

Russian UAVs Envisioned to Replace Manned Reconnaissance Aviation

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestiya*, a large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily, discusses Russian plans to transition its manned reconnaissance aviation to unmanned systems. According to *Izvestiya*, there are less than 100 Su-24MR reconnaissance aircraft remaining in the Russian inventory. Russia is now considering replacing the Su-24MR, which first entered service in 1975, with the *Altius* and/or *Orion* large UAVs that are in development.

Russian media sources have reported that the *Altius* UAV has a wingspan of 28.5 meters, length of 11.6 meters, 6-ton takeoff weight, operating altitude of 12,000 meters, flight range of up to 10,000 kilometers, and is capable of remaining aloft for up to 48 hours. By comparison, the smaller *Orion* UAV reportedly has a wingspan of 16

meters, length of 8 meters, 1-ton takeoff weight, operating altitude of 7,500 meters, and is also capable of remaining aloft for up to 48 hours. However, according to the accompanying excerpted article from *Voyennoye Obozreniye*, a Russian military affairs website, Russia is a late adopter of the UAV-borne satellite communications technology required to field a large unmanned reconnaissance aviation system that can report data in real time.

Voyennoye Obozreniye states that the *Altius* will be the first domestically built UAV with such a capability. Although Russia has become quite adept at developing and fielding small UAVs, efforts to field the *Altius*, *Orion*, or other larger UAVs may be hindered by Russia's lack of experience with UAV-borne satellite communications.

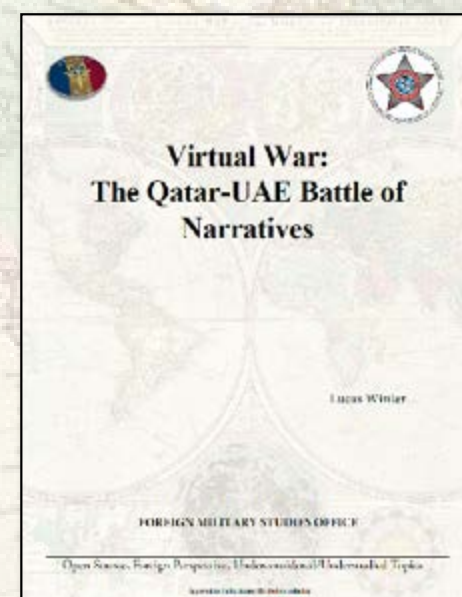
“The Ministry of Defense has decided to gradually transition Aerospace Forces (VKS) reconnaissance squadrons from aircraft to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).”

VIRTUAL WAR: THE QATAR-UAE BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

Lucas Winter

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For much of the past decade, Qatar and the UAE have been engaged in a battle of narratives. Their ongoing dispute dates to 2011 and is rooted in foreign policy and ideological disagreements. Following a hack of the Qatari News Agency in 2017, the nature of Qatari-Emirati competition shifted from being primarily the purview of government officials, spokespeople, journalists, analysts and authors, to one where coders, influencers, trolls and cybersecurity experts played a vital role. Since then, both countries have worked to increase their capabilities in the cyber and informational domains. Their relationship in these domains has evolved into one of strategic competition. This paper looks at how these dynamics may affect the regional operational environment, with a particular focus on the cyber and informational domains.



<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/329799>

Continued: Russian UAVs Envisioned to Replace Manned Reconnaissance Aviation

Source: “Встать в рой: подразделения ВКС переходят на беспилотную разведку (Get into a Swarm: VKS Subunits Are Transitioning to Unmanned Reconnaissance),” *Izvestiya* (large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily newspaper), 12 May 2021. <https://iz.ru/1162513/roman-kretcul-anna-cherepanova/vstat-v-roi-podrazdeleniia-vks-perekhodiya-na-bespilotnuu-razvedku>

The Ministry of Defense has decided to gradually transition Aerospace Forces (VKS) reconnaissance squadrons from aircraft to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Right now, these subunits are equipped with specially modernized Su-24MR aircraft, which were developed based upon the famous Soviet frontal aviation bomber. In the experts’ opinion, the “Orion” UAV and the advanced “Altius” unmanned aerial vehicle, which is capable of flying many thousands of kilometers, will be able to replace the Su-24MR aircraft...Everything depends on how rapidly the latest drones will complete testing and their launch into series production...In the process, the Defense Department does not intend to totally reject manned reconnaissance aircraft. If necessary, Su-34 fighter-bombers, which have been modernized based upon the “Sych” Project, will accomplish these functions, the publication’s sources reported. These aircraft can use standardized suspended reconnaissance pods. There are three of their variants: electro-optical, signals interception, and radar. The aircraft will be able to use this hardware to independently detect ground, naval, and airborne targets in any weather at greater ranges than before. In March, Izvestiya reported that the first modernized models have arrived at Central Military District units.

Today Russia has only one type of reconnaissance aircraft the Su-24MR. They were developed based upon the frontal aviation bomber, which was accepted into the inventory in 1975. These aircraft are equipped with two turbojet engines and with a wing with variable geometry in flight. The crew consists of two men. Despite the aircraft’s considerable age, the Military Department will not rush to decommission it. Several years ago, the aircraft, having successfully proven themselves in Syria, completed modernization and remain in operation.

“Today, there are approximately 12-15 Su-24MR aircraft in the Naval Aviation’s composition and another 60-70 are performing service in VKS units”, Military Historian Dmitriy Boltenkov told Izvestiya. “We don’t have other reconnaissance aircraft right now. The Su-24MRs are far from new aircraft and the question about their replacement with more state-of-the-art aircraft looms large...”

Source: “Разведывательно-ударный беспилотник «Альтиус-У» получил спутниковую связь (Reconnaissance-Fire Strike ‘Altius-U’ UAV has Satellite Communications),” *Voyennoye Obozreniye* (Russian military affairs website), 27 March 2021. <https://topwar.ru/181336-razvedyvatelyno-udarnyj-bespilotnik-altius-u-poluchil-sputnikovuju-svjaz.html>

The Russian Altius pilotless vehicle became the first domestic drone, equipped with a satellite communications terminal. Altius Project Main Designer Ilya Matveyev reported this.

Responding to a journalist’s question on the air on the “Rossiya-24” television channel, Matveyev explained, that the Altius UAV was the first among Russian unmanned vehicles to get a satellite communications terminal developed in Russia, positioned beneath the drone’s forward cowling.

This onboard satellite communications terminal was developed in Russia, and is included for use as part of our onboard equipment. Our unmanned vehicle is the first, in whose equipment such a type of radio communications capabilities was installed – he said.

Previously, it was reported that, thanks to the device installed, the unmanned vehicle can be controlled via satellite, and that makes its usable range almost unlimited...

In February of this year, it became public that the Defense Ministry had ordered an initial batch of “Altius” intelligence collection/strike unmanned vehicles. The delivery time and number of drones in the batch has not been reported.