

Air Force Releases UAV Strategic Vision

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The Air Force recently completed a vision document to provide high-level guidance to service development and integration of unmanned aircraft for the next 25 years.

While the Air Force has been experimenting with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles since 1962, the technology has only recently evolved to a point to provide truly transformational capabilities to the joint commander, said Brig. Gen. Stanley Clarke, deputy director of the Air Force strategic planning directorate.

"Sensors and payloads are now smaller, lighter and more capable," General Clarke said. "And the required command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance technologies have only recently come on line."

Air Force UAVs bring persistence to the fight and also have the ability to work in hazardous environments, said Col. Gail Wojtowicz, chief of the Air Force's future concepts and transformation division.

"Unmanned aircraft are a critical piece of ongoing Air Force transformation," Colonel Wojtowicz said. "Their persistence couples an unblinking eye with the ability to rapidly strike targets of opportunity, such as fleeting terrorists or insurgents. They also operate in dangerous chemical or biological environments, require a much smaller forward logistical footprint, and are as effective in conducting mundane tasks in the 30th hour as they are in the first."

The Air Force produced the UAV strategic vision document, entitled "The U.S. Air Force Remotely Piloted Aircraft and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Strategic Vision," primarily in response to recommendations by the 2004 Air Force Futures Game, which was a guided strategic discussion about the Air Force's future capabilities.

While not directive in nature, the document lays out a broad vision and provides recommendations. These include developing common terminology, adequately funding relevant science and technology, coordinating efforts with other services, managing cost and performance expectations, reviewing and updating laws and policies, and integrating unmanned aircraft with manned and space platforms.

The new strategic vision document also addresses the historical context of UAVs, the unique attributes of the aircraft, and the various challenges in fielding them, General Clarke said.

"While unmanned aircraft have incredible potential, they still have formidable obstacles to overcome," he said. "They must be integrated into national and international airspace, their costs must be kept in check, and the C4ISR systems they depend on are vulnerable to attack and use an incredible amount of bandwidth."

The general also said there are policy and legal issues to address in regards to UAVs, as well as unique organizational, manning and training issues.

The new Air Force strategic vision is consistent with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Unmanned Aircraft System Roadmap released in October, as well as the recently completed Quadrennial Defense Review, General Clarke said.

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