

New Global Hawk Undercuts Insurgent Advantages

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If you are a paid Taliban operative or an Iraqi insurgent you may think you know how to slip through the mountains or skulk in the desert without U.S. forces noticing. Guess again. There's a little thing invented in America in the 1980s called Ground Moving Target Indicator. It's a radar-based sensor that paints you, your truck and the other two-legged and four-legged movers near you as dots on a map. A bunch of smart Americans at computer terminals can learn an awful lot about you every time you move. They can drench your location with more reconnaissance planes to take your picture up close. They can tell the Marines in the firebase you are heading their way. They can call in an air strike – or they can follow you for days, to wait and see what you do next.

Troops in Afghanistan and Iraq have been relying more and more on moving target indicator data from big planes like the Air Force Joint Surveillance Targeting and Attack Radar (JSTARS) and modified Navy EP-3 Orion patrol planes. Thinking ahead, the Air Force decided it was a good idea to custom-build an advanced moving target indicator sensor to fit its newest model of the high-flying Global Hawk unmanned plane. Global Hawk is a great platform for staring at hotspots in Afghanistan and Iraq. It flies at 65,000 feet, and stays overhead for 20 hours or more on a single mission. Adding the new moving target sensor will make it possible for Global Hawk to provide high fidelity ground moving target indication as well as the focused, imagery snapshots it's already famous for.

But for some reason, Congress is thinking about slashing funding for Global Hawk Block 40 in 2010. On top of that, word has it the Air Force was forced to offer up 14 of 22 planned Global Hawk Block 40s in a Pentagon cost-cutting drill for the 2011 to 2015 budget.

Huh? What about "the wars we are in?" Congress's cut would slow production on Global Hawk even though it is a mature airframe that's flown over 25,000 combat hours since 1991. These planes have a no-kidding war record. They've taken hundreds of thousands of pictures and used heat-seeking sensors to target bad actors and cue Predators, fighters, and bombers to strike. By banding together with JSTARS, Global Hawk with the new moving target indicator sensor can cover many more of the key areas in Afghanistan and Iraq and help protect troops.

Some in Congress want to hold up the Global Hawk planes while the ground moving target indicator sensor goes through its final tests. Unfortunately, that benefits no one. Six of the Block 40 planes are already done. Others are counting on the line. The U.S. Navy, for example, is buying dozens of Global Hawks for its broad area maritime surveillance mission. Slowing the line will just add to their costs. The potential Air Force cut is even more troubling. For the Air Force to put Global Hawk Block 40 on the chopping block shows the budget situation is so desperate that airmen are cutting muscle. And what will they do with the new sensor sized for the slim belly of Global Hawk? Hang it on a prop plane? Global Hawk should be messing with the bad guys, not fighting off the budget bean counters.