

New Pentagon Counter Drone Strategy: Unify Solutions Search, Avoid Duplicated Efforts



1st Lt. Taylor Barefoot, a low altitude air defense officer with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 163 (Reinforced), 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, programs a counter-unmanned aircraft system on a Light Marine Air Defense Integrated System (LMADIS) during a predeployment training exercise at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif., Nov. 13, 2018. U.S. Marine Corps / Lance Cpl. Dalton S. Swanbeck

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Defense Department’s new strategy to thwart attacks and spying by small unmanned aircraft systems calls for protecting the force at home as well as overseas, while coordinating technology development across the services to avoid redundant programs that waste time and money.

In development since November 2019, when the Army was picked to unify counter-UAS efforts across the services, the strategy addresses both the potential threats from foreign adversaries and the hazards posed by reckless drone operators domestically.

The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps have all been developing systems to detect, deter, disable or destroy enemy drones. However, as the worldwide use and misuse of small, unmanned aircraft has grown exponentially, a coordinated effort to counter the risk – not only with technology but other solutions like doctrine, training and policy changes [was needed, according to the report outlining the new strategy.

Most current solutions aim to sever the link between a remotely piloted drone and its operator, Army Major Gen. Sean Gainey, the director of the Pentagon's Counter-UAS Office (JCO), told an online discussion of the new strategy Jan. 8 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington think tank.

"But where we see the threat going in the future," Gainey said, is toward "autonomous, massing swarming capability, [drones] integrating AI [artificial Intelligence] and potentially leveraging 5G" cell phone technology.

The JCO will create integrated plans, technology, training concepts and doctrine that focus "appropriate resources on countering the UAS threat, while minimizing unnecessary duplication and redundancy," said Gainey.

In addition to coordinating countermeasure steps across the U.S. military and with allies and partner nations, the Pentagon is also coordinating domestic efforts with the departments of Justice and Homeland Security, which includes the U.S. Coast Guard.

The widening use of small drones by non-state actors and terrorists has led some to call small UAS "the new IEDs" (improvised explosive devices). Mindful of the expanding commercial use of small unmanned aircraft, Nicole M. Thomas, the JCO's division chief for strategy and policy, noted "there are legitimate uses of drones," although incompetent or deliberate misuse of a UAS could be a hazard.

Thomas said the JCO is completing details of the implementation plan, expected to be released by the end of January. "Those will all be action plans of things we're going to do to make the strategy a reality," she added.

In mid-January, the JCO will invite industry to demonstrate their "low collateral effectors," non-lethal, low collateral damage capabilities, including jammers, at a common test range

during the first week of April “and we’ll select the best ones, and move forward with that as the joint solution” Gainey said.