Commentary

Like most members of Congress, I am a frequent user of the national airspace system, traveling between Washington and my congressional district in Alabama on a near weekly basis. This lifestyle requires trips to multiple airports in some of the busiest, most-restricted airspace in the country. Additionally, the US Army Unmanned Aircraft Systems Center of Excellence at Fort Rucker and the Air Force's Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education at Maxwell-Gunter AFB are in my congressional district. As a result, I am very interested in and concerned about how unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) will affect the areas of safety and mission training.

Airspace regulation is a concern not only for my personal travels but also because of my duties as a member of the House Armed Services Committee. It is particularly pertinent to my assignment to the Terrorism and Unconventional Threats and the Air and Land Forces Subcommittees. Over the last year, I have traveled to Iraq, Pakistan, and twice to Afghanistan on congressional delegations. I have seen firsthand how valuable the entire spectrum of UAS platforms is to intelligence gathering, tactical warning, and taking the war to our enemies. After taking a flight over the Hindu Kush in an Mi-17 "Hip" that looked and felt like it was built in another era—and was older than the two Pakistani pilots flying it—I can certainly understand the value of unmanned aircraft.

Several questions are posed by the increasing proliferation of UAS platforms. How can they be safely integrated into the national airspace system while retaining the operational flexibility and increased training airspace these systems will demand? How might we begin to meet the challenges facing the future of UASs?

While UAS technology is growing at a rapid rate, it is important to remember that this is not a new issue. The first sustained use of unmanned aircraft systems was during the Vietnam War, with over 3,400 reconnaissance sorties flown between 1964 and 1975. Many of the first pictures of SAM sites, North Vietnamese airfields, and Haiphong Harbor were taken by these early systems.

As the technology developed, so did the capability of these systems. What began with a few hundred unmanned aircraft at the beginning of the decade has grown tremendously. We now have thousands of unmanned

aircraft, which are employed on important missions around the world. They provide our Soldiers on the ground with an invaluable tool for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. This information gives the troops a better way to assess their environment and identify impending danger while also providing a certain level of comfort that they will not be surprised.

Unmanned systems have also grown into lethal weapons, giving us the potential to strike our enemies wherever they might be. Our "Hunter-Killer" platforms are responsible for taking down some of the world's most notorious terrorists in some of the least hospitable locations on Earth. Further underscoring their effectiveness, UASs have even been debated by some as a viable alternative to sending more troops into Afghanistan. Clearly, our unmanned systems play an integral part in our operations around the world, and their role only stands to grow.

Growth in UAS operations could be an important factor in our military success, and we should embrace it. However, with such growth comes a certain number of obstacles and problems that may well impede our UAS effectiveness, readiness, and continued leadership in this critical technology. In the immediate future, we have to find ways to streamline the certificate of authorizations (COA) and Federal Aviation Administration waivers that allow UAS platforms to operate in the national airspace system. Currently, the COA process takes too long, even for renewal of an existing authorization. We also need to develop reasonable operational and safety standards. From the FAA's point of view, safety is the number one concern when it comes to unmanned systems flying over our residential areas and highways.

Federal Aviation Administrator Randy Babbitt gave a speech recently that left little doubt about the FAA's position on unmanned aircraft systems. He believes they are not technically mature enough for seamless and routine use in civilian airspace. Administrator Babbitt views "see and avoid" as a primary part of operations. He says the definition of see and avoid for unmanned aircraft systems is "the capability of an unmanned aircraft system to remain well clear from and avoid collisions with other airborne traffic and vice versa." But it is encouraging that the FAA has taken the lead by working with industry partners to study ways to integrate UAS platforms into the national airspace system.

Another imperative will be expanding the training airspace to accommodate exponentially increasing demand. Finding ways to do this without infringing on the legitimate concerns of general aviation users, such as airspace reductions and additional equipment requirements, will require

coordination from that important community. Congress is only beginning to catch up with the rapid developments in the UAS field. My goal is to help nurture UAS progress, not hinder it. This process will logically include discussions with the military, our intelligence agencies, and the FAA. It will also entail congressional hearings so all sides have an opportunity to bring operational and safety concerns to light. But we should not stop there.

I believe Congress has a real opportunity to show leadership on this issue. Too often various federal agencies experience problems when trying to coordinate activities across their respective jurisdictions. In this case Congress can be the honest broker for all parties involved as we meet the challenges associated with UAS expansion.

Though Congress may be late to the game, some action has been taken. Already, an executive committee consisting of the FAA, the Defense Department, Homeland Security, and NASA leaders has been created to address these issues.

Another action Congress can take is to support policies that encourage the FAA, industry, and DoD agencies to work together to develop operational, airworthiness certification, and flight standards for the UAS platforms. There must be a realization from industry that these systems should not be in the marketplace until there is better assurance of safety and control link reliability.

A recent Congressional Research Study noted that the unmanned aircraft accident rate is 100 times that of manned aircraft. Though the accident rate is much too high, there has been marked improvement in the last few years as our Airmen and Soldiers gain experience and these systems mature. The Army has reduced the accident rate of UASs by 50 percent in each of the last two years; likewise for the Air Force. Continued emphasis on safety will help reduce flight limitations and should allow the services to rely more heavily on unmanned aerial vehicles.

Congressional benchmarking could also help improve UAS data-sharing requirements and overall capabilities. Right now there is not a single clearinghouse for operational and safety data reporting. In UAS operations, it is like the Wild West out there, with each service doing its own thing. In the current rush to field capabilities and get these systems from the marketplace to the combat zone, we are not taking the time as a group of users to collect and learn from incident data across the system. A single-service lead-role concept within the DoD as well as within other agencies who wish to operate in the national airspace system would help develop

standards and collect useful information. In the coming months, I will request an Armed Services Committee hearing so this Congress can begin addressing some of these important issues.

Regardless of what happens on the UAS horizon in the near future, one fact is abundantly clear: our ability to successfully and quickly integrate UAS platforms into our civilian airspace will help meet increased training requirements and safety concerns. Ultimately, this will provide UAS platforms greater performance and effectiveness in their primary mission—supporting the war fighter.

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