# Air Force wants tougher, ''more survivable'' drones

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The U.S. military wants its next-generation RPVs to perform ISR duties (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), while being more survivable in “contested airspace.” At a breakfast with reporters in DC, Lt. Gen. Philip Breedlove (the Air Force’s chief of operations, plans and requirements) noted the MQ-9 Reaper’s shortcomings [1], and stressed the need for tougher, more durable RPVs.

Iraq and Afghanistan can both be classified as low-intensity conflicts; our enemies field neither fighter planes nor sophisticated anti-air defenses. Under no circumstances could either theater be labeled “contested airspace.” For such asymmetrical warfare, our current stable of MQ-1 Predators and MQ-9 Reapers is sufficient. Nor is Breedlove referring to potential conflicts with adversaries like China.

The “middle ground” is what concerns the military. According to Breedlove (and as reported by Defense Tech [2]), The Air Force is already working on capabilities that can go into extremely heavily defended regions, but needs something that can handle less heavily-defended but still dangerous airspace. This isn’t a political blog, but picture an enemy less China, and more “Axis of Evil.”

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 capped the air-supremacy weapon, the F-22, at 187 planes, privileging the more versatile (and some would argue *less capable*) F-35. Defense Secretary Gates also pushed drones for the expected low-intensity conflicts that would characterize future warfare. In such an atmosphere, the F-22 would be superfluous. Many critics (this editor, among them) argue that instead of a “Swiss Army Knife” (i.e. the F-35), specialized solutions are needed. It’s an awful national security risk to assume we’ll never engage in conventional state-on-state warfare.

Meanwhile, the actual next-gen RPV (codename: MQ-X) is still on hold. Referring to a more survivable RPV, Breedlove mentioned that, “We need a capability in that area and I think MQ-X is a good place to have that conversation.”

The Pentagon assumes we won’t need substantial air-to-air capabilities in the near future. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have cut funding for the F-22. But they also feel the current crop of RPV is insufficient for a (higher) low-intensity conflict. With its turboprop engine and cruising speed of 230 MPH, the Reaper *[3]* is dead meat in contested airspace.

It’s an interesting quandary, and perhaps a tacit acknowledgement that the F-35 isn’t the Holy Grail of jet fighters.

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[1] http://www.military.com/news/article/military-wants-more-sophisticated-drones.html
[2] http://defensetech.org/2010/11/04/combatant-commanders-want-tougher-drones/

[3] http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=6405