THE U.S. MILITARY WANTS A ROBOT THAT CAN FLY ANY PLANE

News / Airlines

The U.S. Air Force is looking to fund the development of a system that allows it to easily convert any of its manned aircraft into robot-piloted planes, potentially making huge portions of its existing fleet fully autonomous.

According to a public solicitation notice, the “drop-in” system would “rapidly convert a variety of traditionally manned aircraft” to be autonomously controlled without any modifications to the aircraft itself. That means that unlike the Navy's fully autonomous X47-B drone, the robot would use vision-based recognition systems to “manually” read gauges and operate the yoke, throttle and other controls just like a human pilot as soon as it's dropped into the cockpit.

“Non-invasive approaches to robotically piloted aircraft using existing commercial technology and components offer the benefits of unmanned operations without the complexity and upfront cost associated with the development of new unmanned vehicles,” the Air Force's posting reads. “Such a system will have the ability to automatically pilot an aircraft using only the gauges and cockpit controls available to a human pilot thus eliminating custom design and integration costs.”

Of course, most modern planes are already highly automated. Recent studies have shown that commercial pilots barely spend any time at all on the controls during an average flight, fueling arguments that planes would actually be much safer with robots (Although there remains very good reasons it's still good to have a human pilot present as a failsafe).

For the Air Force, the benefits of being able fly autonomous missions without having to build or even modify existing aircraft are obvious. But it's also easy to see how plug-and-fly robots would be highly desirable for commercial shipping and other uses, if not transporting human passengers.

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