



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE UNVEILS NEW ARMED DRONE THAT CAN SPY ON TARGETS FOR TWICE AS LONG TO DOUBLE RAF FLEET

News / Manufacturer



Britain will double its fleet of armed surveillance drones with a new upgraded generation of unmanned aircraft able to fly for nearly twice as long, laden with more bombs, missiles and sensors, the MoD has disclosed.

The 79ft wingspan, remotely piloted planes will be able to circle over and spy on targets for nearly two days, while sophisticated new flight computers mean they will be able to fly in bad weather and survive ice, lightning and bird strikes.

The new General Atomics Certifiable Predator B, which is expected to be named Protector when used by the RAF from the end of this decade, is likely to be at the forefront of spying and air strike campaigns against militant and terror groups such as Islamic State.

First details of the new aircraft have been disclosed as defence officials signed a £415m contract with the Pentagon to buy 20 of the new drones to replace the RAF's 10 existing MQ-9 Reapers.



1. Top speed of 200kts (230 mph)
2. Maximum height of 45,000+ ft
3. Nine hard points to attach weapons and sensors
4. Expected to carry existing Hellfire missiles and GBU-12 500lb bombs. Other weapons may follow.
5. Detect and avoid system allows Protector to fly in UK airspace
6. 24m (79ft) wingspan
7. Sophisticated flight control software allows Protector to fly in bad weather

The 38ft long aircraft will also be certified to fly in European airspace, allowing them to be potentially used in Nato intelligence-gathering missions in eastern Europe, or even over the UK and its waters.

Liz Quintana, director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, said: "The aircraft is much more capable than its predecessor. It has almost double the endurance of the Reaper so with a fleet of 20 aircraft, this represents an almost quadrupling of the capability, vital given the MoD's range of commitments and its requirement to respond to emerging crises."

Defence experts said the drone, which is still being developed, was likely to at first carry the same Hellfire missiles and laser-guided bombs as the Reaper, but other weapons could eventually be added.



Protector will be able to stay airborne for more than 40 hours, controlled by satellite link by pilots at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. The Reaper can currently stay aloft for around 25 hours.

Huw Williams, unmanned systems editor at IHS Jane's, said: "We are looking at increasing endurance. The longer you can stay on station, the better. It will also have more hard points to attach sensors and weapons."

The RAF's Reaper drones are believed to be all currently deployed in the Middle East, where they have flown hundreds of missions over Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria.

Sources said defence chiefs had suggested the name Protector, rather than its original name of Predator, in an attempt to change public perceptions that drones are unaccountable killing machines.

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