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The Drone Debate: How Should Canada's Military Use Unmanned Aircraft?

Canadian Army General Jonathan Vance had a decision to make regarding drones.

The general attended a meeting about unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in early 2016 in which his staff debated whether the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) should acquire such aircraft and, if so, whether they should arm them.¹

The use of drones, aircraft remotely piloted by an operator who can be thousands of miles away, was a highly controversial issue all over the world. Armed drones were even more controversial.

By the end of the first 2016 meeting, Vance and his staff had agreed to meet again on March 7 to finalize a recommendation on drones for Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister. The team's debate at that point had centered on four issues:

1. The physical and mental implications of drones on military personnel, particularly drone pilots.
2. Public perceptions of drones and whether they would affect the CAF's social license.
3. The environmental implications of drone use, particularly given Canada had recently made a priority of reducing carbon emissions.
4. The costs associated with drones compared to manned aircraft.

In the weeks between the meetings, Vance and his team researched drones extensively. The majority of the data available originated from the United Kingdom and United States. However, because the UK and US militaries had different objectives and values than the CAF, Vance knew it was important to interpret the available information carefully.

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