



A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

THE THREAT POSED BY 'PROTECTOR' AT HOME AND ABROAD

1 What is Protector?

'Protector' is the name the UK is giving to the latest version of the Reaper drone it is acquiring from the US. The UK currently operates 10 Reaper drones overseas, which are used both for surveillance and armed strikes. Reaper is set to be replaced in the mid-2020s by a fleet of up to 26 Protector drones which will be based at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. Protector is significantly more lethal and dangerous than Reaper in terms of its range, weapons, and technical capabilities. Reaper drones are not allowed to fly in the UK for safety reasons, but the Ministry of Defence (MOD) is pushing regulators to allow the new Protector drones to fly in the UK.

2 Why should I be concerned about the UK's armed drones?

The growing use of armed drones lowers the threshold for the use of force, transfers the risk of armed combat from soldiers to civilians, and has led to the rise of so-called 'targeted killing'. In short, drones make war more likely. The secrecy surrounding the use of drones and the UK Government's refusal to provide information on its Reaper operations has reduced media coverage and public debate. This helps normalise targeted killing, eroding human rights and international law.

3 Why does the Ministry of Defence want to fly Protector in the UK?

The MOD want to fly Protector in the UK for domestic security purposes, training personnel, and to support civil authorities at times of emergency. The MOD is lobbying for Protector to fly freely throughout the UK so it is not limited to 'segregated' airspace—that is, airspace specially set-aside for the purpose. However, there are real safety worries about this proposal.

4 What concerns are there about flying large military drones in UK airspace?

In addition to safety, privacy and accountability are key concerns. Drones create risks to other air users and to life and property on the ground. Large drones similar to Protector frequently crash because they rely on constant communication links—which are regularly lost—in addition to problems being caused by mechanical and electrical failure, and bad weather. Military drones also threaten people’s privacy and raise ethical concerns because they are used for surveillance and intelligence gathering.

5 How much does Protector cost and what problems does it face?

Protector programme costs have already increased by 40% over the original estimate to £1.14 billion (a cost overrun of £325 million) and will likely increase further. The MOD’s senior civil servant has stated that the most significant risk to the Protector programme is likely to be problems recruiting and retaining armed drone operators. US-based manufacturer General Atomics produces Protector for the UK and are set to profit greatly if it is allowed to fly freely in domestic airspace.

6 Why does the MOD want to change airspace around RAF Waddington?

The MOD want to change the airspace around RAF Waddington because current air rules would prevent Protector drones flying beyond the visual line of sight (BVLOS) of their operators in this area. On-board safety technology for Protector—which would allow BVLOS flights—is being tested and developed but will need to be approved by regulators. There needs to be a proper public debate before Protector is allowed to freely fly in the UK. Local residents must also have their say on whether large military drones should fly above them.

7 What should be done about Protector?

We believe that the UK should not acquire large armed drones such as Protector. The MOD should also not be allowed to freely fly such dangerous drones in UK airspace. Armed drones are a threat to global peace and security and are also becoming a danger to people in the UK because of the safety risks they pose. Public polling conducted on behalf of UK Drone Watch revealed that, of those who expressed an opinion, 86% were worried about the safety implications of large BVLOS drone flights in the UK. The Government must be transparent about its procurement, deployment and use of armed drones so that it can be held accountable for its decisions.

Visit ukdronewatch.net to get involved in the campaign to keep UK skies safe and protect our privacy from military drones



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