

Acquiring the Drone: Can Canada Realistically Purchase UAVs?

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Introduction

In late 2013, Canadian defence officials announced that they would be looking into the purchase of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), also known as drones, for use by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).¹ The announcement was not exactly shocking as discussion regarding the possible creation of a Canadian drone program has gone on for at least a few years. While Canadian military personnel used allied drones in Afghanistan, the possible purchase of UAVs for independent use by the CF has been somewhat contentious.

There are a range of strategic and political issues which have been debated in the recent past by proponents and opponents of such a program. Some argue that Canadian UAVs would give the country independence in its defence and security activities while also contributing to the protection of Canadian territory and interests. Others point to the possible pitfalls of such a program, namely potential privacy concerns which might arise should Canada choose to launch UAVs. They also point to the possibility that drones could make Canada look like a hostile nation in the eyes of some individuals and countries which could in turn have dire consequences.

It is not surprising that the arguments for and against a Canadian UAV program are not totally unlike those that have been made in the debate about the possible expansion of overseas Canadian intelligence operations, as UAVs would essentially add to Canada's ability to collect information both at home and abroad. However, a Canadian drone program has unique features which make it at least partially independent of the wider debate about Canadian intelligence. For starters, a UAV program would be run by the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF which already has some real-world experience in the realm of drones. Additionally, it fits into the debate about military procurements and the kinds of physical equipment the CAF needs to defend Canada and its interests.

This paper looks at whether Canada can realistically purchase UAVs in the near future. In doing so, it takes into account a range of factors which could play a role in determining whether

Canada acquires the drone or not. The paper proceeds in two parts. First, there is a discussion of the various factors which could encourage or inhibit the purchase of UAVs in Canada. The factors outlined are: strategic and political considerations as well as financial cost and procurement. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the discussion and potential strategies for overcoming barriers in the Canadian procurement of drones are outlined.

Discussion

Strategic and Political Considerations

Proponents of a Canadian drone program have argued that UAVs would significantly contribute to the country's ability to protect itself and its interests in the future.² Some have made the case that UAVs would be especially valuable in the Arctic where Canada has made a conscious effort to establish itself amidst countries like Russia, for land and resources. Essentially, the argument has been made that drones would be a cost-effective and reliable way to monitor the region and give the Canadian government the ability to detect and enforce Canadian law on entrants to the area. It could also allow Canada to monitor potential hostile acts in the Arctic.³

The claims made by proponents are not totally baseless. Several countries have considered purchasing drones for similar reasons: to monitor their border regions and ensure travelling people and goods adhere to host country laws.⁴

Drones are also considered at present to be a cost-effective method for collecting information, especially in remote regions, when compared against other viable alternatives which would be necessary for protecting Canada's claims in the Arctic.⁵

The case has also been made that UAVs can be particularly helpful for collecting general intelligence related to military activities in which the CAF is likely to be involved.⁶ One such example can be made about the case of the Philippines in 2013 when the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) was sent to aid local populations by providing food, water, and medical tools and expertise as well as to engineer travel routes into and out of assigned locations.

Even a single drone could have potentially aided the DART in reaching more people in a shortened amount of time, all while relaying useful information back to CAF personnel about ways to build routes around the island to provide aid more quickly to villages and individuals. It could have also resulted in cost efficiencies as the drone could relay visual intelligence to DART members about the best options for moving around the assigned region without having to use as much valuable manpower and other equipment such as helicopters. This is only one of the many cases in which a drone program could be strategically useful by the CAF. In this way, purchasing and operating a fleet of UAVs makes strategic sense for the Canadian government. However, there are other considerations to take into account before determining whether Canada can realistically purchase drones in the near future.

Perhaps the most divisive debate when considering drones has come from the political aspects of such a program. Like in the wider intelligence debate, some argue that Canada could achieve greater independence in its security and defence policymaking by increasing its intelligence capabilities. In essence, proponents argue that Canada would become more self-sufficient in the collection and analysis of intelligence because it would be handled solely by Canadian personnel.⁷ There would be no sharing of equipment as was the case in Afghanistan, which would allow the CAF to operate drones as they see fit to defend and protect Canadian interests. It would also allow the Canadian government to make decisions based entirely from Canadian owned and operated equipment.

However, opponents of a Canadian UAV program argue that the possibility exists for abuse by government and security personnel. The ability to use high tech equipment to even inadvertently collect images and information about non-security threat individuals poses a problem in a country like Canada where there is a high value placed upon individual and privacy rights.⁸ Furthermore, there has been great debate in Canada and in other countries where drone programs have been developed about the ethics of using drones for certain purposes, namely the targeting and elimination of security threats.⁹ It will ultimately be up to the Canadian government to decide whether it will take the step of arming its UAVs should it create its own program. If it does choose to take this step however, then it should be prepared to make some other decisions about the way in which it uses this ability and when it will be used for combative purposes. Specifically, there has been concern about the effectiveness of combat drones to counter terrorism. The

argument has been made that using UAVs to target enemy combatants results in the creation of more terrorists because collateral damage and innocent civilian deaths act as a rallying cry for individuals who would not otherwise take up arms.¹⁰ If this argument is accurate, then using drones to attack terrorists may be strategically counter-productive in the counter-terrorism portfolio. Yet drones can still be useful for collecting intelligence about potential threats and other persons of interest.

Additionally, some researchers contend that a drone fleet could take Canada one step further to looking like a hostile state in the eyes of some countries. In turn, such a program could lead to a loss in international standing and force Canada into adverse situations with certain governments.¹¹

These points are certainly important to consider given the fact that some countries have been in direct competition with Canada in the recent past and some of those governments have a tendency to act aggressively when in such confrontations. It is also important to keep these facts in mind as Canada has been recently accused of spying on foreign governments, even though these accusations have been denied by the Canadian government and have not been proven to date.¹²

Yet there are some counterpoints which can be made to the ones given by the opponents. There are also measures which could be implemented to prevent some of the possible abuses of a drone program and there are some principles which must be kept in mind if Canada were to purchase UAVs. First, Canadian officials must understand that UAVs are not a substitute for the collection of intelligence from other sources.¹³ Drones are limited in the type and extent of information they can provide to Canadian security and defence personnel. They can provide images and general information about areas and the activities of certain groups and individuals to the Canadian government. They cannot provide a clear context of any situation on their own. In this way, drones are an inadequate method of forming full analyses when used alone. However, they are a tool which can give Canadian officials access to useful information in places where it would be otherwise difficult to gather. They are also a tool which can be helpful when used in conjunction with human and other electronic resources.

Second, if other countries are already in direct competition with Canada for land and resources or they have previously accused Canada of spying on them, then it might not make a difference whether Canada purchases UAVs or not. If they already view Canada as a competitor

and/or as a country which is spying already, then they may expect Canada to operate its own drone fleet to collect information and protect its national interests. In the end, such a program would leave Canada's current reputation intact and add to the types of equipment the government can use to defend the country.

Finally, there should be a legal discussion about the ways in which Canada uses its drones whether it chooses to arm them or not. An effort should be made to establish a legal regime which protects the rights of Canadians from potential abuses by a drone program while allowing the CAF to operate the machines without being mired in legal battles. Further, rules and practices should also be adopted within Canada's security and defence establishment to prevent any wrongdoing with regards to information sharing from a drone program. Such practices have already been established within security organizations such as the Integrated National Security Enforcement Teams (INSETs) to protect Canadian rights and to ensure that information is shared between agencies in a legal manner.⁴⁴ These practices could serve as a basis for ensuring that a drone program can fit comfortably into the current Canadian defence and security environment. In this way, Canada would probably be able to develop a drone program which most effectively protects Canadian security and interests.

Financial Cost and Procurement

The financial cost and procurement of a UAV fleet is also an imperative consideration to be taken into account. Currently, there is an earmarked number of dollars (CDN \$60 billion) for defence procurements in Canada.⁴⁵ While defence officials claim that some funding has been set aside for the potential purchase of drones, there are two key factors which could ultimately make the program unaffordable in the near future.

The first factor to consider is whether there is sufficient funding in place for ongoing procurement projects and how much funding would be left for drones after those processes take place. Much has been made about the potential cost overruns of the F-35 program and there are still several other projects which have priority over drones on the federal government's docket. Projects such as the frigate replacement program have yet to really begin and these are also expensive endeavours which could suffer from cost overruns in the future. Presently, the cost of a drone is between approximately CDN \$4.5 million and CDN \$18 million per unit depending on the model.⁴⁶ If the federal government chooses to continue with the F-35 after the latest competition

round, then the price tag for the fighter jet program could rise to between \$45 billion and \$70 billion for 65 jets. This estimate is far greater than the \$9 billion initially forecasted.⁴⁷

Even if all other projects stay within their initial cost estimates, then there may not be any funding left for a drone program in the end. This barrier can likely only be overcome by scrapping the F-35 procurement and negotiating a new deal with another fighter jet maker who can keep the price of their planes within the existing costing framework. It can also only be achieved if all other projects which have priority over the drone program are kept under close scrutiny in order to ensure that they too remain within the existing costing structure.

In saying that, defence officials should keep in mind that procuring a fleet of drones could alleviate some of the need for such a robust fighter jet fleet. While drones perform differently than jets and do not have nearly the same capabilities, they can perform some tasks which would otherwise be carried out by fighter jets. If necessary, the Canadian government could potentially reduce the number of jets needed in order to purchase a fleet of UAVs. Such a move could also create some cost efficiencies as even the most expensive drone only prices at a fraction of the cost of a modern fighter jet.⁴⁸

Second, defence budgets fluctuate over time and in Canada it is a regular occurrence that defence spending is decreased in order to fund other initiatives. For example, in its effort to balance the budget by 2015 the current federal government has already decreased defence spending over the past few years.⁴⁹ This is just one of the many instances in which the federal government has reduced defence expenditures in order to meet other goals.

While the defence budget was periodically increased over the previous decade, there still may not be enough room for the DND/CAF to purchase drones and keep other important programs in the fold with the recent budget cuts. This dilemma is especially compounded by the possibility that there may not have been enough funding for UAVs in the first place.

Another possible barrier for defence officials to consider is the fact that Canada has struggled with major procurement projects in the recent past. The F-35 is a contemporary example of a project which has taken longer than anticipated to make its way through the process while also creating possible cost overruns at the same time. However, perhaps the most famous example of this particular problem comes from the example of the Sikorsky CH-148 Cyclone helicopter procurement which began under the

Mulroney and Chretien governments and has still not come to fruition 20 years on. This project has had several setbacks over the years resulting in no real return on investment.⁵ With these two recent projects in mind, it is very feasible that something similar could happen with a UAV fleet procurement in the near future. If nothing else it is a factor for Canadian defence officials to contemplate when deciding whether they can acquire the drone or not. Even though it would be a separate procurement in the event that it comes to fruition at all, every effort should be made to ensure that the process goes according to plan while keeping within the existing costing forecasts. If not, then Canada may never actually acquire drones even if desires to do so.

Conclusion

In the end, it seems that the CAF could acquire drones in the near future. The potential benefits of UAVs are fairly straightforward. They are cost-effective, provide strategic advantages such as allowing Canada to collect important intelligence in order to protect itself and further its interests, and could give the country more independence in its policymaking. However, there are some major barriers which would need to be overcome before Canada orders a fleet of UAVs.

First, there are concerns about the possible infringement upon individual rights if drones are operated by the CF. While this infringement would likely be inadvertent, there should still be robust discussion about the best way to establish a legal regime which would govern how drones are used, when they are used, and for which purposes. There should also be a discussion about how information collected via UAVs is shared among security partners. Fortunately, much has already been done in Canada with regards to

information sharing and there is precedence which would be extremely useful in creating regulations for a drone program.

Within this discussion, there should also be thought given to whether Canada will arm its drones for combat purposes. While UAVs are useful for collecting intelligence there is some question about how effective they are in offensive combat situations, especially in countering terrorism. If Canada chooses to arm its drones, then the discussion should also establish a method for governing how defence personnel would go about using that capability.

Second, there may not be enough funding for a Canadian drone program moving forward. Moreover, the potential purchase of a UAV fleet could be problematic from a procurement standpoint given some of Canada's previous issues in securing new defence equipment. If Canada chooses to continue with the current F-35 procurement, then it is unlikely there will be enough funding for drones as well. For a drone program to become financially feasible, the federal government must end the F-35 project and renegotiate a fighter jet deal with another jet maker. Furthermore, it must ensure there is sufficient funding in place to acquire drones even when there are budget cuts. A potential solution to this problem includes establishing strict oversight of all defence procurements to ensure projects stay on time and within their existing costing framework. Another possibility for the government to consider would be replacing some jets with drones, which are far cheaper, because they can carry out some of the same functions. In all, if these barriers are overcome then the CF could realistically acquire drones in the near future. If they are not however, then Canada may never acquire the drone.

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