

## Split Decision On Global Hawk Leaves Fate Of Most Capable Unmanned Aircraft In Question

*Loren B. Thompson, Ph.D.*

The outcome of the Defense Acquisition Board's June 24 meeting on the future of the Global Hawk unmanned aerial system appears to have been a split decision, with some airframes and sensors approved while funding of others was deferred. The mixed outcome introduces an element of uncertainty into the Air Force program, which is the highest-altitude, longest-endurance unmanned system the service operates. The plan had been to retire manned U-2 reconnaissance planes and replace them with the unmanned Global Hawk, but now it isn't entirely clear how the Air Force will proceed.

On paper, Global Hawk proponents got most of what they wanted. The next, ninth, production lot was funded including a mix of "Block 30" and "Block 40" airframe variants plus the various sensor packages required to make them useful. The decision on whether to provide long-lead funding for a follow-on tenth production lot was deferred until October or November, but that money too will probably be provided in the end.

What's troubling is the atmospherics surrounding the deliberations. In the weeks leading up to the meeting, Air Force acquisition chief David Van Buren complained about the airframe, the sensors, the cost of the program and the results of tests on the latest versions. In the meeting itself, the Air Force was less than enthusiastic, forcing representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense to defend the program. That's somewhat surprising, because Global Hawk is one of the few revolutionary systems that the Air Force has managed to field since 9-11. It's true that recent test results were disappointing, but that's because the service used the wrong intelligence exploitation system -- an experimental design -- in the tests, rather than a system representative of what the joint force actually employs in Iraq and Afghanistan (the tests will be redone in July using the right equipment).

There may be many nuances to the Air Force position on Global Hawk that are escaping me, but I'm starting to detect a pattern in the service's approach to new technology that isn't encouraging. After spending well over a decade developing the very capable Global Hawk system, the service is suddenly acting like it doesn't care about realizing the program's full potential. It has done the same thing with the Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System -- a manned sensor aircraft -- even though both systems address ground-moving-target intelligence, CENTCOM's top intelligence need. The service was also just a little too eager to use its version of the Joint Tactical Radio System as a bill-payer in the fiscal 2010 budget build, and couldn't wait to kill off the Transformational Satellite Communications (T-SAT) program.

The picture I'm getting here is that for all its protestations of jointness, the Air Force remains rather provincial in its mission priorities. It talks a good game about meeting the needs of the entire joint force, but somehow it's always the programs that support the ground forces that seem to feel budget pressure first. Global Hawk is just the latest installment in this pattern, but since it's an especially important program, it would be nice to hear Air Force leaders explain what their thought process is about providing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to the rest of the joint force in the future.