

## Drone Wars UK Parliamentary Briefing: June 2020



### **1. New Drone Wars report: Joint Enterprise: An overview of US-UK co-operation on armed drones / Reaper armed drones operating outside of Iraq and Syria**

A new report entitled Joint Enterprise, published earlier this month by Drone Wars, investigates co-operation between the UK and the US in relation to armed drone operations. Whilst the UK insists its armed drone programme is independent and separate from the US, the report argues that close historic ties, shared use of infrastructure and tightly integrated operations shows that that the two programmes amount to a joint enterprise, with arguably joint liability. The report concludes that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) could address concerns regarding US-UK cooperation, for example, concerning targeted killing operations, by taking a more open approach to decision-making on drone operations and routinely publishing key information on decisions, drone strikes, and joint operations.

As highlighted in our March briefing, the MoD revealed—in response to an FOI request we submitted—that British Reaper drones are undertaking missions outside of Operation Shader, the UK’s military operation against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, the MoD has refused to say how many ‘non-Shader’ sorties there have been, or where they are taking place. As The Guardian notes, since the UK’s use of Reaper in Afghanistan, ‘there has only been one RAF Reaper mission of this type – the killing of the Isis recruiter Reyaad Khan in Syria in 2015’ which raised ‘questions about the legality and proportionality of his killing’.

Resources: [Drone Wars: Joint Enterprise: An overview of US-UK co-operation on armed drones](#)

[Drone Wars: UK drone strike stats](#)

[Drone Wars: Interview with Peter Burt, author of Joint Enterprise](#)

[UK Parliament: Written questions and answers on drones in 2020](#)

Media: [The Guardian: Ministers refuse to reveal target of new RAF killer drone missions](#)

Suggested action: Submit a question to the Ministry of Defence.

### **2. US plans to export more armed drones**

The US wants to ‘reinterpret’ the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) in order to increase its armed drone exports, particularly large drones like the MQ-9 Reaper. If President Trump pursues this course of action, both global peace and security and American interests will be harmed. US drone manufacturers argue that

other countries like China and Israel are already exporting armed drones, so it is unfair that the US is unable to. However, the drones that China are exporting (the Rainbow and Wing Long series) do not breach Category I of the MTCR. Moreover, Israel, although not a member of the MTCR, voluntarily abides by its provisions and so does not export such larger drones.

If the US unilaterally breaches its MTCR commitments, it is likely that China and Israel would quickly follow suit by building and exporting drones with a larger weapons payload. This would have a significant negative impact on global peace and security. Drones are already becoming a preferred means of intervening in foreign wars—notably in Libya. Adding advanced US drones to this situation would only make it more volatile.

Resources: [Drone Wars: The Next Generation](#)

Media: [Forbes: U.S. Could Face Unintended Consequences If It 'Reinterprets' Arms Control Pact To Sell More Drones](#)

Suggested action: Submit a question to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Suggested questions:

- i) Will the Minister relate to his US counterpart the UK's opposition to the US reinterpreting the MTCR in order to allow increased armed drone exports and the importance of the US abiding by its treaty obligations?
- ii) Does the Minister accept that if the US unilaterally reinterprets the MTCR agreement to allow itself to export larger, more lethal UAVs that would be a breach of Category One of the agreement, and other nations would likely follow suit and export more lethal systems too?
- iii) Does the Minister agree that a better way forward than individual states undertaking unilateral action in regard to the export of lethal drones, is for states to work together under the auspices of the UN for a specific arms control agreement on the export and use of these systems?

### **3. The UK and autonomous weapons systems / Banning killer robots**

The development of autonomous technology continues to be a research priority for the MoD and the UK's armed forces. Research is being conducted in all three of the key disciplines underpinning autonomous technology: artificial intelligence and machine learning; robotics; and sensors. MoD programmes for pioneering new autonomous military systems have increased not only in the breadth of their scope but also in their profile within the MoD's communications.

Many of the systems under development by the UK could be weaponised and enabled to operate beyond human control with relatively little difficulty. The UK should instead support measures which would control and prevent the development and use of lethal autonomous weapon systems.

Resources: [Drone Wars: New developments in the UK's military autonomous systems](#)

### [Drone Wars: Interview with Peter Burt on autonomous weapons](#)

Suggested action: Submit a question to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Suggested questions:

- i) What discussions has the UK government had with the US Secretary of State for Defense on the DoD's plans to introduce a set of ethical principles to govern the military use of artificial intelligence?
- ii) Will the UK commit to developing and introducing a set of ethical principles on the use of artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons, and other new military technologies as a priority?
- iii) Will the Prime Minister address the topic of killer robots as a priority at the forthcoming summit on ethical and responsible technology which he intends to organise?
- iv) Will the government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy provide an ethical framework concerning the development of autonomous military technologies?

#### **4. Growing domestic use of drones following Covid-19 and political unrest**

The extraordinary circumstances arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have seen police, security and other government agencies around the world increasing their use of drones domestically. In the UK, police were granted an exemption to existing rules by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) so they could enforce the lockdown using drones. The CAA also approved the use of drones by the government to deliver personal protective equipment to the Isle of Wight. As reported by the Island Echo, this was significant as it was the first time outside of military use that a drone had been 'allowed to fly out of the line of sight, meaning the pilot is controlling the drone remotely from a significant distance away – in this case 5 miles'.

Looking more widely, countries including China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Colombia, Chile, and the UAE have, according to the website Geospatial World, 'successfully used disinfecting drones to control the spread of coronavirus'. Furthermore, police in several countries including China, India, Italy, and Malaysia used drones to monitor people's movement and make sure that they followed lockdown rules. Meanwhile, in the US last May, the Customs and Border Protection agency flew an unarmed Predator drone over protesters in Minneapolis who were demonstrating about the murder by police of George Floyd. According to the Center for the Study of the Drone, as of March 2020 over 1,100 US police departments had acquired some form of drone.

Resources: [Center for the Study of the Drone: Public Safety Drones](#)

[UK Parliament: Written questions and answers on drones in 2020](#)

Media: [The Times: Coronavirus: Police with emergency powers will use drones to spot crowds](#)

[Island Echo: UAV lands on the Isle of Wight in historic drone trial](#)

[Medium: Predator Drone Surveillance in Minneapolis Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg](#)

[Geospatial World: How drones are being used to combat COVID-19](#)

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Best wishes,

Tim

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