

Solving the Drone Deficiency

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September 21, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

Whenever there is a discussion about why Russia's military is less technologically advanced than the United States, the conversation usually centers on Russia's inability to produce its own drones.

This weakness was particularly glaring during the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Drones are precisely the tool that Russia will need the most if the situation in Central Asia worsens and a military solution is required. The dominant role that drones have played in U.S. and NATO conflicts over the past 10 years underscores their importance in modern warfare.

Despite the significant funds that Russia has invested in the development of unmanned aircraft since 2005, defense manufacturers have not been able to produce equipment that meets Defense Ministry demands. As a result, Moscow has turned to Israel as a source of drones.

To be fair, however, even technologically advanced countries such as Britain, France, Germany and Italy buy drone aircraft from the United States and Israel. But the key difference

is that Moscow cannot purchase the most advanced drones because Washington and Tel Aviv will not sell them to Russia.

The drones Moscow managed to procure from Israel are two generations older than those used by the Israeli army and those that are sold to NATO. Israel cannot act autonomously in military technology transfers because it is dependent on the United States. For Moscow, any agreement with such a supplier is risky considering that Russia has political and commercial interests in the Greater Middle East that are in direct opposition to Israel's interests.

Russia must find a solution to its urgent need for drone aircraft. On the surface, the country has the necessary engineering expertise, particularly in aircraft construction and manufacturing, and it also has adequate financial resources. Nonetheless, a country that has successfully developed fifth-generation combat aircraft has still failed for six years to build a decent drone.

A radical shakeup must occur in which new, innovative companies are granted research and development contracts for developing the drone. The obvious place to start is Vega, the leading drone developer that has swallowed 5 billion rubles (\$158.5 million) of government funding with little to offer in return.

It is time to pay closer attention to other high-tech companies that have not been considered leading players in drone aircraft construction. The United States was tremendously successful when the relatively small firm of General Atomics, based in San Diego, became the global leader in drone manufacturing with their highly successful Predator model. General Atomics outperformed the other huge U.S. defense contractors, such as Boeing and Northrup Grumman, in this sector.

Russia, too, has quite a number of innovative companies similar to General Atomics that could one day become a competitive drone manufacturer with the right amount of investment, research and development. These companies are more mobile and flexible than Vega. Most important, they are not corrupted by multibillion-dollar government contracts and years of unaccountability, but are instead accustomed to risking their own money and relying on innovation.

Only these agile and innovative companies can give Russia the military technological breakthroughs it so badly needs.

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