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# The Drone-Warfare Revolution Is Here

By **ARTHUR HERMAN**

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown the world drones' power to change the way wars are fought. America should take note.

The most unlikely hero of the war in Ukraine has been a drone — or, to use the Pentagon's preferred term, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The Turkish-made Bayraktar TB-2, a medium-altitude, long-endurance drone that's 21 feet long with a 39-foot wingspan, can stay aloft for 24 hours at a stretch. It also carries a lethal punch: a "smart" munition that has been taking out Russian armored and supply columns and helping to grind the Russian ground offensive to a halt.

Meanwhile, civilian clubs of Ukrainian drone enthusiasts have weaponized their much smaller, commercially made drones — including Chinese-made DJI machines — by flying them above ridgelines and buildings to conduct reconnaissance on enemy units and send the information back to Ukrainian artillery units and other commanders. **According to the *Independent***, Ukrainian officers have even been traveling to Poland to learn how to do the same thing with their military UAVs.

In short, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is showing the world how drones will change the way wars are fought going forward. The question now is: Will our military realize that UAVs as the airpower weapon of the future, or will the lessons of Ukraine be pushed aside and forgotten?

There's a related issue that needs to be confronted first, however. Why are the Ukrainians relying on drones made in Turkey and China instead of American drones? It's true that we are planning to provide Ukraine with Switchblade "kamikaze" drones, which are small enough to be carried in a backpack and explode when they hit their target, and **training a small number of Ukrainians** to use them. But there's much more in the way of drones that the U.S. could be offering Ukraine, and the fact that we are not explains why we're still behind in realizing the potential of UAVs as an airpower weapon.

There are two reasons we aren't doing enough.

First, our ability to export our best and most valuable drones — e.g., the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper or the Northrop Grumman Global Hawk — is hampered by an international agreement known as the Missile Technology Control Regime, which unaccountably treats unmanned-aircraft technology like ballistic-missile technology. I have written **before** about how this treaty limits U.S. exports even to allies such as the UAE, who as a result have to rely on Chinese-made UAVs instead.

Second, there is an association in the minds of voters and policy-makers between drones and the war on terror, which has limited the leeway Pentagon strategists have to embrace the full potential of these revolutionary and disruptive weapons. For example, right now the Air Force is planning to retire an entire fleet of one of our best long-range intelligence-gathering tools, the RQ-4 Global Hawk Block 30 remotely piloted surveillance aircraft, most of which are under ten years old and still in very serviceable shape. The stated reason for their retirement is that they can be shot down

by highly advanced anti-ballistic-missile systems. But by flying at altitudes where they are less vulnerable to those systems, they could still serve as the bedrock of an extended intelligence-sharing network, allowing the U.S. and its allies to keep watch over the Black Sea, Iran, the Taiwan Straits, the South China Sea, and North Korea. They could even be shared with our NATO allies and Ukraine through a lend–lease agreement designed to create such a network.

In the future, squadrons of armed UAVs have the potential to be used for close air support and full-scale air campaigns against enemy ground forces on a much larger scale than they have been in Ukraine — and for airborne ballistic-missile defense. But right now, NATO should be flying large U.S.-made and fully weaponized UAVs such as the Reaper from Poland into Ukraine and handing the controls over to the Ukrainians. In 2015, after the Russian invasion of Crimea, I wrote that the U.S. should supply Ukraine with such advanced UAVs:

A Ukrainian fleet of Reapers, Predators, and Global Hawks . . . could not only help to deter Russian moves in Ukraine, but provide some oversight of Russian moves elsewhere in the region.

If that advice had been followed, the war in Ukraine might look very different today — or there might not have been a war at all. American policy-makers can't be caught flat-footed again in the event of future conflicts. They must realize that we are now in the midst of an unmanned revolution, and that it's one in which America can and should lead the way.

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