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Two retired U.S. Air Force generals who were deeply involved in the early development of the U.S. drone war program have suggested introducing the notorious MQ-9 Reaper, the most powerful U.S. killer drone, into the skies over Ukraine.

Decisions about whether and how to use Reaper and Grey Eagle drones in Ukraine can have profound consequences for humanity.

Such a move would open a new, even more dangerous phase in Ukraine's war in which Reapers, and MQ-1 Gray Eagle drones, both widely used in Afghanistan, might be put at the service of the Ukrainian military to attack Russian forces in Ukraine and, quite possibly, to conduct assassination and bombardment inside Russia.

These drone operations, which would almost certainly be reliant on U.S. military personnel, could lead to a nuclear response from Russia if they are seen to further signal a determination by the United States to fragment Russia's central government and turn Russia into a failed state like Iraq, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan. The United States and western Europe waged wars of choice in these countries, presumably because the countries had not subordinated their national interests to the national interests of the United States and Western Europe.

TANK BUSTERS

On March 16, 2022, retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General David Deptula, writing in [Forbes](#), called for the introduction of the Reaper and Gray Eagle drones into the Ukraine war for “defensive operations” against Russian tanks and other military equipment. He argued that these American drones can greatly expand on the success that smaller Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have had against Russian equipment:

“Ukrainians can be trained to operate these (U.S. drone) systems in a relatively short period of time, thus avoiding valid concerns regarding U.S. personnel directly engaging Russian forces. Given U.S. use of this equipment over the past 20 years, they are rapidly available in high numbers, as is all the supporting infrastructure. The MQ-1 can be operated from a ruggedized laptop computer instead of a traditional ground control station thus simplifying basing logistics, and it takes-off and lands automatically reducing the need for highly skilled pilots.”

General Deptula’s advocacy for introducing Reaper and Grey Eagle drones into the Ukraine war might be dismissed because he is currently Dean of the Mitchell Institute of Aerospace Power Studies, which is, as noted with the Forbes column, supported by the maker of these drones, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc. However, his Air Force experience in developing the U.S. drone war program was taken seriously enough by [Defense Daily](#) to ask the Pentagon for comment, which was not immediately received.

General Deptula told Defense Daily that Ukrainians could be trained to operate the U.S. drones in two or three weeks and that the drones could be controlled “from positions far from areas of direct combat.”

Although the general makes it seem that the use of the Reapers and Gray Eagles would be a strictly Ukrainian operation, realistically it appears that while Ukrainians might symbolically be present, or be trained in U.S. drone control centers, it is unlikely that they will actually control either type aircraft for months. Training time for a U.S. Air Force drone pilot is a [minimum of one year](#), and the U.S. Army, which operates the Grey Eagle, [says](#) that an unmanned aerial systems operator receives “more than 23 weeks” of training.

In addition, operation of both U.S. drone types requires substantial support contingents. In 2013, retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Martha McSally, who had experience with U.S. drone operations in Africa, and elsewhere, testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee

on Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights:

“It actually takes about 200 individuals to keep one of these aircraft airborne for a 24-hour orbit. And, that 200 individuals includes the operators, the intelligence personnel, the maintenance personnel, the equipment people, the lawyers, and also as part of the process, you have literally hundreds of other personnel that are involved in the process on the military side when you’re actually conducting one of these operations.”

The Reaper drone control centers closest to Ukraine for the missions that General Deptula advocates would be at Campia Turzii Air Base in Romania and Miroslawiec Air Base in Poland. Clearly, this direct involvement in attacks against Russian forces would mean greater danger for these nations.

Although the Gray Eagle drone is built to be “flown” by troops in the field of combat, and laptop computer control of the Gray Eagle is being developed, its operating system involves complex ground-based and satellite systems that can require a team of more than 100 trained soldiers, as [described](#) by the U.S. Army:

“The system is fielded in platoon sets consisting of four unmanned aircraft, two Universal Ground Control Stations, seven Ground Data Terminals, one Mobile Ground Control Station, one Satellite Ground Data Terminal, an automated takeoff and landing system, Light Medium Tactical Vehicles (LMTVs) and other ground-support equipment operated and maintained by a company of 128 Soldiers within the Combat Aviation Brigade. U.S. Army Special Operations Forces and Intelligence and Security Command have two Gray Eagle Extended Range (ER) systems which include 12 unmanned aircraft, six Universal Ground Control Stations, nine Ground Data Terminals, three Mobile Ground Control Stations, one Satellite Ground Data Terminal, an automated takeoff and landing system, LMTVs, and other ground-support equipment operated and maintained by a company of 165 Soldiers.”

In addition, it is likely that if Gray Eagle drone control equipment were sent into Ukraine, the U.S. would protect it from capture, which would likely require U.S. troops to accompany the deployment of such equipment.

PILOTLESS NO FLY-ZONE

On March 30, 2022, retired U.S. Air Force Major General James Poss published a [column](#) in Inside Unmanned Systems in which he described a complex system using Reaper drones and manned surveillance aircraft to monitor a no-fly zone over Ukraine. The plan also would require Reaper drones to attack Russian anti-aircraft weapons in Ukraine and to fire on Russian aircraft.

The general acknowledged at the end of his column that using Reaper drones to enforce his no-fly zone, in the absence of a new generation of air combat drones, would be very hard and perhaps might not work:

“An unmanned no-fly zone is possible in 2022 but would involve a lot of MQ-9 losses and the MQ-9 would struggle to engage Russian aircraft violating the no-fly zone. The coalition could handle the losses. The USAF alone has over 250 MQ-9s in its inventory and a further several hundred MQ-1A Predators in storage. I’m sure every one of these drones would relish the opportunity to die in glory instead of rotting in storage. However, the ineffectiveness of today’s drones in air-to-air combat would make an unmanned-only no-fly zone very difficult to execute.”

NO CONSEQUENCES?

The generals’ recommendations to send in the drones appear to be based on the idea that this would enable the U.S. to support Ukraine without risking American pilots’ lives and without putting Americans into direct combat with Russians. In General Deptula’s scheme, the United States is further protected by a veil of faux Ukrainian control of Reaper and Gray Eagle attacks.

But, the primary impetus for their initiative appears to be the surprising failure of Russian anti-aircraft weapons to knock down the low-flying, propeller-driven, 125 mph maximum, Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones

“Given the performance of the Russian Aerospace Forces to date over Ukraine,” General Deptula [said](#) in Defense News, “there is little concern of interception/shoot down of these

UAVs (Reaper and Gray Eagle drones).”
[2022/04/01/russia-belgorod-fire-helicopter-ukraine/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/01/russia-belgorod-fire-helicopter-ukraine/)

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The Russian Pantsir S1 anti-aircraft system was “trounced” by Turkish drone attacks in Libya in 2020, according to [Real Clear Defense](#), and it apparently has not been as successful as anticipated in Ukraine. The same can be said for the Russian 9S932-1 anti-aircraft weapon, which is considered highly advanced technologically.

Ukrainian forces have captured units of both these systems, and, as noted in [The Drive](#), assuredly this equipment is being studied by the U.S. to determine its vulnerabilities and countermeasures.

“Altogether, for every system like the 9S932-1 that Ukrainian forces capture, they are not only hampering Russian forces’ ability to operate in the country, they are also potentially exposing new details and providing new insights about some of their most advanced capabilities.”

FATAL ATTRACTION

When one considers the apparent failures of Russia’s anti-aircraft systems against relatively slow, low-flying aircraft, like drones, and that Russia shares a 1,200-mile land border with Ukraine, it is apparent that Russia may be extremely vulnerable to armed Reapers that might fly by night carrying electronic jamming systems and artificial intelligence targeting assistance.

The Reaper drone, therefore, offers an extremely tempting weapon to be flown into Russia, flying the Ukrainian flag, for assassination and bombardment. These drones have already been used in a number of nations around the world as a key part of a strategy to disable central governments.

Precedent for Ukrainian attacks within Russia, was established on April 1, 2022, when, [according to](#)

The Washington Post, two Ukrainian helicopters, flying at a low altitude, appeared to have attacked a fuel storage area in the Russian city of Belgorod, 22 miles from the Ukrainian

border.

On April 1, 2022, Jeremy Scahill [wrote](#) in The Intercept:

“The White House smells Putin’s blood in the waters of his disastrous invasion. The flow of weapons, the sweeping sanctions, and other acts of economic warfare are ultimately aimed not just at defending Ukraine and making the regime pay for the invasion in the immediate present, but also setting in motion its downfall.”

On March 22, 2021, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov [told](#) CNN:

"Well, we have a concept of domestic security, and it's public," Peskov said. "You can read all the reasons for nuclear arms to be used. So, if it is an existential threat, a threat for our country, then it can be used in accordance with our concept."

At this moment, decisions about whether and how to use Reaper and Grey Eagle drones in Ukraine can have profound consequences for humanity.
