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The DOA Battlefield: *Autonomous Systems, Doctrinal Inertia, and the Closing Window* for American Defense Reform

A position paper on the obsolescence of legacy platforms, the structural failure of the U.S. innovation pipeline, and a layered, fielded response grounded in distributed autonomous systems.

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The DOA Battlefield: Autonomous Systems, Doctrinal Inertia, and the Closing Window for American Defense Reform

A position paper prepared for senior U.S. military leadership.

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Executive Summary

The U.S. and NATO are fighting the last war on paper while the next war is already airborne, waterborne, and buried in the soil. Autonomous systems — in the air, on the ground, on and under the sea — are no longer a future threat to be shaped by capability-development timelines. They are a present and scaling threat, fielded today by peer adversaries, near-peer competitors, and non-state actors at cost points that make our legacy force structure strategically indefensible.

This paper makes four arguments:

1. **Doctrine is the first casualty of institutional success.** Militaries that win with a given doctrine tend to marry it. Patton, Guderian, and Mitchell each described the next war to leaders who could not hear it. We are now in that same inter-period, and the evidence is in Ukraine, the Red Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Baltic.
2. **Legacy capital-intensive platforms — Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs), manned fighter/bomber aircraft, Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), crewed attack helicopters, and the $100M "loyal wingman" — are dead on arrival in a saturated autonomous threat environment.** The math no longer closes.
3. **The innovation base that could correct this exists in the United States today** — from garage inventors to mid-tier primes — but is locked out by procurement pathways that are arduous at

best and impossible at worst. This is a national security failure at the capital-formation layer, not the technology layer.

4. **There is a layered, fielded, and credible response.** Unmanned United (UU) and similar American firms are building Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR), Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems (C-UAS), area-denial, and autonomous logistics platforms — at an order of magnitude less cost — that map directly to the threats the Department of War (DoW) and NATO now face. The question is whether the institution will adopt them before contact, or after.

The recommendation of this paper is straightforward: open the procurement aperture, compress the time-from-demonstration-to-fielding, reform how risk is priced inside the defense industrial base, and publicly acknowledge that the Drone Dominance initiative, as currently constituted, is catching up to a battlefield that has already moved on.

I. Doctrine Is a Lagging Indicator

There is a recurring pattern throughout the modern history of warfare. A generation of officers learns, practices, and breathes the doctrine that won the last war. It becomes not a framework but an identity. The pattern is visible from the French Maginot Line, to the British reliance on the linear battleship well after the naval aviation revolution, to the U.S. Army's persistence with massed armor after the precision-strike revolution made unmaneuvered armor a thermal signature on a kill list.

The canonical American example is instructive. General George S. Patton, Jr., saw clearly what the post-1945 confrontation with the Soviet Union would become. He understood that armored mobility, combined arms, and aggressive maneuver — refined under combat conditions rather than preserved as a doctrinal artifact — were the decisive tools of the next fight. His contemporaries, most notably Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, were married to the methodical, attritional, lines-on-a-map doctrine that had produced success under very different conditions. Patton's warnings about permitting Soviet expansion into Central Europe, and his willingness to push across lines he had been instructed not to cross, were treated as political indiscretions. He paid the professional price. The historical record has largely vindicated him.

We should be candid: every generation of officers believes it is the one that has finally learned the lesson. Every generation is, in part, wrong. Between 1945 and 2026, U.S. force structure absorbed enormous shifts — the nuclear triad, carrier-based power projection, strategic airlift, the precision-guided munitions revolution, network-centric warfare, stealth, and, most recently, Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2). Each of these represented a real capability jump. But none of them fundamentally displaced the platform architecture around which the U.S. military still organizes itself: the CSG, the MBT, the Armored

Personnel Carrier (APC), the crewed fighter, the crewed attack helicopter, and the manned strategic bomber.

In 2026, that architecture is an ecosystem of extraordinarily expensive, extraordinarily capable, extraordinarily visible, and extraordinarily few platforms. It is the operational embodiment of an industrial-age procurement culture in a post-industrial combat environment. It is Montgomery's set piece, at a budget scale Montgomery could not have imagined, facing a Patton problem that Patton would immediately recognize.

The parallel to the inter-war period — 1919 to 1939 — should be uncomfortable. In that era, Heinz Guderian read J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart, and operationalized combined-arms mechanized maneuver while the French General Staff convinced itself that a fortified line would substitute for maneuver doctrine. Billy Mitchell demonstrated, on the deck of the *Ostfriesland* in 1921, that the battleship — the then-dominant capital platform — was no longer survivable against airpower. He was court-martialed for saying so too loudly.

We are now in an equivalent inter-period, and the institutional temptation to court-martial the Mitchells of 2026 is strong.

II. The Present Threat, Not the Future Threat

Four threat vectors are not emerging. They are here.

1. Massed autonomous swarms

The operational debate is no longer whether swarms work. The debate is only about how large they scale, how cheaply, and how soon they become truly cognitive rather than pre-scripted. Off-the-shelf fixed-wing and multirotor platforms, paired with low-cost inertial navigation, thermal imaging, computer-vision terminal guidance, and mesh networking, already demonstrate:

- Sea-skimming ingress profiles below effective radar horizon,
- Coordinated saturation against point defenses,
- Post-launch re-tasking against emergent targets,
- Terminal homing on thermal and EO/IR signatures without continuous RF control.

Consider the canonical stress case for a CSG: a distributed launch of roughly 5,000 low-signature, EMI-hardened, autonomous unmanned aerial systems (UAS), each carrying a ~150 lb warhead, executing a low-altitude approach at a range of 25 ft above the sea surface, using advanced thermal imaging for terminal lock. Even under optimistic assumptions about layered defense — Rolling Airframe Missile (RAM), Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile (ESSM), Phalanx Close-In Weapon System (CIWS), Standard Missile (SM-

2/6), and embarked carrier air wing Combat Air Patrol (CAP) — the magazine depth of a CSG is finite, interceptor-to-threat cost ratios are inverted, and reaction timelines collapse. If the swarm is 5,000, the CSG is in serious trouble. If the swarm is 25,000, the CSG is gone.

This is not a 2035 thought experiment. Every enabling component — long-endurance one-way attack airframes, low-cost thermal seekers, 3D-printed warhead bodies, inertial/visual navigation without GNSS, and mesh autonomy — is already in field use, in multiple theaters, by both state and non-state actors.

2. GPS- and RF-denied operating zones, at scale

For a decade, U.S. doctrine has treated the Global Positioning System (GPS) as a utility. Adversaries now treat it as a target. Dense Electronic Warfare (EW) environments — directional jammers, GNSS spoofers, cellular and Wi-Fi emitters used as EW bait, and high-power microwave denial systems — are persistent features of the contested environment. Ukraine is already there. The Red Sea is already there. The Strait of Hormuz is already there.

Our current doctrine, our current munitions, and our current Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) architectures are disproportionately GNSS- and RF-link-dependent. That dependence is a doctrinal vulnerability. Autonomy that does not rely on a command link is not a convenience feature in a GPS- and RF-denied environment; it is the baseline.

3. Autonomous ground systems, including smart landmines

Ground autonomy is underestimated in Western doctrine because it contradicts the assumed dominance of air-centric Joint Fires. Adversary development of unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs), tethered and untethered loitering munitions, acoustic- and seismic-triggered autonomous submunitions (functionally: smart mines with visual confirmation), and Combat Engineer-grade autonomous obstacle emplacement is already happening at platoon scale. When these systems network, they produce something more dangerous than a minefield: a persistent, adaptive, distributed denial system capable of re-tasking, target discrimination, and engagement on command from a protected operator.

4. Highly asymmetric warfare

The asymmetric problem is no longer primarily the problem of a $50 roadside explosive defeating a $5M vehicle. It is the problem of a $2,000–$20,000 autonomous platform defeating a $100M+ high-value asset, at scale, across every domain, at a pace that outstrips our acquisition cycle. This is the structural condition under which every defense planning assumption written before 2020 should be re-examined.

III. Why the Legacy Force Is DOA

Let us be precise about what is dead on arrival (DOA), and why.

The Carrier Strike Group. A CSG is a concentrated target with known signatures, a finite interceptor magazine, and a defense architecture optimized against threat volumes an order of magnitude below what is now fielded. Its survivability assumptions rely on layered defense economics that no longer close. Beyond a certain swarm density, mathematical saturation is guaranteed. The CSG's remaining operational utility is against adversaries who cannot field that density. That set is shrinking rapidly.

The manned fighter and the "loyal wingman." The $100M+ 5th/6th-generation manned fighter, paired with a $25–40M Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA) wingman, has been overtaken by two curves: the cost of attritable one-way effectors is falling faster than the cost of crewed or exquisitely engineered uncrewed platforms; and the value of a human in the cockpit in contested EW and hypersonic-threat environments is degrading. The loyal wingman, as currently priced, is an expensive bridge across a closing canyon. Any CCA architecture that does not drive unit cost below $2–5M with mass production at the 10,000+ airframe scale is a solution to the wrong problem.

The Main Battle Tank. The MBT survives in narrow operational niches, principally breaching defended obstacles and conducting shock against unprepared infantry. In a battlefield saturated with top-attack loitering munitions, anti-armor UGVs, and sensor-to-shooter loops measured in seconds, the MBT is a thermal signature with depreciation. The doctrinal question is not whether to retire it, but whether to replace it with distributed autonomous ground effectors.

The crewed attack helicopter. The same analysis applies to rotary-wing close air support. AH-64 class platforms will continue to have value against non-peer threats. Against any opponent capable of fielding man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) networked with even modest ISR, their survivability is marginal, and their unit cost is unjustifiable against cheaper distributed effectors.

The strategic bomber and stealth triad. The nuclear deterrent remains necessary. The conventional role of the manned strategic bomber is narrowing to the specific case of long-range penetrating strike at a cost point that cannot be replicated by autonomous long-range one-way aircraft. That case exists. It is smaller than the procurement plan assumes.

This paper is not a call to cancel legacy programs. It is a call to recognize that they are no longer the decisive instruments of national defense, and to reallocate the budget and doctrinal gravity accordingly.

IV. The Drone Dominance Problem

The current DoW emphasis on “Drone Dominance” is welcome, insofar as it constitutes institutional acknowledgement that the Department is behind. It is also, respectfully, mostly a catch-up exercise. The capabilities being pursued in public-facing drone initiatives are in significant part the capabilities that front-line Ukrainian operators have been fielding, iterating, and improving for three years, built around commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) components, 3D-printed frames, and open-source flight stacks.

That is not a criticism of the operators and program offices executing Drone Dominance. It is a criticism of the institutional posture that allowed the U.S. to arrive at this fight three years late, and that is now in danger of declaring victory over a standard already being obsoleted by the 5,000-airframe swarm problem described above. Dominance is not the deployment of small UAS at squad level. Dominance is the ability to operate — offensively and defensively — through a swarm environment that will reach theater scale within this decade.

V. The Capital-Formation Failure

It is often said that the United States has the most innovative defense industrial base in the world. This is partially true. We have a world-leading innovation *community*. We do not have an innovation *pathway* that converts that community’s output into fielded capability at the pace required.

The failure is not at the invention layer. The failure is structural, at the capital-formation and procurement layer. Thousands of American engineers, veterans, and entrepreneurs are producing genuinely decisive autonomous capabilities — in garages, in small business incubators, in mid-tier defense firms, and in university labs — and the vast majority of them will never reach the force. The reasons are well known and rarely addressed honestly:

- **SBIR/STTR** programs are valuable for early technology maturation, but the “valley of death” between Phase III and Program of Record (POR) adoption remains structurally unbridged.
- **Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs)** are excellent on paper. In practice, access is dominated by incumbents with dedicated business-development infrastructure that garage-scale innovators cannot replicate.
- **Private venture capital** is misaligned with defense acquisition timelines. A 7–10 year procurement cycle is incompatible with a 5–7 year fund life.
- **Export control, ITAR, and compliance overhead** are prohibitive for small firms, effectively restricting high-end autonomous development to companies that can afford a full compliance department.

- **Demonstration-to-fielding** remains the hardest transition in the ecosystem. A working prototype that kills a target on a range in 2024 is often fielded in 2031, if at all.

This is a national security problem, not a business problem. Every adversary has noticed that the United States' main vulnerability in the current moment is not engineering talent. It is institutional permission to field what that talent has already built.

A serious reform agenda would include, at minimum:

1. A standing, merit-based, prize-class acquisition lane for autonomous capability, with public demonstration milestones, fixed-price commitments, and pre-committed transition funding.
2. Radical compression of the time between demonstrated capability and fielded quantity — measured in months, not years.
3. Defense-grade capital vehicles (patient capital, sovereign-backed) matched to acquisition timelines, so that innovative firms are not forced to choose between commercial VC exits and defense fielding.
4. A standing, independent Red Team with the authority to decertify legacy programs that no longer meet credible survivability thresholds against 2026-class threats.
5. Open, protected ranges at which garage-to-prime innovators can test at representative scale, under classified terms, without being crushed by compliance overhead.

These are not radical proposals. They are the minimum viable reforms to a national innovation pipeline whose current output is insufficient.

VI. What a Layered, Credible Response Looks Like

We cannot spend our way back into relevance on the existing platform trajectory. We can, however, layer a credible defense and a credible strike posture using autonomous, attritable, and distributed systems — at one to two orders of magnitude lower unit cost, and at radically faster procurement cadence.

The layered defense problem set is not theoretical. It can be stated in the following terms:

- **Engage the swarm before it is a swarm** (ISR, persistent overwatch, long-range stand-off strike against launch nodes).
- **Engage the swarm at range** (layered C-UAS including directed energy, high-power microwave (HPM), and interceptor effectors).
- **Engage the swarm at the point of effect** (point defense, layered kinetic terminal defense, and — importantly — area-effect kinetic denial capable of stopping saturation without relying on one-to-one interceptor economics).

- **Deny the adversary the approach** (area denial via distributed unmanned systems, both on land and in the littoral/open-ocean domains).
- **Preserve tempo in GNSS- and RF-denied environments** (autonomy that does not require a continuous command link).

Unmanned United was founded to address this problem set head-on. The UU product family is deliberately structured against the threat vectors above, rather than against the platform categories of the past. It is referenced here so that a serious reader may evaluate whether capability like this is within reach of the industrial base today — it is — and whether the institution is prepared to field it.

The Overwatch family

- **Overwatch-Sentinel.** ISR and Search-and-Rescue (SAR) autonomous Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS). Purpose: persistent situational awareness, multi-sensor collection, and recovery operations, with resilient autonomy in contested environments. The ISR baseline for a force that can no longer assume GNSS and satellite connectivity.
- **Overwatch-Atlas.** Heavy-lift autonomous logistics platform in development for release later this year. Purpose: contested-logistics resupply, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) support, and autonomous sustainment in environments where crewed rotary lift is no longer survivable. The honest question for every Theater Logistics Plan should be: in the first 72 hours of a Western Pacific contingency, what survives to move cargo?
- **Overwatch-Vanguard.** Offensive autonomous variant designed for persistent-presence engagement, under consideration for the force application mission set. Purpose: credible offensive mass at unit costs that invert the current adversary economics.

Terminal defense and counter-swarm

- **Stormbreaker.** Counter-UAS terminal defense system. The design logic is explicit and worth restating: against saturating autonomous threats, single-shot one-to-one interceptor economics fail. A credible terminal layer must include area-effect kinetic denial — functionally, a wall of metal produced by large-caliber multi-submunition rounds — layered with directed energy (laser) and HPM effectors. Stormbreaker is engineered around that logic. Think of the problem at naval surface-defense scales: large-caliber (for example, 16-inch class) proximity-fuzed rounds, each dispersing on the order of 200,000 dense metal pellets across the ingress lane, form a volumetric engagement envelope that the individual drone cannot out-maneuver and that the swarm cannot afford to saturate. Pair that with laser terminal kill and HPM volume engagement, and the saturation math finally tips back in the defender’s favor.

Squad-level and dismounted

- **Thor's Hammer.** Throwable AI reconnaissance drone fragmentation grenade, derived from the M67/M111 fragmentation grenade form factors in its stowed configuration, deploying to active flight on release. Purpose: restoring the dismounted squad's ability to see around the corner, over the wall, and into the next room without spending a Soldier or Marine to do so. This is doctrinally important: the next war will punish forces that cannot generate organic, immediate, expendable ISR and Seek & Destroy inside the last 200 meters. Thor's Hammer is designed to make that capability standard issue rather than exquisite.

Area denial — land and maritime

- **NODEFENCE.** Distributed fiber-optic connected, remotely piloted defensive drone network for persistent area denial. Under the NODEFENCE architecture, buried canister nodes containing foldable quadcopter effectors are pre-positioned along defensive perimeters and connected via armored single-mode fiber (Corning SMF-28 class) to Regional Operations Bunkers (ROBs), which aggregate onward to a Central Command bunker and distributed pilot stations at depth. Acoustic and seismic sensors detect ingress; an AI classifier triages; an operator-in-the-loop authorizes engagement under Rules of Engagement (ROE) and Blue Force Tracker deconfliction; the node's drone is spring-ejected, assumes flight under fiber control (effective up to 5 km), and is piloted to visual identification and, if warranted, terminal engagement. The doctrinal advantages are decisive:
    - **Human-in-the-loop by design.** NODEFENCE is not an autonomous weapon within the meaning of DoD Directive 3000.09, nor a mine within the meaning of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Protocol II. All engagements are authorized and executed by a trained operator.
    - **Electromagnetic spectrum-survivable.** Fiber-optic control is immune to RF jamming and GNSS denial.
    - **Operator survivability.** Pilots operate from protected ROBs and Central Command bunkers at 10–30 km depth, eliminating the front-line pilot exposure problem that characterizes current First-Person View (FPV) operations in Ukraine.
    - **Asymmetric cost imposition.** Engineered cost-exchange ratios against adversary clearance and bombardment actions are on the order of 10:1 to 100:1 in the defender's favor. That is the correct direction of the asymmetry for the first time in a decade.
    - **Legal defensibility.** Human visual confirmation via EO/IR feed, Positive Identification (PID) standards, geographic deconfliction via Blue Force Tracker, and Article 36 review pathway are all designed in.

NODEFENCE is architected at deployable scale: roughly $14,867 per node all-in at the 100-node deployment cost point, and under $75,000 total for an MVP three-node demonstration. These are numbers that can actually be programmed against, in the actual budget year, at actual quantities. This is what frontier defense along a 1000mile border looks like.

- **NODEFENCE-Maritime (conceptual extension).** The same distributed-denial principle extends directly to the littoral and open-ocean domains using Unmanned Surface Vessels (USVs) in place of quadcopter effectors. The architecture is identical in concept: tethered or pre-deployed maritime nodes, fiber or directional-acoustic cueing, human-in-the-loop authorization, and distributed engagement. The strategic effect is the same: the approach becomes economically and operationally unattractive for an adversary who must now contest every nautical mile. This is how the U.S. and allied forces restore area denial in the First Island Chain and in the Eastern Mediterranean without attempting to out-build the adversary's numerical fleet.

The direction of travel

Taken together, the portfolio above is an articulation of a thesis, not a product catalog. The thesis is: **American forces can re-establish credible layered defense and credible offensive mass by fielding many, cheaper, smarter, distributed, human-supervised autonomous systems — faster — rather than by fielding fewer, more expensive, more exquisite crewed platforms more slowly.** Every piece of that sentence is doctrinally loaded. All of it is technologically within reach today.

VII. The Subsurface Pivot

One further implication deserves to be named plainly. Surface warfare itself may now be a transitional domain.

If the threat environment described above matures — which is to say, if swarms reach theater scale, if GNSS and RF denial become ambient, and if autonomous ground and surface effectors become cheap and ubiquitous — then the cost of operating any crewed or high-signature platform on the surface of land or ocean may exceed the operational value of doing so. In that world, the CSG is replaced, functionally, by a distributed subsurface capital architecture: autonomous Unmanned Undersea Vehicles (UUVs), Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs), long-endurance underwater sensor networks, pre-positioned subsea munitions, and the nuclear submarine force as the surviving crewed node.

The subsurface domain has three structural advantages against the 2026 threat set: - It is orders of magnitude harder to surveil, at scale, than the surface. - Its kinetic tempo is slower and therefore more defendable against the saturation problem. - Autonomous subsea effectors remain less mature — and therefore more shapeable by U.S. industrial-base investment — than their airborne counterparts.

If the institution is prepared to think fifteen years out rather than five, the correct question is not how to harden the CSG against the swarm. The correct question is what the subsurface-centric capital architecture of the United States Navy looks like in 2040, and what the transition glide path from 2026 to 2040 requires of the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) today. That is a question this paper cannot answer. It is a question this paper insists be asked.

VIII. Recommendations

A concise recommendation set, intended for readers who will translate it into staff action:

1. **Decertify force-structure assumptions that no longer survive red-team scrutiny against 2026 autonomous threats.** Publicly. That includes assumptions embedded in the CSG, the MBT, and the manned fighter/CCA trajectories. Do this inside the institution before an adversary does it for us.
2. **Accelerate the fielding of autonomous, attritable, distributed effectors at every echelon** — squad (Thor's Hammer class), tactical (Sentinel/Atlas class), operational (Vanguard class), strategic (long-range autonomous strike), and defensive (Stormbreaker and NODEFENCE class, plus NODEFENCE-Maritime) — on 12–24-month cadences, not 7–10-year ones.
3. **Open the procurement pipeline to the full American innovation community** via a standing, merit-based, prize-class acquisition lane with fixed-price, time-boxed fielding commitments; by radically reforming SBIR/STTR-to-POR transitions; and by standing up defense-grade patient capital instruments explicitly aligned to DoD timelines.
4. **Treat Electromagnetic Spectrum (EMS) survivability and GNSS independence as mandatory** for every fielded unmanned system. No future system should be accepted whose operational kill chain collapses on first contact with a modern EW environment.
5. **Formally evaluate distributed area-denial concepts, including NODEFENCE-class land systems and USV-based maritime extensions, against existing force-protection and theater-denial mission sets.** This is a Title 10 question. It should be answered under Title 10 authority, not by waiting for an incident to force the answer.
6. **Begin the subsurface pivot planning effort now.** Not as a capstone concept paper. As an FYDP-actionable glide path with named programs, named decrement lines, and named transition timelines.
7. **Fund and empower an independent Red Team with authority** to stress-test doctrine, force structure, and procurement assumptions against live autonomous threats. Treat its findings as directive rather than advisory.

IX. Closing

There is a specific cost to institutional inertia. It is measured, historically, in the lives of the soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Guardians who are ordered into a fight with the wrong tools because the institution could not bring itself to retire the right ones in time. Patton understood this cost. Mitchell understood it. Guderian's opponents understood it only in retrospect. The pattern is so consistent that, at this point, it should be considered a planning factor.

The United States still has the window. The window is narrow, and it is closing. The technology exists. The innovation community exists. The operational concepts exist. Allied interest exists. What is missing is institutional willingness to decide that the next war will not be fought with the last war's platforms, and to open the industrial aperture to the Americans who can build the right ones in time.

Unmanned United is building toward this future — not as the only answer, but as a concrete, fielded, American example of what is actually possible on a 2026 timeline rather than a 2035 timeline. The more serious point is not about any one company's portfolio. It is about whether the United States will choose to be Patton, or Montgomery, in the decade we are already in.

We should choose Patton.

Prepared by Jason Braverman, CEO, Unmanned United Inc. Contact: jason@unmannedunited.com. *Unclassified. This paper references publicly releasable descriptions of Unmanned United product concepts (Overwatch-Sentinel, Overwatch-Atlas, Overwatch-Vanguard, Stormbreaker, Thor's Hammer, NODEFENCE, and the conceptual NODEFENCE-Maritime extension). No classified or export-controlled performance data is included.*

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