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Will America Ever Build a Long-Range Strike Drone?

The Navy has shown that autonomous aircraft can take off and land on aircraft carriers. But what will those super-drones do?

By Eric Tegler Feb 8, 2016 96

The X-47B was a fierce-looking piece of the future. The Navy's web-shaped drone demonstrator was the first unmanned aircraft to take off and land on an aircraft carrier autonomously. It seemed to herald a future in which drones potentially could take the place of fighter pilots, fulfilling far-flung advanced missions on their own.


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That was then. Last week, Defense News reported that the X-47B's successor will likely be just an aerial re-fueler, rather than an intelligence-reconnaissance drone as envisioned by the Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike (UCLASS) program. However, in a Tuesday morning speech unveiling President Obama's 2017 defense budget request, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter didn't say a word about turning the Navy's UCLASS system into a tanker.

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What gives? It remains unclear exactly what the Pentagon plans for its followup to the X-47B, and it could be that a refueler UAV is in the works. But even if that's true, it doesn't rule out the idea that America will build a long-range carrier strike drone. In fact, the decision to go with a tanker UAV (which would be called CBARS, or Carrier Based Aerial Refueling System) actually could complement the development of long-range strike drone.

For one thing, a potential tanker UAV would operate with an air wing that includes F/A-18s and F-

35s. The military would gain crucial knowledge here about mixing manned and unmanned tactical aircraft during flight—knowledge it wouldn't get with just drones dedicated to surveillance and reconnaissance, which operate on their own away from other planes. This experience would be crucial to integrating real drone warplanes into the fleet.

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The Navy is also facing a looming strike-fighter shortfall with all the uncertainty swirling around the F-35. Plus, it has repeatedly expressed desire for an aircraft that can penetrate sophisticated air defenses without putting pilots in harm's way. And there's institutional momentum, too. Last fall, the Navy created a directorate of unmanned weapons systems chaired by a rear admiral, and earlier in 2015 Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, said the F-35C "almost certainly will be, the last manned strike fighter aircraft the Department of the Navy will ever buy or fly."

But the best reason to believe a long-range strike drone is still in the cards is the fact that there's still funding in the current budget for one. USNI News points out that the current the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act sets aside $350 million for continued development of a deep-strike concept and $375 million for prototyping of at least two follow-on air systems "that move toward" a long range strike system.

Whatever happens next, the story of the X-47B and its successors has already been a long, complicated saga, says Sam LaGrone, editor of U.S. Naval Institute News. LaGrone explains that in 2006, the Navy launched a program to develop a deep-strike carrier-borne unmanned aircraft. The Northrop-Grumman X-47B was a technology demonstrator. By 2011, shifting Pentagon priorities called for a more modest UAV, which the Navy envisioned as an ISR drone with limited weapons (UCLASS). Lockheed Martin, Boeing and General Atomics each proposed UCLASS designs. But some in Congress, like J. Randy Forbes (VA), chairman of a House Armed Services subcommittee, still wanted a deep-strike UAV. The debate about what a carrier drone should be led to a suspension of the UCLASS program in 2014. And here we are.

Will further money be channeled to a continue deep-strike UAV development? Congress will hash out the major 2017 NDAA items soon, but smaller details like specific R&D funding will take longer to approve. Still, the proposed 2017 defense budget funnels more money to research and development for the second year in a row, indicating high interest in advanced technologies like a long range strike drone.

If the first carrier-launched drone turns out to be a tanker, it might be seen more as a prelude to a strike UAV than what the Pentagon had previously planned.

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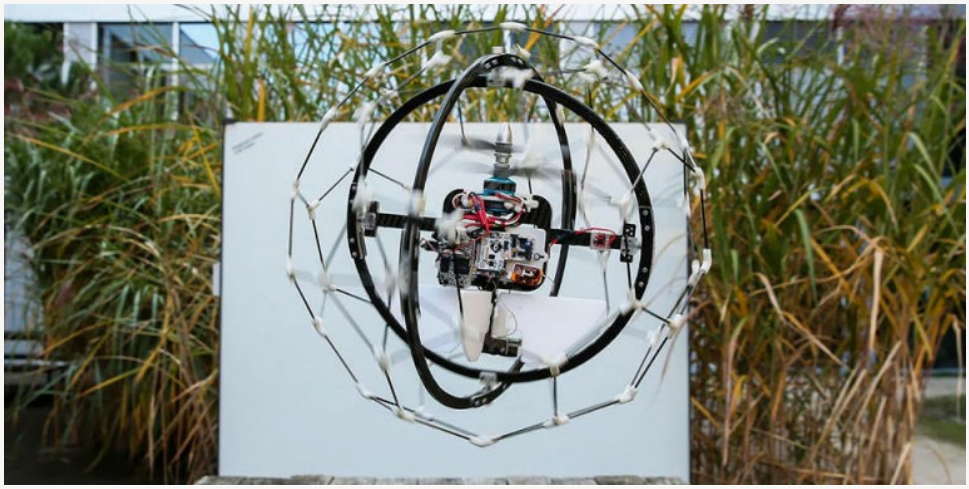

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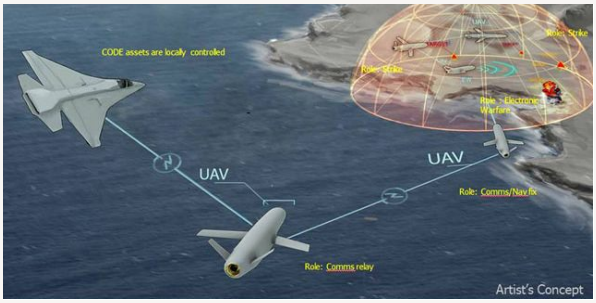

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