

Editorial

No Drone Zone

The drone-fly is a common hoverfly which mimics the honeybee. It is one of several species of related hoverfly whose larvae are known as ‘rat-tailed maggots’ and live in muddy water. Adults feed on nectar and can be seen throughout the year, emerging from hibernation to feed on ivy flowers on milder winter days.

These are not the drones excluded from flying at RAF Waddington in the English Midlands. Probably, the authorities have in mind the small drone machines which have brought to a halt major commercial airports such as Heathrow and Gatwick. RAF Waddington is home to UK Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) and the main operating base for airborne intelligence aircraft and systems. Air ISTAR is the RAF’s ‘eyes and ears in the sky’, according to the base website. The Air Warfare Centre at Waddington provides mission support to front line commanders. The Air Battlespace Training Centre instructs across land, sea and air, but not space. Approximately 3,500 people work on the base.

The grimly titled *Reaper* is based at Waddington. It is a remotely piloted medium-altitude, long endurance (MALE) aircraft designed for ISTAR and attack. Its US predecessor, *Predator*, fired missiles ‘in anger’ against targets in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC in 2001. In 2004, the RAF was permitted to embed UK personnel in US *Predator* operations. RAF *Reaper* operations in Afghanistan began in 2007, working out of Creech Air Force Base, Nevada. Now, the RAF’s *Reaper* is being replaced by *Protector*, as recounted in this issue of *The Spokesman* in an excerpt from an extensive report entitled *On the Edge: Security, protracted conflicts and the role of drones in Eurasia*, prepared by the Drone Wars group. We focus on Azerbaijan’s recent defeat of Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, assisted by drones and ‘loitering’ munitions. Apparently, drone military technology proliferates widely.

The US evacuation of military personnel from Afghanistan, in accordance with former President Trump's timetable, marks a significant geopolitical development. Ancient Afghanistan was the crossroads of civilisation in Central Asia; it was of pivotal importance in the exchange of goods and ideas from Asia to the Mediterranean, as the British Museum highlighted in a major exhibition in 2011. The geography of Eurasia positions Afghanistan centrally, not least for potential gas pipelines, as Craig Murray, former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, recounts in this issue. (Mr Murray will again be able to share his insights when released from his unnecessary imprisonment for contempt.) China and Russia swiftly recognised the Taliban as Afghanistan's new government, having talked with their representatives prior to the Taliban's open return to Kabul after regaining control of much of the country in 2021.

President Biden asserts that the US 'decision about Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan. It's about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries.' If this should prove to be the case, it would mark a major change. 'Moving on from that mindset and those kind of large-scale troop deployments will make us stronger and more effective and safer at home,' said the President. He has much to address at home. Meanwhile, the US retains extensive 'over-the-horizon' kit, such as drones, for targeted killings of perceived enemies. President Obama authorised thousands more such killings than his predecessor, President George W Bush, and President Trump subsequently continued the strikes. Meanwhile, the CIA maintains its presence in Afghanistan, as Tobias Ellwood MP reminded the Westminster Parliament when it was recalled in August 2021.

Iran shares an extensive border with Afghanistan. It is one of the hazardous routes out of the country for refugees fleeing the Taliban. Recently, there was a change of government in Iran with the election of President Raisi. What will now happen with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to address Iran's nuclear programme (see *Spokesman 143*), negotiated under President Obama and jettisoned by Trump? As Assal Rad recounts in this issue, President Biden has been slow to restore constructive relations with Iran. Now, he has to treat with the new administration there.

Tony Simpson

Saludos!

Our man in Honduras writes:

A fortnight ago *The Spokesman* No.145 arrived, followed last week by Nos.146 and 147. The Honduran Post Office was completely shut down for six months along with everything else, public transport, taxis, schools, colleges, all meetings, alcohol sales banned, and the public only allowed out once a fortnight, dates depending on the last number of your ID card, masks compulsory at all times outside the house. A strict curfew and heavily armed military and police back it up. That couldn't last, especially as so many are dependent on the informal economy and need their daily pittance to survive. So, things have slowly eased off, drunks are once again lying all over the pavements of town and quite often in the road, and the Post Office has opened up, though for months all mail between Honduras and Europe was banned. My brother sent me some PG Tips teabags two to three months ago, as a kind of trial run, and I am still waiting.

Even the police and soldiers have got bored with it all and have gone back to their usual wandering around. But infections are once again going up and a few restrictions have come back in place, mostly involving when you can go to the bank and playing local football matches. I wonder where this is going to go. Presidential elections are coming up in November. Will mass political meetings be allowed as they were in February for the parties' election of candidates, or will elections be postponed and Orlando stay in office because of the pandemic? It is just possible Orlando has outstayed his welcome as his name is soiled with drug racketeering, the gringos might want to find someone with a cleaner image but never fear, there are plenty of other crooks lining up.

Rainy Season here, but it's not raining; it did rain a bit during the Dry Season, and there were no forest fires or airport closures due to the smoke and dust. Strange times, indeed. In the meantime, *Saludos* to all at *The Spokesman* from Honduras.

Nigel Potter