

Small Drones, Big Problems

C-UAS Handbook

July 9, 2026

Overview

Joint Interagency Task Force 401 (JIATF-401) published a practical handbook title “[Small Drones, Big Problem](#)” designed to aid audiences across government, industry, and academia in building a shared understanding of the drone threat and the basic principles of protecting against illicit drones. The handbook is a part of the task force mission to synchronize counter-unmanned aircraft systems efforts across the war department. The purpose of the handbook is to establish a foundational understanding of what drones are, why they matter, and how adversaries are using them. The handbook notes that effective counter-drone operations begin with understanding the threat itself before discussing defenses. The handbook itself is broken down in 7 principles:

- Is It a Bird, Plane, or Drone?
- Four Ps, of Drone Threats
- Five Ds of Protecting Against Drones
- The Five Ds in Practice
- Protecting Against Drones in the New Terrain
- Role of Artificial Intelligence

Is It a Bird, Plane, or Drone?

Drones have transformed the operating environment by making airborne surveillance and attack capabilities accessible to almost anyone, creating a new security challenge across military, government, and critical infrastructure environments:

- Drones are increasingly common, affordable, and capable.
- Distinguishing drones from other aerial objects is the first challenge in C-UAS.
- Adversaries use drones for ISR, attack, disruption, and illicit activities.
- The widespread availability of drones has fundamentally changed the threat environment.
- Understanding the drone threat is the foundation for the Four Ps, Five Ds, and broader counter-drone strategy.

Four Ps of Drone Threats

The JIATF-401 handbook established a simple framework for analyzing any drone threats referred as the “Four Ps”

- **Person:** Who is operating the Drone
- **Platform:** What is the drone being used for?
- **Process:** How is the drone controlled and employed?
- **Payload/Purpose:** What effect is the drone intended to achieve?

Five Ds of Protecting Against Drones

The JIATF-401 handbook builds on the Four Ps by providing a framework for how defenders should respond to a drone threat. The handbook emphasizes working through the Five Ds in sequence with destroying the drone being a last resort rather than the default response:

- **Detect:** Identify and track the drone threat
- **Deny:** Prevent the drone accomplishing its mission
- **Disrupt:** Interfere with the drone's operation
- **Defeat:** Neutralize the drone when necessary
- **Discipline:** Learn, train, and continuously improve defenses

The Five Ds in Practice

A successful C-UAS operation does not necessarily end with a drone being destroyed. The preferred outcome is often to deny or disrupt the threat before a kinetic response is required, reducing risk, cost, and collateral damage while still protecting the target

Protecting Against Drones in the New Terrain

Drone is fundamentally changing the efforts on the battlefield and securing the homeland. Airspace is no longer a separate domain. Airspace is now part of the terrain that commanders and security leaders must continuously consider and defend.

The handbook emphasizes drone defense is no longer just about countering aircraft, it is about adapting to a new operating environment where the airspace around people, facilities, and forces has become part of the terrain that must be actively managed and defended

Role of Artificial Intelligence

The JIATF-401 handbook identifies Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a key enabler of modern counter-UAS operations. Rather than being a standalone solution, AI helps defenders process vast amounts of data, accelerate decision-making, and improve the effectiveness of layered defenses. The role of AI will allow:

- **Faster Detection:** Identifies and track drones across multiple sensors
- **Improvement in Situational Awareness:** Creates a common operating picture from radar, RF, and EO/IR Data
- **Enabling Faster Decision Making:** Accelerate threat assessment and response recommendations
- **Ability to Predict and Adapt:** Recognizes patterns and anticipates adversary behavior
- **Support Layered Defenses:** Connect sensors, command-and-control, and counter-drone effectors

What this Means for Vendors:

The handbook establishes a roadmap to where government C-UAS spending and priorities are heading:

- **Layered Defense Wins:** Agencies will prioritize integrated ecosystems over standalone products.
- **Detection First:** Greater focus on finding, identifying, and tracking drones early.
- **AI Matters:** Demand for sensor fusion, automation, and decision-support tools.
- **Integration is Critical:** Technologies must connect with larger C-UAS architecture.
- **Mission Protection Over Kinetic Effects:** Solutions that deny or disrupt threats may gain favor.
- **Training is a Requirement:** Vendors that combine technology with readiness and training may have an advantage.

Drone vendors should position solutions around how they can support in helping agencies operationalize the "Five Ds" rather than simply selling a product category.