



The True Cost of Drone Warfare?

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This is the fourth instalment of a series on the costs of remote warfare. To see the introductory post on remote warfare and the Modernising Defence Plan, please click [here](#). To see the third post on the cost of Special Forces please click [here](#).

On Monday the 25th June the RAF announced that the UK's newest drone, the Protector, would be flying from the test centre based in North Dakota, USA and arriving at RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire on the 11th July in time for the Fairford International Air Show. The 20-hour long flight marks the first time that a medium altitude long-endurance (MALE) drone has crossed the Atlantic. An event that British defence minister, Guto Bebb, described as an “exciting milestone in [the UK's] mission to get the most advanced equipment to combat the intensifying threats [the UK] face”.

Built by the American-based defence contractor, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems (GA), the Protector was set to replace the RAF's current fleet of armed Reaper drones from 2018. However, last April the government suggested the timetable for replacing Reaper would be delayed owing to their ongoing deployment in the anti-ISIS campaign.

The Protector brings advanced capability through an increased payload. Reaper can carry only 4 Hellfire missiles or two GBU-12 Paveway II 500lb laser guided bombs, whereas the Protector will have a maximum payload of nearly 5,000lb with 9 “hard points” to attach weapons and sensors. It will also be certified to fly in European airspace.

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The total number the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has procured, however, remains unclear. This is characteristic of a broader problem when it comes to understanding the UK's drone programme—it is very hard to establish just how much it costs. In an age where the defence sector is under increasing pressure to demonstrate value for money, the ambiguity that surrounds the true costs of a platform that has often been linked to a vision of low-cost, low-risk warfare is troubling.

Suspicious Accounting

As part of the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review the government set out a requirement for “more than twenty”—doubling the size of its [current fleet of 10](#). A [2016 report](#) by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, however, suggested the fleet of Protector could grow to 26.

This confusion is compounded by an ambiguity that surrounds the specific breakdown of costings for the programme, including its ‘whole of life sustainment’ up until 2030. The government first reported in April 2016 that the investment in the Protector drone would cost around £415m. However, the [U.S. government's own costings](#) announced later that same year estimated the contract was worth £790m.

It is also unclear whether this figure accounts for the wider infrastructure investment that may be required to support the UK's growing drone capacity. News reports, for example, have suggested the RAF may require as many as [18 ground stations](#) to support its new fleet.

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Recently, the Australian government ordered 6 Triton surveillance drones. This entailed an AU\$364m investment in major infrastructure works at Royal Australian Air Force bases. On top of these costs, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull confirmed their government's deal with GA will have an overall "whole of life sustainment" cost of AU\$6.9bn. There is therefore good reason to believe that the final cost of the Protector programme could be a lot more than the figures the MoD has set out publicly.

The UK's History with Drones

The RAF first started flying drones in 2005. At that time, UK personnel embedded with U.S. units in Afghanistan flew the earlier, Predator drone. But by 2007, the UK was deploying its own fleet of Reaper drones—an advanced version of the Predator—piloted by RAF service personnel.

The increasing reliance on drones was confirmed in December 2017, when the RAF announced that after a decade of being deployed their fleet of Reaper drones had amassed 100,000 flying hours in support of coalition combat operations in Afghanistan (2007-2014) and the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria (2014-).

Perhaps one of the most extensive studies on the costs associated with the use of drones comes from the U.S. The Reaper appeared in a 2012 series published by *Time Magazine*. According to their study, approximately 172 personnel are required to support reaper combat air patrol (CAP)—although this report from 2018 suggests it's as many as 200 personnel.

A CAP is “essentially having an aircraft in the air, providing joint combatant commanders with dominant ISR and real-time munitions capability”. To coordinate as many as 60 CAPs (in the U.S. context) deployed at one time, would require over a thousand Airmen in various capacities from [sensor operators](#) to “intelligence personnel and weather forecasters”, they suggest.

Maintenance Costs

The true cost of the British drone programme will also ultimately depend on the tempo of operations and the vast infrastructure—including large numbers of personnel—that is necessary to sustain them. Indeed, beyond the cost of munitions and the investment in infrastructure to support drone technology, drones are known to require [more extensive maintenance than conventional aircraft](#). This reality is exacerbated by higher crash rates compared to conventional aircraft. Taken together, [drones](#) “start to look not much more cost effective than conventional aircraft”.

Conclusion

Government opacity over the breakdown of costs for its Protector programme is indicative of a culture that over-classifies parts of the UK’s defence and security policy. This appears to be partially based on the assumption that more secrecy automatically brings greater strategic advantage. However, [as we have explored in more depth elsewhere](#), there are real flaws in this logic. Particularly when it comes to providing legitimacy for British operations and HMG’s desire for improved coordination between government departments on national security issues.

The lack of clarity on budgets, particularly when it comes to providing details of specific projects and programmes, makes it incredibly hard to estimate how much remote warfare actually costs and which activities demonstrate the greatest value for money. This not only undermines external accountability of the UK's military engagement overseas, but also ignores the value of institutionalising important lessons. If defence wants to show true value for money, it must be more transparent about how money is being spent.

Image credit: [Royal Air Force](#)

About the author

Liam Walpole has been Senior Advocacy Officer at Remote Warfare Programme since July 2017. Previously, Liam worked for two Conservative Members of Parliament at the House of Commons, supporting them in carrying out their duties in Parliament and their respective constituencies. Liam studied Politics and History at Brunel University and wrote his undergraduate thesis on President Barack Obama's foreign policy in Afghanistan and the effectiveness of the then-President's troop surge. Liam is currently studying a part-time Masters course in Diplomacy & Foreign Policy at City, University of London.

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