

By a special correspondent

Budgetary considerations alone prevented the UK from fielding more unmanned aircraft, including those capable of firing weapons, MPs were today told.

The Defence Select Committee was taking evidence as part of its inquiry into ISTAR and heard from the following witnesses:

Ministry of Defence (MoD)

- Air Vice-Marshal Simon Bollom, Director General Combat Air
- Air Vice-Marshal Stuart Butler, Capability Manager Information Superiority
- Air Vice-Marshal Chris Nickols CBE, Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Operations)

Opening the session, Conservative MP and Committee Chair James Arbuthnot asked for an overview on ISTAR and how it contributed to network-enabled capability in the context of the overall defence of the country.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler said the concept was all about prioritising the intelligence and surveillance needs of a commander on a battlefield. This included the manner in which a collector gathered such information and exactly what was needed, and disseminating the data to whomever it was who required it.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler told the Committee that data fusion allowed for a much better dynamic of the situation that was taking place in a certain area.

Mr Arbuthnot asked about progress with network capability and how ISTAR was evolving. In some areas it was extremely good, but more challenging in other areas, Air Vice-Marshal Butler stated, pointing to the appointment of a position looking at the networks, information and people. He told the Committee that progress was generally good, with constant assessments of where to best place investment.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler said that unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were balanced in terms of what could be put into the programme at the time, with gaps being filled where needed. The Committee heard that UAVs might act as a key part in filling such gaps.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler spoke of achieving a balance and mentioned that monitoring equipment had been successful in Iraq and Afghanistan. He told the Committee that the Hermes 450 had been initially procured as a stop-gap filler, with the Watchkeeper programme being the follow on from this.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler explained that a need for a deeper surveillance facility had been identified, with Reaper filling this gap. When the Reaper programme was ready, Hermes 450s would be phased out, the witness stated.

On the Desert Hawk side, he said mini-UAVs had been in service for many years.

When asked how effective UAVs had proved to be, Chris Nickols said that Reaper was operating in Afghanistan, adding that such devices, with their ability to loiter over areas for long periods was well-suited to counter-insurgency style operations. On the issue of counter-insurgency, he said the operations need to be intelligence led as insurgents could only be found through intensive surveillance efforts.

Air Vice-Marshall Butler said that more focus on the direct process of collection and dissemination was needed and mentioned a programme in the longer term to improve this.

Mr Arbuthnot asked if the Defence Information Infrastructure (DII) project was mainly aimed at dissemination, which Air Vice-Marshall Butler confirmed, stating it revolved around the provision of effective command, control and information to the battlefield, acting as a secure internet system for the dissemination of data.

Responding to Conservative MP Robert Key, Air Vice-Marshall Butler said that UAVs were operated by the unit judged best able to ensure information was delivered to the ground. He added that Reaper, as it operated at higher altitudes, provided a greater integration problem, making the Air Force better placed for this duty.

Mr Key asked about the loss of information between different services, to which Air Vice-Marshall Butler said that the system was as seamless as was possible in wartime. He told the Committee that data was disseminated direct from the UAV to a small ground terminal, or done (as through Reaper) through the US, from where it was then redirected to front-line personnel.

Mr Key observed that the Government had admitted to the Committee that there was a 48 per cent deficit in the number of unmanned aerial vehicles in service.

Air Vice-Marshall Butler stated that the situation had greatly improved and pointed to a transition period, where hard work was needed to find the right personnel. He stressed the importance of not placing pressure on operational theatres. There had been a training process over time, the Air Vice-Marshall continued, as prior to the current situation UAVs had not always operated in large numbers. He explained that personnel had been recruited from other aircrew types to meet an urgent need in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mr Arbuthnot asked about the Army and the RAF's different approach to the personnel who operated UAVs. In the case of Reaper, Air Vice-Marshall Butler said the strategic impact of the platform and the patterns that were flown dictated that there were officer commanders, whereas the Army had a different approach and operational requirements, using a mix of personnel.

Responding to Labour MP Brian Jenkins, Air Vice-Marshall Butler said there was a deficit of analysts, pointing out difficulties in training and recruitment. He spoke of processes to improve this, telling the Committee of numerous initiatives, including a wider search across the defence establishment to see if current analysts could be redeployed from existing sources.

Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin asked about the issue of identification for UAV operation in warzones, to which Air Vice-Marshal Butler spoke of the Air Tasking Order, explaining that UAVs were tasked as if they are a fixed-winged manned aircraft. The Order allowed other users to know where the platform was at any time and for a certain amount of flexibility. He told the Committee of systems on the UAV to identify where the platform was.

Responding to Mr Jenkin, Air Vice-Marshal Butler said the support provided to the Army was unique to that service, while Reaper was allocated across the theatre to meet the greatest ISTAR, planned on a daily basis to make sure the most important asset was targeted. In terms of equipment procurement programmes, he said there was always a thirst for more and spoke of the balance across the different collectors.

When asked about capability provided by allies other than the US, Air Vice-Marshal Butler told the Committee of a number of forums in which UAV was focused to ensure overlap was avoided, in terms of tasking and commander control.

On the issue of operational sovereignty, Air Vice-Marshal Butler spoke of a dependence on the United States and mentioned the affordability issues of conducting everything 'in house.' He said that the relationship was generally comfortable.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler told the Committee that Britain had the advantage of a wider upgrade programme, being able to buy into US upgrades at a relatively low cost, adding there was an element of dependency, but pointing out that maintenance was carried out domestically for Reaper.

In response to Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock, Air Vice-Marshal Butler said that the UK had complete freedom on where vehicles were deployed, with it being relatively easy to change the task.

In terms of Reaper, the platforms were allocated on a theatre basis, he added, stating that the Afghanistan operation was run by coalition forces. Air Vice-Marshal Nickols said there were no restrictions on the availability of Predator B models, while Air Vice-Marshal Butler said the only restrictions were ones that would be placed on the system anyway. He added there was a debate on weaponised Reaper, with the release of weapon coming from the US base.

In response to Robert Key, Air Vice-Marshal Butler said Watchkeeper brought many of the capabilities of the Hermes 450 but greatly improved upon them, pointing out that it would have an anti-ice system, better rough field landing characteristics and better sensors, all of which were a step forward.

Labour's Linda Gilroy asked about provisions for UAV capability from the sea, to which Air Vice-Marshal Butler said requirements were still under review, adding it was a new concept. He told the Committee that some trials had been run to prove the launch and recovery concept could be mastered.

Linda Gilroy asked if there were any known benefits from operating UAVs as compared to manned aircraft, to which Air Vice-Marshal Butler stated that if it were not for budgetary issues they UAVs would be greater used. The Committee heard a capability investigation on UAVs

was currently being carried out to focus on establishing what the future requirements were. He said autonomy took the pressure off the UAV operator, but in other areas a more dynamic tasking was needed with someone present to direct the platform.

Air Vice-Marshal Butler spoke of a study ranging out to the 2035 era to establish the difference of providing ISTAR and strike capability with manned and unmanned utilities. He expressed the belief there would always be a demand for manned utility.

In response to Labour MP David Crausby, Air Vice-Marshal Butler said the ISTAR capabilities were constantly under review.

Regarding the arming of UAVs, he replied that it was the MoD's stated intent to do so with Reaper, which would generally carry a missile and a small bomb. On the risks of the technology moving too quickly, Air Vice-Marshal Butler said the change in technology of the platform itself was not that rapid, but noted that progress had not yet begun to level out.