



USAF Wants Authority To Down Drones After F-22 Near Miss

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In early July, an [F-22](#) Raptor pilot coming in for a landing just barely avoided colliding with a small, commercial unmanned aerial system (UAS). That same week, a base security guard watched another tiny drone fly onto the complex and over the flight line before heading back out.

In neither case did the airman have the legal authority to shoot down or otherwise disable the drone.

As drone technology becomes cheaper and more commercially available, the U.S. Air Force is increasingly worried about the threats posed by small UAS such as quadcopters. But while the service is developing the tools to defend against these systems—from jamming their electronics to shooting them down—it lacks the legal authority to use them, says Gen. James Holmes, commander of Air Combat Command.

“Imagine a world where somebody flies a couple hundred of those, and flies one down the intake of one of my F-22s with just a small weapon,” Holmes said July 11 during an event on Capitol Hill. “I need the authorities to deal with that.”

Dealing with commercial drones near protected facilities is a complicated legal issue. The [FAA](#) is responsible for all U.S. airspace, and has already established no-fly zones over every U.S. military base so any drone flight there is illegal. But determining when it is OK for the military to disable or destroy UAS that wander into its facilities is still something of a gray area. Outside the Pentagon and FAA, multiple government agencies are involved, including the Department of Homeland Security and even the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which mandates that only government agencies can use jamming against drones.

In particular, the Air Force is concerned about UAS near its nuclear sites—an even more complex issue because the Department of Energy also has a stake.

“We will likely receive authorities to defend the nuclear installations first, and then we will try to work the other ones,” Holmes said. “We need to extend those authorities beyond the nuclear sites to protect our sophisticated assets that we rely on.”

For the FAA, the most immediate concern is UAS flying near busy commercial airports. The agency has tested several different detection systems at several airports, including a CACI International system that can identify both a UAS and its operator in the vicinity of airports.

Meanwhile, UAS in the wrong hands abroad present a different threat. Islamic State militants have begun arming commercial quadcopters with small munitions akin to grenades and deploying them against Iraqi security forces and civilians. The U.S. Army saw many instances of this tactic during the fight to retake Mosul.

Several firms are developing ways to deal with this threat, including Battelle’s “DroneDefender,” a handheld device that uses directed energy to disrupt adversary control of the drone. But this system has not been authorized by the FCC and cannot be sold commercially.

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