

Drone Proliferation Update, January 2021

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Over the last few months have seen a number of significant developments in relation to the increasing proliferation of armed drones. The most significant of these have been the use of Turkish Bayraktar TB-2's in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh which turned the military engagements in Azerbaijan's favour and, secondly, the Trump administration's decision to unilateral reinterpret the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) agreement in order to allow it to export more armed drones.

This latest update details new operators and other significant developments around the proliferation of armed drones. For our complete list of states operating, or close to operating, armed drones see [Who Has Armed Drones?](#)

Turkey

Azerbaijan and Turkey's partnership

In the long running conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), Turkey provided military support for Azerbaijan. The most noteworthy arms transfer was the [Bayraktar TB-2](#), the use of which was said to have provided Azerbaijan with an advantage that Armenia could not match. When violence has flared up in the past, Armenia usually had the upper hand, but this time [Azerbaijan was able to cause more devastation](#). Questions remain over whether the Turkish drones were actually operated by Turkey or Azerbaijan given the short turnaround between the sale and operational use.

The use of Bayraktar TB-2's led campaigners [to step up pressure to have sales of various imported parts](#) in TB-2 suspended. [Armenian activists have photographed these parts](#) and built up a media campaign. US manufacturers have supplied transceivers, antenna, fuel filters and reservoirs, GPS units among other things, whilst the UK is said to have supplied fuel pumps and bomb racks, and Canada, sensors and antenna radio transmitter.

Turkey Export deals

TB-2s have also been [delivered to Ukraine](#), who are said to be working towards joint production so they can beef up their fleet to [48 air frames](#). At present they have 6 from the 2019 deal and are said to be [ordering a further 5 in 2021](#).

In December Turkish Aerospace were [reported](#) to have signed a deal to export 3 Anka-S drones to Tunisia in an \$80m deal, the first export of Anka drones.

Other Turkey drone news

Turkey have also announced the [successful flight test of a second Akinci](#) drone prototype.

The Akinici – an armed High Altitude, Long Endurance (HALE) drone with an endurance of 24hrs – will be able to fire various indigenously built rockets and laser guided bombs on 6 underwing hardpoints. As imposing as this sounds, commentators judge it is merely [papering over the cracks](#) of the ageing Turkish aircraft fleet. Turkey has been frozen out of a US F-35 programme and has little option but to develop indigenous alternatives. The Akinci seems to be the flagship of this new generation.

Roketsan, the state controlled missile manufacturer has also been busy [developing new missiles specifically for drones](#).

Selcuk Bayraktar, the chief technology officer of Baykar, recently indicated that Turkey are ready to [mass produce their own drone engines](#) which will be used in the Akinci and Bayraktar TB-3. However, it was previously understood that Akinci engines were part of a deal with Ukraine. It's possible that the Ukrainian engines will be of a higher horsepower, as [this](#) commentator suggests.

Turkey is said to have around 75 TB-2 drones already in operation with their armed forces, engaged in operations in Syria, Libya, Iraq and, within Turkey itself, operating against Kurdish fighters. In the last few months, several articles have [exposed the toll this drone war is taking on local Kurdish populations](#).

US exports

As Turkey and China's armed drones exports expand, the Trump administration ([prodded](#) by lobbyists from some of the world's biggest arms companies) unilaterally announced its [reinterpretation of the MTCR rules on exports](#), in order to be able to sell Category 1 systems (that is drones capable of carrying a 500-kilogram payload at least 300 kilometres) to more countries. After unsuccessfully trying to persuade other signatories of the Missile Technology Control Regime to loosen restrictions on what constitutes a 'Category 1' system, the Trump administration announced that it will treat systems that fall in to Category 1, but travel less than 800km/hr as Category 2, allowing these systems to be sold beyond close allies.

In response to Trump's loosening of the MTCR restrictions, a cross-party group of senators [introduced a bill](#) that would mean only NATO members, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan fell under the new rules drawn up by the administration. All other countries would continue remain under the existing MTCR rules.

In the short space of time since this announcement in July, the State Department has approved sales of armed Reapers to the [UAE](#) and [Taiwan](#), as part of larger packages of weapons transfers to both countries, and is in discussions about potential sale to [Morocco](#).

The sale to Taiwan is less controversial within the US as many members of Congress and the Senate support arm sales to Taiwan as part of geo-political moves to deter China. China, who regard Taiwan as a wayward province rather than an independent responded immediately saying it "strongly urged" the US to withdraw its plans and "cease US-Taiwan military contacts."

The sale to UAE, on the other hand, has proved considerably more controversial amongst US legislators. A deal for the transfer of military equipment was [first announced in July](#) after Jared Kushner negotiated the normalisation of relations between UAE and Israel. In return

for its recognition of Israel, UAE is to be rewarded with sophisticated weapons. The State Department gave [notification to Congress on 6 November](#) and since then several senators have lodged objections and tried to introduce [joint resolutions to block the sale](#). Drone Wars has joined a [coalition of NGOs worldwide denouncing this sale](#) as [UAE continue be involved in the bloody war in Yemen](#), where many say there is [evidence of war crimes](#).

[Morocco is reportedly to receive four MQ-9B SeaGuardian](#) drones (a Reaper variant made by General Atomics), giving it the capability to survey huge swathes of sea and desert. It is not known if the armed or unarmed variant will be sold to Morocco, but it is part of a [larger defence and security deal](#) between the two countries.

Finally, in less good news for US arms companies, [Japan is said to be rethinking its purchase of Global Hawk](#), for two reasons. Firstly, the US is retiring its Block 30 fleet, the model the Japanese intend to purchase. This would make maintenance costs rise significantly for Japan. Secondly, that [Iran were able to down a Global Hawk](#) in July has raised questions about the drone's efficacy.

Europe News

The [debate in Germany on whether or not to arm its drones](#) took a surprising turn in mid-December. As part of their coalition agreement, the Social Democrats (SPD) and Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) had agreed that the Bundestag would only decide on whether or not to arm its drones after a comprehensive debate on the issue. The German Ministry of Defence set up a series of carefully controlled panel discussions and events during 2020 which aimed to fulfil this requirement and the MoD published a policy document on the use of armed drones. A vote was scheduled for mid-December in the budget committee to provide funds to arm the Heron drones that Germany lease from Israel, and it seemed to many commentators that this would be approved. However, a few days before the vote, the SPD said that they would in fact [vote against](#) the resolution as there had not be sufficient public debate. In the end, the resolution was withdrawn and discussion on the issue is likely to continue in the run up to German elections in September 2021.

Meanwhile, Spain received [two more Reapers](#) from General Atomics, taking the total ordered to 6 aircraft. Spain have also committed to purchasing "at least" [12 of the Euromale drones](#). These will be received in 2029. Presumably the Reapers will be in service until then. The Euromale is currently moving in to Phase 2 of development with contracts now signed for work on production.

[Belgium has signed a deal with GA for four MQ-9B SkyGuardian](#) drones, a variant of Predator, due to be delivered in 2023 and worth nearly \$189mn. The UK, whose Protector is the same model of Predator, and Belgian air forces have signed a ['Statement of Intent' to explore collaboration](#) on their MQ-9B drones.

The Euromale and the UK and Belgium's MQ-9B drones are intended to gain certification from civil regulators to fly in European airspace, opening up a whole new set of regarding safety and privacy. Drone Wars has previously commented on this and has recently launched [UK Drone Watch](#) a project that will to monitor developments.

Other News

Russia

Similarly to Turkey's Roketsan, Russia's JSC Kronshtadt has displayed [missiles made specifically for the Orion MALE drone](#) (built by Kronshtadt) which was delivered to the army last spring for operational assessment, and, it is said, will be [ready for reconnaissance and combat missions in 2021](#). This time around, this might actually be the case.

United Aircraft Company (UAC) who are manufacturing Russia's other armed drone, the (reportedly) stealthy Okhotnik, have been ordered to accelerate production and [have the drone delivered to the army by 2024](#). It is said the Okhotnik has a range of 6,000km, a 59,000ft ceiling and can deploy air-to-air missiles.

Nigeria

Nigeria's fleet of CH-3 armed drones are to be joined by more Chinese armed drones. Reports are that this new deal includes [four CH-4B, two Wing Loong II and two CH-3B](#). The CH-4B have arrived in Nigeria and two are deployed to a [new Combat Reconnaissance Group](#) in Gombe state. This makes Nigeria only the third country, after China and UAE, to operate the [Wing Loong II](#), China's most deadly drone. It is likely that the drones [will be used immediately](#) they are ready in Nigeria's ongoing battles against counter-insurgents and "armed banditry" in the north west of the country.

India

India's quest to acquire armed drones continues amid growing tensions in the disputed border area with China. The army submitted a proposal to the Defence Acquisition Council seeking to arm the 90 Heron drones in service across the three services. [Project Cheetah](#), has been in existence for a decade but a decision on whether or not to go ahead was [sped up](#) in August of 2020 although there is no confirmation of the outcome at the time of writing.

In the meantime, the [Indian Navy has leased two unarmed MQ-9B SeaGuardian](#) drones, presumably for training purposes ahead of a larger acquisition of armed drones which has been subject of long, on-going discussions.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has had two Wing Loong I since 2017, although it is unclear whether they are fully operational. Nonetheless, since Azerbaijan's use of the Turkish armed drone against Armenian forces in the recent conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazak military figures have begun to consider acquiring TB-2 drones. Reports have surfaced that a [delegation from Kazakhstan visited the UAS base in Batman](#), Turkey, in November. One news agency suggested that Kazakhstan is looking to acquire "[several dozen](#)" TB-2.

The need for controls

In light of the developments in 2020, not least the Trump administrations undermining of the MTCR and Azerbaijan's widely reported use of Bayraktar TB-2 in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, there has been renewed discussion about the need to develop effective international controls on the proliferation and use of armed drones.

In October, NGOs and rights groups, including DWUK, delivered a [statement to the First Committee of the UN General Assembly](#) in which they stressed the need for accountability on the use of armed drones that, in many cases, have ignored standards of humanitarian and human rights law.

The Stimson Centre and Pax held an online discussion that can be viewed [here](#). It pulled together different voices on the topic of drone proliferation and made for an interesting discussion that included representatives from producer country, a non-producing country, the NGO sector and Agnès Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. An [event summary is available](#) from EFAD.

Lastly, a new report was published by the [Geneva Centre for Security Policy](#) that outlines the existing mechanisms for control and suggests ways of strengthening each of them, noting that all avenues need to be pursued as militarisation in general and the use of armed drones in particular, increases across the globe.

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Featured image: CODEPINK protests killer drones at DC home of Jeh Johnson (Credit: CODEPINK)

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