



## ANALYSIS

# Maintaining the Relevance of the Future Carrier Air Wing

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On July 16, I had the honor of testifying before the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces on the issue of requirements for the US Navy's Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike (UCLASS) aircraft (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/uclass-the-future-naval-power-projection-10889>). Over the past month, debate within the Department of Defense (DoD) on the future of the UCLASS program has intensified and has now reached a culminating point. This week, senior Pentagon officials will meet to decide whether to proceed with a program focused on developing an aircraft optimized for conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions in low-to-medium threat environments, or to revert to the original intent of the program – producing a carrier-based aircraft capable of conducting both ISR and strike missions in the high threat, anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) environments anticipated for the 2020s (<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/a2-ad-wars-necessity-9524>). In response to my testimony, a congressman posed a question germane to the upcoming DoD deliberations on UCLASS: "Since the Navy and OSD/Joint Staff vetted the UCLASS requirements, has additional information come to light to warrant a change to those requirements at this stage of the acquisition process?"

The short answer is yes.

Countering emerging A2/AD challenges (<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/countering-china%D5s-a2-ad-challenge-9099>) was OSD's motivation for initiating the Navy's Unmanned Combat Air System (UCAS)/UCAS-Demonstration program in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), and for providing an additional \$2 billion for these efforts in the Pentagon's FY11 Program and Budget Review. The need for a longer range, survivable, carrier-based air vehicle for ISR and strike in contested airspace was articulated throughout the 2010 QDR process and affirmed in testimony to Congress on several occasions by senior Navy officials.

The current key performance parameters (KPPs) emerged from a highly contentious—and still unsettled—debate within DoD over the past two years. There are essentially four schools of thought on this issue. One seeks a lower-end, carrier-based unmanned aircraft system (UAS) optimized for counter-terrorism missions as a hedge against the potential loss of land-bases for armed UAVs such as the MQ-1 *Predator* and MQ-9 *Reaper*. A second school believes that the Navy requires additional, carrier-based ISR capability to provide persistent “maritime domain awareness” for carrier strike groups (CSGs). A third school is willing to dilute UCLASS requirements to reduce bureaucratic and cultural resistance within the naval aviation community in order to “get something” onto the carrier deck. A fourth school argues fervently that a stealthy, air-refuelable ISR-strike UAS is needed to maintain the operational relevance of the carrier air wing in the face of emerging A2/AD threats. Importantly, only the latter would offer “pan-conflict spectrum utility,” meaning that it would be equally capable of performing the counter-terrorism, MDA, and counter-A2/AD power projection missions.

What has changed since this debate was first joined is a growing awareness within DoD and the national security community of the increasing scale and scope of the A2/AD challenge (<https://www.usnwc.edu/Lucent/OpenPdf.aspx?id=95>) (<https://www.usnwc.edu/Lucent/OpenPdf.aspx?id=95>), and of the accelerating pace at which it is unfolding. Meanwhile, the once-feared loss of land bases to support counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa has not materialized and there are no signs that it will. While it is difficult to say whether counter-terrorism operations will be as prominent in the mid-2020s when UCLASS is scheduled to field as today, current trends suggest that the US military will retain a wide range of options for basing long-range UAVs such as the extended-range MQ-9 *Reaper* and RQ-4 *Global Hawk*. In contrast, A2/AD threats to the aircraft carrier and its embarked air wing are clearly intensifying (<http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2012/01/outside-in-operating-from-range-to-defeat-irans-anti-access-and-area-denial-threats/>).

Although several countries around the world are fielding A2/AD capabilities, China is, without question, the pacing threat. In its most recent *Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* ([http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_DoD\\_China\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf)), DoD highlights myriad A2/AD threats to the aircraft carrier including air-, sea-, and submarine-launched anti-ship cruise missiles; wake-homing torpedoes from a growing and increasingly capable submarine fleet; and long-range, anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs).

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