Washington Knocks Down Turkey’s Bayraktar Business

In the US, it has long been understood that the market for services using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has a great potential for development, wide ways of use and areas of application.

The UAV market is expected to reach $50 billion by 2025. According to the CAGR indicator (cumulative annual growth rate), since 2020 it has been 13.8%. In terms of absolute numbers, the volume, even according to rough estimates, will increase from $22.5 billion in 2020 to almost $50 billion in 2025. Moreover, taking into account the tendency of aggravation of various armed conflicts unleashed by Washington onto the world, the United States sees especially great “prospects” in increasing the production and sale of military drones.

In 2015-2016, it was assumed that the United States was the absolute world leader in the development, production and use of military drones. Back in 2020, there were 11 thousand drones in operation in the United States - mainly of the reconnaissance type, but there were also multi-purpose drones (attack vehicles). However, most of the US military drones today are intended for use against countries that do not have air defense system, or for use after the air defense system is suppressed. The development of supersonic drones, which will be better protected from air defense attacks, was discontinued in 2016. But there are developments of a fighter-bomber that can reach speeds up to 0.9 M.
While remaining in a leading position, the United States nevertheless has to admit that there are more active participants in the global market of military UAV manufacturers, which are reducing the gap that existed a few years ago. These are, first of all, China, Turkey, Israel, and Russia. For example, The National Interest called drones Russia’s main weapon during the special operation in Ukraine.

Following the Middle Eastern countries, which are constantly fighting with the help of any weapons they can get their hands on, an increasing number of countries have been trying to acquire unmanned aerial vehicles in recent years. Moreover, after the allegedly “absolute successes of Turkish drones” in Syria, Libya and in military operations in the Caucasus that had been actively advertised by Turkey, as well as a very low price compared to the UAVs of other countries (about $70 million for a six-drone complex), it is Bayrakts that have recently enjoyed especially great popularity. The first foreign buyer of Bayraktar TB2 was Qatar, which in 2018 acquired a six-drone complex, two ground control stations and other related subsystems and equipment. Following Qatar, Ukraine acquired a similar “gentleman’s set” in 2019.

However, in reality, the Syrian and Libyan experience for Bayrakts was not very successful – the losses of drones turned out to be significant, and therefore Turkey was forced to adjust the tactics of using drones. Nevertheless, obviously because of the low price, they began to be bought more and more in various countries, even among NATO members. For example, even the Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak on May 27, 2021 solemnly proclaimed the imminent arrival of Turkish Bayrakts in Polish arsenals.

Under these conditions, the United States, in its usual manner of eliminating unnecessary competitors, has long been working to undermine the prestige of the Turkish UAVs. So, taking into account the fact that the outdated and decommissioned American combat UAV MQ-9 Reaper and the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 are almost completely identical, the United States has launched an active criticism of these drones in the media. In particular, the command of the US Air Force publicly declared the unsuitability and even uselessness of these UAVs for combat operations even against the armies of Iran and North Korea, not to mention the Armed Forces of Russia or the Chinese PLA, arguing that drones of this type can only be used against inferior armies that are unable to build an air defense system of even average quality. This, in particular, was stated a year ago by the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, as well as the General Kenneth Mackenzie, who oversaw US operations in the Middle East.

The American MQ-9 Reaper UAV and the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 differ from each other only in size and minor details: MQ-9 Reaper is noticeably larger and heavier. Whereas the wingspan of the Bayraktar TB2 is 12 meters, the American equivalent has the wingspan of 20 meters. The maximum take-off weight of the Bayraktar TB2 is 650 kg against 4.76 tons of the MQ-9 Reaper. Both can be used as attack drones and as aerial scouts or spotters. The Turkish drone can carry 150 kg of ammunition or outboard equipment on board, and the American drone can carry 1,700 kg. The cruising speed of the MQ-9 Reaper is 313 km/h, while the Bayraktar TB2 has a speed of 130 km/h. At the same time, the American MQ-9 Reaper is superior by an order of magnitude to its Turkish equivalent in terms of protective equipment, having on board a warning system about the irradiation of a drone by enemy radars and an active jamming unit. Despite all this, the command of the US Air Force is already refusing to purchase new UAVs of this type, demanding to create a new generation drone.

Both the American MQ-9 Reaper and the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 were successfully used in the past in military operations against “defenseless prey.” However, when Turkey massively used its drones against the Syrian army in the spring of 2020, the failure of its Bayrakts TB2 became obvious after the Syrian army set up an “umbrella” of air defense using even fairly outdated weapons systems. But that proved enough to neutralize the Turkish air threat. As American military experts explain to buyers of Turkish UAVs, these failures of the Bayraktar TB2 were due to the fact that the Turkish army still does not have full-fledged air defense systems, the air defense of tank and motorized infantry units of the Turkish ground forces is limited to Stinger anti-aircraft missile systems installed on cars and tracked vehicles. Only now in Turkey, the HISAR A+ anti-aircraft missile system has begun to be developed to cover ground troops. In addition, of course, recently Turkey’s air defense has clearly been strengthened by Russia’s S-400.

Washington began to actively use the above disadvantages of Turkish UAVs in luring the customers from Turkey in this market and suggesting replacing Bayraktar TB2 with “more efficient American drones.” In particular, such an “offer” was recently officially published by Breaking Defense based on Turkish buyers in Ukraine and other “US-allied countries.” “It is frustrating to know that the Ukrainians could be even more effective if they were employing American UAVs,” the publication says.
Vladimir Platov, expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.