

# Back in the saddle: manned spyplanes make a comeback

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**Manned aerial surveillance aircraft are making a comeback as East-West tensions rise, bucking the trend towards unmanned aerial vehicles. *Tim Ripley reports***

Almost 60 years ago a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft on a top-secret mission over the Soviet Union to photograph missile and bomber bases was shot down by a surface-to-air missile (SAM). Then, when the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was paraded at a trial in Moscow a major diplomatic incident was sparked.

Beyond the immediate political fallout the U-2 shutdown convinced the CIA and the Pentagon that Soviet air defences were now so effective that it was just too dangerous to continue with the overflight programme. This reality heralded the rapid migration to space-based satellites to collect imagery, radar, and signals intelligence (SIGINT).



*Manned and unmanned: a U-2 on final approach at Beale Air Force Base, California, in September 2013 while an RQ-4 Global Hawk taxis toward the runway. (US Air Force)*

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The trend towards unmanned surveillance operations gathered further pace in the 1990s with the increasing use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The iconic MQ-1 Predator UAV

became the signature weapon system of the US Global War on Terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, in 2001. Live streaming video imagery of Islamic Jihadist fighters filmed from Predators was in high demand from military commanders and political decision makers alike. This so-called 'Predator TV' was also hugely popular with the US media and public, who could see their enemies being hunted down by superior US forces.

However, intelligence professionals in the United States and other countries argued that live streaming video was not the 'be all and end all' of aerial surveillance requirements. In March 2014, when Russian forces seized control of Crimea, there was suddenly a requirement for many different types of intelligence products. Literally overnight, top Western decision makers wanted to know the whereabouts of Russian tanks, tactical ballistic missiles, air-defence systems, fighters, warships, and submarines. As a result manned surveillance aircraft were being called upon once more.

Meanwhile, manned aerial surveillance aircraft had not gone away since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Instead, they had been increasingly retasked to carry out tactical missions in support of troops on peacekeeping, humanitarian, or counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. Using electro-optical imaging cameras to photograph targets of interest, SIGINT sensors to monitor communications, synthetic aperture radars (SARs) to gather three-dimensional images of targets hidden under forest foliage or camouflage nets, and ground moving target indicator (GMTI) radars to find moving vehicles, surveillance aircraft focused on finding and identifying individuals of interest or the low-tech military hardware of non-state armed groups in places like Afghanistan and North Africa.

Following Russia's resurgence after the 2014 Crimea crisis, a top priority for US, NATO, and other Western intelligence agencies was to help build up a detailed intelligence picture of their new strategic competitor. A similar process had been under way in the Pacific Rim region, as the US and its local allies, Australia, Japan, and South Korea sought to monitor Chinese and North Korean military build-ups. As a result old intelligence-gathering techniques had to be dusted off and made relevant for new scenarios, times, and threats.

### **New Cold War, new missions**

The renewed priority for strategic intelligence on Russian military power meant that Western intelligence agencies had a lot of catching up to do. With the focus on peacekeeping in the 1990s and the Global War on Terror after 2001, work to monitor the order of battle of Russian air, land, sea, and air-defence forces, particularly their electronic emissions, had been neglected. Moreover, technical intelligence gathering on the performance of Russian conventional military equipment had been downgraded because it was not envisaged that this information would ever be useful again.

Most importantly, NATO 'warnings and alarms' intelligence procedures that had been at the heart of Cold War operations had been allowed to wither. The procedures had been based around the collection and analysis of intelligence indicators of Warsaw Pact mobilisation for war and were meant to fast track vital information to NATO's senior military and political

leadership. Emerging threats of hybrid warfare surprise attacks, spearheaded by Russian special forces or 'little green men', against NATO members in Eastern Europe meant that there was an urgent need to resurrect a 'warning and alarms' intelligence picture for the alliance.

Although satellites and UAVs can do much of this work they were not the answer to every intelligence requirement. Moreover, a significant portion of the US and allied satellite and UAV capability remained committed to supporting ongoing counter-terror operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, North Africa, Somalia, Syria, and elsewhere. This resulted in a requirement for manned aerial surveillance communities in the US and NATO to step up and fill much of the new 'intelligence gap'.

This new manned aerial surveillance campaign is highly sensitive – politically and militarily – so it is surrounded by a high degree of secrecy and the US, UK, and NATO will not discuss it publicly. For example, when asked about it US spokespeople usually reply, “[The] US routinely conducts air operations throughout Europe in co-ordination with our NATO allies and partners to assure allies and deter any potential aggression in the region. As a matter of long-standing policy we will not comment on matters of intelligence, surveillance, or reconnaissance missions.” Their allied counterparts say much the same thing.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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