD's announcement that it was setting up a new unmanned systems capability development centre \(UAS CDC\) to be based at Boscombe Down in Wiltshire.](#)



Click image to see presentation: UAS CDC info from slide 19 onwards

The new centre, which will be run in conjunction with defence giant [QinetiQ](#), aims to develop new drone programmes “from concept to deployment” as well as “facilitate engagement between industry and the MoD to make the best use of collective expertise and facilities.” Although there is as little public information available as yet, some slides about the new centre were included as part of a recent general presentation to industry by the MoD.

It was also announced that the new Unmanned Systems Centre will join with ADS, the UK Aerospace, Defence and Security trade association, and Farnborough Airshow to hold [a new 'expo' on autonomous unmanned systems at Farnborough in July 2013](#). Although shy of using the word 'autonomous' (substituting the more acceptable phrase 'intelligent systems', the week-long event is clearly focused on autonomy as ADS Director, Kevin Jones states in a filmed interview (below) "Yes.... we are talking about systems that have the technology and the capability to make their own decisions..." The event planned for 2013, is a "precursor to a complete Intelligent Systems Air and Ground Expo that will occur at the Farnborough International Airshow 2014 where, as a show-within-a-show, this event will have command of the global aerospace stage."

The push towards arming smaller drones - and therefore making armed drones more 'useable' in crowded urban and civilian areas - also continues. MBDA announced a "concept vision" of a new range of small missiles for UAVs including [Gladius with a launch weight of only 7kg, including a 1kg blast/fragmentation warhead](#).

Meanwhile Raytheon announced that its new purpose-built bomb for small tactical drones, (imaginatively called the [Small Tactical Munition](#)) may, following more live testing, [enter service within a few months](#). Raytheon recently issued this video showing the bomb being test launched from a small drone.

Another example of the growing proliferation of drone technology can be seen in the Israeli company IAI's announcement that it was in discussions with a number of organisations and academic institutions around the world to set up [drone training academies](#). The academies will offer training on IAI's own UAVs including Heron, Panther and Hunter which can serve as training for pilots going on to fly those drones or as a generic training course. According to Defense News:

"IAI has been training customers at a campus in Israel for nearly 40 years but only recently started referring to the site — which the company refers to only as "a secure location near Tel Aviv" — as an academy. It also conducts UAV training flights from Ein Shemer, an army airfield in northern Israel."

Although BAE Systems had hinted that an announcement (and possible contract signing) in regard to the proposed joint UK-French Telemos drone would take place at the Farnborough airshow in the end nothing happened and a scheduled press conference was cancelled. President Hollande of France did meet with David Cameron and in the subsequent joint press conference President Hollande said ["We want to work in common on drones. The defence minister is coming to London on July 24, when two arrangements will be signed regarding drones."](#)

Meanwhile the political case for drones continues to be made in the US as well as the UK. Two articles extolling the virtues of drones - and challenging those who are critical of them - appeared over the past few days. First Washington think-tank the [American Security Project](#) argued that drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere were perfectly legal and rather than not having a legal argument, the US was deliberately not explaining its legal position:

"It is of strategic value for the US to refrain from providing justification [for the

drone strikes] because to acknowledge any legal framework is to implicitly agree to be bound by its terms. By remaining formally unaccountable to international frameworks, the US can operate unimpeded by the red tape of the international legal community. From any angle, such a strategy is in the best interest of US national security. It is also important to note that a lack of public justification does not mean the US is not acting in accordance with international legal frameworks.”

Many might say that operating purely in your own national security interests and regarding international law as mere ‘red tape’ would put you in the same class of rogue state as Syria, for example, but obviously the American Security Project does not agree

In the same vein, a New York Times op-ed tried to make [the moral case for drones](#) arguing that not only was using drones ethically permissible, but it also might be ethically obligatory due to their advantage in identifying targets and striking with precision. In a quick and strong rebuttal Jeremy Hammond of the Foreign Policy Journal demonstrated that it was in fact making [the immoral argument for drones](#). Rather than summarise his piece I’d really recommend you read [the whole article](#).

Despite ongoing serious moral and legal doubts, behind the scenes the development of armed drones and unmanned systems by the military and the defence industry is proceeding at a frightening pace. As always there is need for more transparency, accountability and a proper public debate.

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