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In the skies above Iraq and Afghanistan, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are providing America's military forces with a significant advantage over our terrorist enemies. UAVs are flying more than 30 missions a day in both of these regions, providing video surveillance, fire support and enhanced combat capability to our soldiers and Marines. Most importantly, these assets are saving American lives on the battlefield.

By 2005, the greatest threat to coalition forces in Iraq, as well as the primary source of combat casualties, was Improvised Explosive Devices ---- remotely detonated munitions that allow insurgents to engage targets from a distance. In direct response to this threat, the U.S. Army launched Task Force Odin in 2006 at the insistence of Congress to provide persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance of Iraq's roadways through use of UAVs and several other resources.

Since then, more than 3,000 insurgents have been captured or killed, and coalition deaths attributable to roadside bomb attacks decreased by 85 percent.

Task Force Odin was a success by all measures and further demonstrates the effectiveness of UAVs in today's fight against terrorism. Now that greater attention is shifting to Afghanistan, particularly with the addition of another 20,000 U.S. combat troops, we must learn from our experiences and fully implement a surveillance strategy that effectively mitigates roadside bomb attacks and quickly covers rugged terrain along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

As the core component of persistent surveillance coverage, UAV platforms must be fully integrated into the escalating combat mission in Afghanistan. Department of Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently announced his intention to strengthen surveillance coverage in the region, but doing so will require additional resources. Congress and the Defense Department must make this a priority, as well as developing the UAVs of the future.

Congressional Initiative

Perhaps the most effective UAV platform utilized by the U.S. military today is the Predator series. Its origin can be traced to the Defense Research Projects Agency in the early 1980s. However, it was Congress ---- not the Defense Department ---- that largely influenced and supported the continued development of Predator UAVs and other unmanned aerial assets over the next 20 years.

In 1987, Congress withheld all UAV funding until the Defense Department created a Joint Program Office (JPO) for UAV development. The formation of this particular JPO ---- which consolidated several disparate UAV development programs supported by the Defense Department ---- moved UAVs out of the testing phase and toward production.

UAVs were soon flying over the Balkans and the full potential of these platforms was quickly realized. These operations also prompted the next logical step in development ---- arming these platforms.

In 1996, the House Armed Services Committee supported legislation directing the Defense Department to arm Predator and Hunter UAVs, an initiative that the Defense Department strongly opposed at the time. Despite this initial opposition, the Defense Department has since changed its opinion on arming UAVs and now supports advancing unmanned aerial assets that are capable of carrying additional armament.

Through years of supporting program development and production, Congress consistently advanced UAV technology against bureaucratic interests that would have undoubtedly delayed or limited its progress. That support is what ultimately harnessed the full potential and power of UAV technology, and transformed these platforms into some of our most reliable and effective military assets.

The next generation of UAVs

The arrival of additional combat troops in Afghanistan over the next couple months means that more combat infrastructure will be needed to support their daily operations. Secretary Gates has publicly indicated his support for increasing surveillance and UAV operations in Afghanistan, and it is important that Congress reinforce its commitment to this technology through program funding and oversight.

We must also press forward with the development of the next generation of UAVs, including the Predator C. During my service in the Marine Corps, I engaged targets with the Predator A and B Series, and I recognize the advantages offered by Predator C. This particular series is designed to provide covert capability, carry more munitions, and operate at faster repositioning speeds to improve flexibility and survivability.

Yet, recent reports in the North County Times criticize my support, as well as that of other lawmakers, for improving UAV technology. Let me clarify these reports. My support for this initiative is based on my experience as a Marine officer in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the critical contribution of UAVs to our nation's wartime mission. Additionally, the fact that some of these resources are manufactured in San Diego County is a benefit to our local workforce and economy.

The only benefactors of this technology are the men and women of America's military. They are the ones that rely on the capability of UAVs for protection and mission support. Advancing UAV technology will help maintain their advantage on the battlefield while ensuring our military is prepared to face the threats of the 21st century.

Rep. Duncan D. Hunter is a Republican congressman from El Cajon.