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Good News and Bad News About Changed U.S. Military Drone Policy

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

A new Department of Defense policy streamlines acquisition, enables testing, and encourages experimentation for innovation and tactical use of military drones.

The United States is currently outpaced by the Russians and Chinese in military drone use.

Acquisition reform must include reestablishing America's manufacturing prowess; 14 U.S. companies now produce 20 models of drones approved for U. S. military use.

Two articles appeared in news outlets recently with little fanfare but great impact. The first, published by The War Zone, highlights the new Department of Defense (DOD) policy enabling greater experimentation with small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones).[1] In response to President Donald Trump's June 6, 2025, executive order that directs accelerated testing of drones, enables routine drone operations, and mandates increased domestic drone production, DOD has changed existing policies or made new ones to enhance the experimental and practical uses of drones.[2] This new policy is good news for military experimentation with and application of UAVs for several reasons.

The Good News

First, drones can be considered an expendable consumable. In the military accounting system, this

distinction changes drones from a reusable end item to a disposable asset. This categorization makes it easier to maintain appropriate accountability while simultaneously encouraging widespread use. Machine gun bullets, for example, are accounted for when they are issued and expended; the empty casings are not counted and returned for later storage. (In training environments, they are collected for recycling, but they are measured by the pound, not as individual cartridges, and the people who measure them are different from those who shot the ammunition.) Machine guns, on the other hand, have an entirely different standard of accountability: Not only are they examined every time they leave the armory and return, but they are also accounted for daily. One does not use a machine gun and then get to say, "I didn't return it because I broke it."

This changed classification of drones both encourages and allows widespread use. Marines are more likely to try something new if non-negligence negative consequences are minimal.

Second, the new policy (1) allows officers with the rank of colonel (O-6 level) to decide who can operate drones safely and legally and (2) authorizes them to buy, test, and train with these drones. This accelerates both the approval process and the acquisition process. Previously, drones could be authorized for purchase only through Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC), the Corps' acquisition arm; authorized for testing through the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL), which is responsible for the innovating and testing of new ideas and concepts; and authorized for use aboard Marine Corps bases by Marine Corps Installations Command (MCICOM). All of these organizations are in the Northern Virginia/Washington, DC, metroplex area and are commanded by general officers.

Organizational and Geographic Distance. To help with perspective, it is important to remember the challenges of organizational and geographic distance. The Marine Corps has 61 generals, and all of the MCSC's, MCWL's, and MCICOM's commanding generals have bosses who are also generals. Previously, if a Marine in Japan had a good idea about how to use a drone, he would have had to get approval from at least 10 percent of the Marine Corps' generals and overcome the 7,700-mile distance between Okinawa and Washington. Colonel-level authorization for drone acquisition, testing, and use is easier to acquire because of the relative availability and approachability of the Corps' approximately 600 colonels compared to its 61 generals.

Simply put, it is much easier for our imaginary Marine to get approval for his idea from a colonel who is likely only a few miles and three organizational levels away in the chain of command. This construct leads to more

original ideas considered faster, and "more" and "faster" are the primary components of innovation. Thus, the change in approval level equals better opportunities to discover and employ new solutions and speed innovation, which leads to experimentation, which in turn brings opportunities to solve challenges as they emerge.[3]

Stewardship of America's Resources. This policy change will also improve the stewardship of America's resources. Colonels serve in positions of authority: On staffs, they are equivalent to directors in *Fortune* 100 companies, and in the field, they command organizations typically numbering around 2,000 people. Colonels are the smallest of "the big guys," meaning that they are considered senior officers with the requisite legal, accountability, and decision-making authority yet are connected to tactical units and still linked daily to the most junior of Marines. Colonels have the experience needed to balance the risk and reward of experimentation with the required accountability for spending taxpayer dollars while still being approachable by most Marines.

Consider the following imaginary—but typical—conversation:

Marine: "I have an idea."

Other Marine Leaders: "He has an idea, and we agree."

Colonel: "OK, I see the value of the idea. Buy this $2,000 drone, try the idea, and tell me what happens."

Marines: "We broke the drone, but this and this worked, and we want to try this other thing because we think that's why the drone broke."

Colonel: "Good job. Here's another drone; figure it out."

That's obviously a better conversation than the traditional version (which anyone who has ever been a Marine will appreciate):

Marines: "We think this is a solution and want to try it."

Colonel: "No, it costs $2,000, and I don't have the authority to approve it, although I am currently responsible for more than $200 million worth of equipment and resources."

Marines: "We spent the past nine months and have gotten acquisition approval from MCSC, concept approval from MCWL, and range approval from MCICOM for an hour slot next Wednesday."

Colonel: "OK, do it."

Marines: "We broke it, but we think we know why."

Colonel to Commanding General: "So what happened was, I broke this $2,000 thing...."

The new policy places responsibility and accountability at the level where decision-making can influence tactical innovation. Colonels serve at that level.

Unleashing Creativity and Innovation. Another value of the new DOD drone policy is that it will unleash creativity and innovation. As an anecdotal example, I had four jobs as a colonel of Marines. If this policy change had occurred on my watch. I would have authorized drone use for experimentation in delivering small amounts of water and fuel to Marines in isolated locations, assisting military policemen with base perimeter security observation, breaching a minefield by dragging a sausage string of explosives into it, and replacing a high-voltage insulator atop a power pole damaged by a hurricane. Those are just a few ideas for experimentation; Marines and soldiers will come up with many more.

The Marine Corps has developed a drone team that should help to capture this creativity.[4] The Marine Corps Attack Drone Team (MCADT) resides appropriately in Weapons Training Battalion in Quantico, Virginia, in the shadow of Washington, DC. Commanded by a colonel and established by Marine Corps Training Command with the endorsement of MCWL, MCADT is responsible for developing and refining drone training across the Marine Corps, gathering requirements for the rapid fielding of innovative drone applications, and providing training to Marines and units, all while competing in international drone events. Additionally, the drone team, with its links to both Training Command and MCWL, will ensure that any lessons learned from Marine units testing, trying, and refining drones are communicated rapidly across the Corps and the wider Joint Force. MCADT's connections to Training Command and MCWL are important because Training Command is the only unit in the Marine Corps that *all* Marines are part of at some point in their careers, and MCWL has oversight of all the experimental concepts the Corps pursues.

Marines are famous for their ability to shoot ("Every Marine is a rifleman") and their competitive nature. One application of drone technology is as a precision lethal weapon system. Accordingly, MCADT will have a role in the Marine Corps' Competition-in-Arms Program and marksmanship competitions. In addition to allowing widespread use of drones, the Corps is going to teach Marines to use them well. MCADT is running a series of competitions, to culminate in April of 2026, employing a selection of approved techniques, tactics, procedures, and associated hardware for standardized use across the Corps.

The Bad News

All of this is good news for the implementation of the President's executive order and DOD policy for drone use in the American military. But there is also bad news, as shown by a *New York Times* account of a military drone exercise in Alaska.[5]

The account begins with a drone crashing 80 feet from a target it was programmed to recognize. Another crashed on takeoff, and a third crashed into a mountain. Then the author explains that these drones are not flown by amateurs but by the *drone manufacturers themselves*. The two-day exercise turned into a comedy of errors. More drones crashed, had engine trouble, made navigation errors, missed targets, struck non-targeted equipment, and narrowly missed groups of soldiers participating in the exercise. Those soldiers were testing anti-drone technologies and had their own cascade of challenges: no effect with purpose-built radio wave jammers, complete misses with man-portable disarming equipment, and equipment that did not have the "desired effect against the latest technology."

The article explains how the U.S. military trails the Russians and Chinese in manufacturing drones, training with them, and using them by *the millions*. The U.S. is behind in developing drone technology, and the current conflicts in Ukraine and Israel are "dominated by swarms of smaller, inexpensive drones that are largely produced with components from China." One Chinese company, DJI, accounts for 70 percent of all worldwide drone sales and makes millions of drones each year. U.S. companies fabricate far fewer each year. Beyond the obvious overmatch concerns are technical and manufacturing concerns.

These technical and manufacturing concerns are related. The Department of Defense restricts military drone purchase and use to U.S. companies and explicitly prohibits using drones of Chinese origin. This is a wise policy in view of the challenges of Lenovo computers and Huawei phones and their links to the PRC government. DOD has a "Blue List" of drone manufacturers and models authorized for U.S. military use.[6] However, only 14 companies and 20 models are on that approved list, and among these 20 models are the ones that performed so poorly in Alaska.

It is clear that we need more American-made drones, but it is not that simple. The United States lacks the ability to manufacture these and other items across the board. We cannot make more drones right now because, in addition to only 14 companies approved to make drones for the U.S. military, our country lacks the equipment and expertise to construct the tools, dies, and molds that are needed to mass-produce capable drones.

Destin Sandlin, a former missile flight test engineer for the U. S. Army and host of the *Smarter Every Day* series on YouTube, explains the problem practically and eloquently in his video "I Tried to Make Something in America."[7] He tells how he set out to make a gadget using only parts from and fabrication abilities in the United States.

During his year-long effort to source raw materials, components, and specialized fabrication techniques, Sandlin visited mills, shops, technical schools, and businesses of all sizes to get specific components made and learn how to make the components for his gadget. Even though his gadget had no moving parts, he was unable to complete his quest as he discovered that American manufacturing capability is nearly extinct. He found that we do not have dies to make necessary tools, molds to mass-produce templates, tools to assemble and construct subcomponents, or people with the knowledge and experience needed to manufacture products. In short, America lacks the ability to make "things"—widgets, gadgets, or products.

Apple CEO Tim Cook agrees. He told *Fortune*—in 2017—that his company makes iPhones in China not because of cheap labor, but because of "advanced precision tooling." He goes on to say that "in the U.S. we could have a meeting of tool engineers and I'm not sure we could fill the room; in China you could fill multiple football fields. Vocational expertise is very deep in China."[8]

What Needs to Be Done

Congress is appropriately concerned with acquisition reform, but any conversation about acquisition reform must be linked with serious consideration of the need to increase the manufacturing capacity of the defense industrial base. To address the American military's drone shortage and other important shortfalls, Congress should:[9]

- Encourage new companies to enter the U. S. drone manufacturing by implementing output capacity-based grants to incentivize to companies' investment in technology,

- Allow full deductions for drone producers' interest costs and full and immediate expensing for capital expenditures to encourage capital investment in necessary equipment, and

- Create a renaissance of manufacturing in America by expanding student eligibility for Pell Grants to cover vocational and training programs necessary for fabrication and manufacturing.

The Department of Defense should:

- Increase investment in drone experimentation, deployment, and training;

- Increase Defense Innovation Office staffing to match the required influx of drone manufacturers in order to get more drone companies and models rapidly approved for U.S. military use; and

- Consider allowing drones from allied and partner nations to earn inclusion on the Blue List.

For its part, the Department of Labor should:

- Use grants, scholarships, and prizes to encourage vocational and technical schools to redevelop the necessary skills required in manufacturing and

- Create excitement in manufacturing by sponsoring a contest to deliver 1,000 drones constructed to meet a requirement from the DOD Universal Needs List.

Conclusion

In his revised drone policy, Secretary of Defense Hegseth has said that he expects training "force-on-force drone wars" in 2026. However, given its current capabilities, the United States in all probability would not currently be able to win a drone war with China: Its 20 models and hundreds of copies would be at a severe disadvantage against the People's Republic of China's millions. It is critical that the U.S. learn the lesson of the old proverb—"If the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, then the second-best time to plant a tree is today"—and improve its drone manufacturing base immediately.

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Endnotes

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2. See President Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 14307, "Unleashing American Drone Dominance," June 6, 2025, *Federal Register*, Vol. 90, No. 111 (June 11, 2025), pp. 24727–24731, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-06-11/pdf/2025-10814.pdf (accessed July 23, 2025), and Memorandum from Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Defense, for Senior Pentagon Leadership, Commanders of the Combatant Commands, and Directors of Defense Agencies, "Subject: Unleashing U.S. Military Drone Dominance," July 10, 2025, https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jul/10/2003752117/-1/-1/1/UNLEASHING-U.S.-MILITARY-DRONE-DOMINANCE.PDF (accessed July 23, 2025).
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