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Unleashing U.S. Drone Leadership:

A National Framework for BVLOS, Autonomy, and Scalable Aerial Logistics

An Analysis by Darkflite. July 2025

Overview

In this white paper, we lay out how the U.S. can step up and take the lead in drone technology. With a new Executive Order pushing the FAA to make it easier for drones to fly Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS), there's a big opportunity—but also a real risk of falling behind. Right now, the rules are outdated, the approval process is slow, and state and local restrictions create a confusing mess. Meanwhile, countries like China and the EU are already moving fast with national drone corridors and supportive infrastructure. If we don't act quickly and decisively, we risk missing out on the future of drone innovation.

That's why we're recommending a few key moves: create national drone corridors managed by the federal government, make it faster and easier to get flight approvals, invest in things like droneports and charging stations, and build up the U.S. supply chain for drone components. We also need to rethink how the military works with commercial drone companies so new tech can be tested and adopted more easily. With strong coordination between government and industry, the U.S. can still take the lead—but the time to act is now.

Key Challenges

 Outdated and fragmented regulations (Parts 107 & 135)



Recommendations

- Establish Federally Preempted Drone Corridors
 - Create national low-altitude corridors (<400 ft AGL) managed by the FAA to ensure uniform, scalable airspace access
- Standardize BVLOS and Autonomy Approvals
 - Implement tiered, risk-based certifications and privacy safeguards to streamline routine BVLOS and autonomous operations
- Invest in National Drone Infrastructure
 - Fund droneports, charging hubs, digital airspace systems, and shared public-private

Regulatory delays and inconsistent waivers

- Risk of federal-state airspace conflict (e.g., Zoning Act S.1249)
- Global competitors (China, Russia, EU) advancing more rapidly
- Dependence on foreign drone components

- infrastructure
- Secure the U.S. Drone Supply Chain
 - Support domestic manufacturing through tax incentives, component sourcing initiatives, and rare earth element strategy
- Build Agile Dual-Use Acquisition Pathways
 - Modernize defense procurement to accelerate adoption of commercial-grade UAS platforms through rapid prototyping and flexible contracting

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Executive Summary

On June 6, 2025, the White House issued the Executive Order "**Unleashing American Drone Dominance**", directing the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to issue final rules enabling routine Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) drone operations within 240 days. This marks a generational opportunity to unleash the full potential of uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) across critical sectors including commercial logistics, emergency response, infrastructure inspection, and national defense.

The order seeks to correct waiver and exemption-based processes, regulatory fragmentation, and infrastructure gaps that have left the U.S. trailing global competitors. With the FAA preparing to introduce Part 108 while the Congress is considering the proposed Zoning Act (S.1249), now is the time to ensure alignment and clarity. Creating overlapping or inconsistent regulatory frameworks would only introduce friction, slowing innovation and threatening U.S. competitiveness by complicating adoption and delaying commercialization.

This policy shift is not happening in isolation. Significant federal funding is expected to accompany the regulatory overhaul, supporting investments in advanced drone technologies, domestic manufacturing, and state-level deployment programs. In recent years, many drone companies prioritized financial optics over engineering substance, burning through capital without delivering scalable, reliable systems. The shift toward more deliberate, mission-aligned investment offers the U.S. an urgent opportunity not just to lead, but to catch up globally by prioritizing partnerships that design for real-world problems, domestic manufacture at speed, and deliver functional, certifiable technology. This transformation hinges on national coordination and scalable public-private collaboration across commercial, defense, healthcare, and public sectors, spanning jurisdictions and driven by a unified regulatory and funding framework.

To maintain U.S. leadership, the FAA, Congress, and industry must move decisively to build a modern low-altitude airspace framework. This white paper outlines a strategic implementation plan for the Executive Order and offers detailed policy recommendations to ensure success:

- Create federally coordinated drone corridors below 400 feet above ground level (AGL) with clear federal jurisdictional clarity to prevent a patchwork of local restrictions.
- Streamline BVLOS and autonomous flight approvals by establishing standardized safety, privacy, and overflight protocols, including the type certification process for UAS.
- Establish a new agile defense acquisition pathway for dual-use drone technologies, including milestone-based funding and rapid prototyping.
- Invest in and support the installation of national drone infrastructure, including droneports, charging networks, and digital airspace systems.
- Secure the U.S. supply chain through trusted component sourcing and incentives for domestic drone manufacturing.

We urge policymakers to act swiftly and decisively. The window for U.S. drone leadership is open but closing if not addressed appropriately.

Why this matters now

The June 2025 Executive Order on Drone Dominance represents a decisive turning point in U.S. aviation policy. For the first time, the federal government is aligning national airspace strategy, industrial investment, and defense priorities around uncrewed aerial systems. If implemented effectively, this order will unlock the full potential of drone-enabled services across commercial operations, logistics, healthcare, defense, infrastructure, and emergency response.

Yet the U.S. is operating under increasing pressure. China has already scaled drone manufacturing, integrated national drone corridors, and rapidly deployed dual-use platforms. Russia is innovating tactically on the battlefield. The EU is investing in coordinated regulation and infrastructure. In contrast, the U.S. has yet to make meaningful progress, operating under legacy regulations and now entertaining legislation like the Zoning Act, which risks further fragmentation and could cripple efforts to build a unified national framework.

At the center of this challenge is BVLOS flight over populated areas. BVLOS is the essential unlock for commercial viability: without it, drones are restricted to line-of-sight operation in remote areas or complex waiver-based operations that prohibit scalable, economically viable deployment. The Executive Order gives the U.S. a 240-day window to act. That timeline must not be wasted. What's at stake is not just regulatory clarity, but American leadership in the future of uncrewed aviation, autonomy, and logistics.

Background: Current Regulatory Landscape

The U.S. drone regulatory framework is currently governed by FAA Parts 107 and 135, supplemented by a patchwork of waivers, exemptions, and pilot programs. While these rules

allowed the drone industry to emerge, they are not designed for scale, autonomy, or national integration—and they now pose barriers to widespread deployment.

Part 107 governs small UAS operations but imposes major limitations:

- Visual line of sight (VLOS) is required for all operations;
- No flight over people or moving vehicles without waivers;
- Daylight-only operations, unless waived;
- Aircraft must be under 55 lbs and flown below 400 ft AGL;
- Transport of cargo for compensation is prohibited.

Operators must apply for individual waivers from the FAA to conduct BVLOS, night flights, or overflight of people—creating a system that is slow (90 days approval time), can be inconsistent, and often non-transparent.

Part 135, the current framework for crewed air carrier certification such as major airlines, has been repurposed by a handful of companies, such as Alphabet Wing, Amazon, and Zipline, to enable commercial drone delivery. However, the process was not originally designed for uncrewed aircraft and creates a high barrier to entry for the broader industry. Key limitations include:

- Originally developed for crewed aviation, not for autonomous or remotely piloted aircraft;
- Cost- and time-intensive, requiring comprehensive documentation, operational procedures, and audits, for example:
 - Typically coupled with the need for Section 44807 exemptions for aircraft type certification, which impose further requirements, such as compliance with ASTM parachute standards;
 - Environmental assessments are often triggered by BVLOS, infrastructure use, or corridor approvals. These can take many months and impose significant costs, delaying deployment regardless of operator readiness;
- Therefore, the Part 135 route is accessible primarily to well-capitalized firms with dedicated legal and regulatory teams, effectively sidelining the innovation potential of startups and smaller firms critical to a dynamic UAS ecosystem.

Despite FAA authority over national airspace, local governments continue to impose their own drone restrictions, including:

- Bans on drone use in public parks or over city streets;
- Permitting requirements for each flight or operator;
- Vague enforcement standards tied to privacy or "nuisance" laws.

Without federal regulatory consistency and standards, this patchwork undermines scalability and creates a regulatory minefield for operators, developers, and investors alike, ultimately holding back innovation. Without decisive reform under the new Executive Order, the U.S. risks falling further behind global competitors.

What the Executive Order requires

The Executive Order on Unleashing American Drone Dominance outlines a bold, government-wide strategy to accelerate the development and deployment of uncrewed aerial systems in the United States. It includes several landmark directives:

- **Final BVLOS Rulemaking:** The FAA must issue final rules enabling routine BVLOS operations within 240 days, unlocking the economic and operational potential of drones across commercial operations, logistics, emergency response, infrastructure inspection, and national defense.
- Federal Drone Procurement Mandate: All federal agencies are directed to transition to U.S.-manufactured drones, reinforcing national security, reducing foreign reliance, and strengthening the domestic drone industry.
- **Government-Wide Strategy Alignment:** Departments and agencies must coordinate procurement, standards, and drone adoption strategies to ensure scalability, interoperability, and industrial resilience.

This Executive Order represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the FAA to establish a cohesive national framework for low-altitude airspace below 400 feet. However, this effort is at risk, facing threats from conflicting legislation that could fracture national authority and stall progress.

Most notably, The Drone Integration and Zoning Act proposes ceding airspace control up to 2,000 feet to individual states. This bill directly challenges FAA preemption and undermines the very federal coordination the Executive Order calls for. If passed, it would fragment U.S. airspace into a patchwork of conflicting local rules, holding back BVLOS operations, halting unified Uncrewed Traffic Management (UTM) system development, and deterring investment.

While the Executive Order aims to scale American drone infrastructure, S.1249 would bury it under a maze of state-level constraints. At a time when China, Russia, and the EU are moving quickly to unify drone corridors and digitize airspace, the U.S. cannot afford regulatory balkanization.

To meet this moment, the FAA must accelerate Part 108 rulemaking and reaffirm federal supremacy over the national airspace system. Congress must resist short-sighted state-control models that jeopardize a unified, secure, and scalable drone economy.

Finally, the Executive Order sends a clear signal to the private sector: prepare now. Companies must invest in enabling infrastructure - dedicated drone launch and recovery sites, charging networks, digital airspace systems, and collaborate with government to ensure that modernization efforts yield scalable deployment impact. Public-private alignment will be essential if the U.S. is to lead the next era of aerial innovation.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

To fully realize the promise of the Executive Order and reestablish American leadership in the drone economy, the U.S. must act with strategic focus, national coordination, and real urgency. Below are five actionable recommendations to guide federal agencies and legislators toward effective implementation, and long-term impact.

1 - Create Federally Preempted Low-Altitude Drone Corridors

Establishing a national network of federally preempted low-altitude drone corridors below 400 feet AGL is essential to scaling uncrewed aircraft operations across the United States. These corridors must be governed at the federal level to ensure uniform access, consistent safety standards, and seamless interstate operations for certified operators. Federal oversight prevents a patchwork of conflicting state and local restrictions that could limit scalability and create operational uncertainty. At the same time, local and state stakeholders, together with UAS operators, should play an active role in corridor planning, site selection, and refinement over time, helping to tailor routes to community needs, land use considerations, and infrastructure realities. This model enables national coordination with local relevance, balancing scale with responsiveness.

These corridors can be aligned with existing public infrastructure, such as highways, railways, pipelines, canals, and power corridors, to accelerate deployment while minimizing community impact. These routes offer natural, lower-risk pathways that streamline integration and reduce the need for new physical infrastructure.

To ensure full utility, corridors must support safe, standards-based transitions that allow drones to take off, land, and complete missions outside the corridor perimeter. These procedures should be clearly documented and supported by defined operational envelopes and digital compliance protocols, enabling safe and predictable entry and exit from corridor routes. For example, having specific rules for flight path planning outside standard corridors will be essential.

Corridors should be conceived as digitally managed environments, leveraging real-time data, geofencing, telemetry, and dynamic airspace controls. This digital infrastructure allows corridors to evolve over time, adapting to traffic density, safety inputs, and emerging technologies without requiring regulatory overhaul. Seamless integration with UTM systems will enable automated deconfliction and real-time situational awareness. A nationally consistent UTM framework is essential to ensure interoperability, automated deconfliction, and situational awareness across diverse operators and jurisdictions.

Interoperability with the crewed aviation ecosystem is equally critical. Corridors must include clear protocols for coordination with Air Traffic Control (ATC) and established aviation infrastructure, particularly in proximity to airports, heliports, and other sensitive locations. Shared visibility, cooperative tracking, and fail-safe communication layers will ensure that low-altitude drone operations safely coexist with traditional airspace users.

In addition to corridor operations, certain government and emergency response entities should be able to conduct point-to-point drone operations in disaster zones, public emergencies, and time-

critical situations. These operational flexibilities will ensure that emergency medical services, public safety agencies, and national security missions are not delayed by infrastructure constraints, and can deliver life-saving or mission-critical services wherever they are needed most.

2 - Standardize BVLOS and Autonomy Approvals

To scale autonomous and BVLOS drone operations nationwide, the U.S. must implement a streamlined, performance-based regulatory framework that enables routine, economically viable approvals across diverse missions, platforms and operator types.

The FAA should establish a clearly tiered approval pathway aligned to mission complexity and safety risk, with predictable timelines that support commercial viability. Certified aircraft operating within federally designated corridors should be eligible for fast-track approvals, reducing administrative friction and accelerating field deployment.

A national framework must also include clear, consistent rules for overflight of private land, grounded in operational safety, public trust, and privacy protection. This includes standardized guidance on the use of onboard sensors such as cameras, ensuring that data collection is limited to mission-relevant purposes and governed by transparent retention, usage, and sharing policies.

Uncrewed aircraft certification should follow a fit-for-purpose process separate from manned aviation requirements. Review procedures and documentation standards should be clearly defined and supported by digital systems to streamline processing.

The environmental assessment process should be eliminated for low-risk operations or significantly accelerated through time-bound procedures, standardized criteria, and dedicated FAA capacity.

A nationally consistent regulatory structure—integrating risk-based approvals, privacy safeguards, and operational transparency—will enable the safe, scalable deployment of BVLOS and autonomous drones, while earning the confidence of the public and the broader aviation community.

3 - Fund Drone Infrastructure Nationally

To enable the safe and scalable deployment of drone operations across the United States, the federal government must launch a coordinated infrastructure investment initiative. This initiative should support the full spectrum of needs required for routine uncrewed flight, spanning physical infrastructure, digital systems, sensor integration, and operational enablers.

Federal funding should support the development of operational infrastructure, such as droneports, launch and landing pads, or power or charging hubs. These facilities are necessary to sustain regular operations, especially in areas where point-to-point delivery or autonomous missions are expected. In parallel, investments must be made in digital infrastructure such as UTM systems and coordination of such, data transfer and communication networks, and real-time tracking capabilities that enable integration with air traffic control systems. Onboard and ground-based

sensors should be funded and deployed to support cooperative separation, situational awareness, and reliable communication between crewed and uncrewed aircraft.

Incentives should be offered to state and local governments, airports, hospitals, and logistics operators to install and maintain shared-use infrastructure that supports public and commercial drone activity. In high-traffic or sensitive areas, such as highway overpasses, urban corridors, or school zones, physical protective infrastructure may be needed to ensure safe drone passage and reinforce public trust.

Priority should be given to regions where drone logistics can immediately improve access and resilience, including healthcare delivery corridors, rural communities, disaster-prone zones, border regions, and major freight corridors, ports, and logistics hubs critical to national supply chain efficiency. Additionally, selected state-level testbeds should be funded to pilot infrastructure concepts, gather operational data, and inform federal standards and investment strategies.

4 - Secure the U.S. Drone Supply Chain

Securing the drone supply chain is essential to strengthening national resilience, enabling sustained industrial growth, and ensuring operational readiness across both commercial and defense applications. A national supply chain strategy must focus on increasing the availability, security, and domestic production of critical components.

To support the growth of the domestic drone manufacturing base, the federal government should provide targeted tax incentives, low-interest financing, and DoD-backed purchase credits for manufacturers sourcing and assembling drones within the United States. These measures will help offset cost differentials and encourage reshoring of critical elements.

Strategic investments should focus on the domestic production of core components such as battery cells, electric motors, communications systems, chips, microcontrollers, flight controllers, and onboard safety equipment. These parts are foundational to drone performance and reliability, and must be readily available from secure, U.S.-based sources to reduce exposure to foreign dependencies.

Securing access to rare earth elements, especially for use in high-performance motors and sensors, should be treated as a national priority. The U.S. must invest in domestic mining, processing, and recycling capacity to reduce reliance on geopolitical rivals. At the same time, federal funding should support fundamental research initiatives aimed at improving battery cell performance and developing alternatives that reduce or eliminate rare earth dependencies.

The expanded National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Section 848 plays a critical role in this shift. The provision, now reinforced with stricter enforcement, prohibits the use of Chinese and other foreign adversary components in DoD-funded UAS programs. This creates compliance challenges for manufacturers dependent on foreign supply chains, while positioning U.S.-based, compliant producers for significant strategic advantage. Companies meeting these sourcing standards will be prioritized for procurement, ensuring access to DoD and federal opportunities while setting the standard for trusted systems across both public and commercial sectors.

To further strengthen the local drone supply chain, public-private partnerships should co-invest in regional manufacturing hubs, prototyping centers, and trusted design labs focused on drone technologies. Coordinated efforts across the Departments of Defense, Commerce, Transportation, and Energy can streamline certification, accelerate technology transfer, and incentivize broader industrial participation.

To support long-term competitiveness, the supply chain initiative should also include workforce development programs, university partnerships, regional manufacturing support centers and technical education grants to build domestic capability in drone hardware engineering, electronics manufacturing, and avionics integration.

By building a secure, transparent, and resilient supply chain for drone technologies, the U.S. can protect national security interests, enhance innovation leadership, and enable reliable scaling of both commercial and defense drone operations.

5 - Build Agile Dual-Use Acquisition Pathways

The future of American drone innovation lies in dual-use platforms that serve both defense and commercial missions. To unlock this potential at scale, the U.S. must adopt agile acquisition mechanisms that enable rapid commercialization and fielding, remove structural barriers, and incentivize adoption across federal agencies.

Although the DoD's Blue UAS program recently underwent a significant transformation—including the streamlining of approved vendors from fifteen to ten, removing platforms such as Parrot and Inspired Flight, the provisional pathway it introduced remains limited in both scale and accessibility. Under the new dual-track compliance structure, the "Select List" includes platforms that have received a full Authority to Operate (ATO) based on field validation, while the newly established "Cleared List" provides a provisional entry point for NDAA-compliant systems verified through third-party assessments.

While the current framework allows some emerging platforms to demonstrate their capabilities through pilot procurements before full certification, it still presents substantial barriers for systems not already on the approved list, often making it difficult to acquire them or even test them. As a result, defense access to operationally relevant technologies remains constrained, and industrial participation from innovative U.S. manufacturers is discouraged.

To accelerate innovation and enhance defense readiness, the Department of Defense should expand provisional access mechanisms across all services. A simplified path for pilot procurements would reduce acquisition bottlenecks, de-risk early adoption, and allow highpotential commercial platforms to scale into defense use with predictable timelines and clear performance milestones.

Procurement programs should support rapid prototyping, allowing platforms to demonstrate capability and receive incremental support without waiting for full program-of-record status. To drive early adoption, procurement officers and end users must be empowered and incentivized to evaluate and acquire emerging systems. This requires dedicated funding channels for

experimentation, flexible contracting authorities such as OTAs, and performance-based justification frameworks that make it easier to transition from prototype to purchase.

Procurement evaluations should be led by technical experts in uncrewed systems and autonomy, ensuring that acquisition decisions reflect real-world performance, integration readiness, and mission relevance, not just paper-based compliance. Programs like SBIR, DIU solicitations, and DoD OTAs should be aligned with accelerated manufacturing and commercial transition pathways, ensuring promising platforms can quickly move from prototype to production and deployment.

By modernizing incentives, streamlining acquisition tools, and ensuring credible, expert-driven evaluation, the U.S. can unlock a new generation of dual-use drone systems, fielded faster, adopted more widely, and built to advance both national security and commercial competitiveness.

Why Speed is important

Global drone leadership is no longer theoretical, it's a race already underway. While the U.S. remains a leader in core technology and innovation, policy inertia is eroding its competitive edge.

China has moved beyond experimentation and into scaled implementation of drone infrastructure and policy. National drone corridors are operational, UAS are integrated into low-altitude airspace, and military-civil fusion is accelerating dual-use development. Backed by aggressive state subsidies, strategic export support, and regulatory alignment, Chinese drone manufacturers now dominate the global commercial market, exporting to over 100 countries. Reportedly, state-led initiatives enable long-range testing zones up to 600 km with flight ceilings of 4,000 meters, while Al-enabled autonomous drones and swarm capabilities are progressing rapidly.

Russia, meanwhile, has operationalized battlefield drone innovation, deploying loitering munitions, autonomous swarms, and low-cost FPV systems with agility and speed. Its statebacked drone ecosystem aligns defense demand with commercial production, enabling rapid iteration and scalable deployment. Key Russian institutions, such as the National Technology Initiative (NTI) Platform and state-aligned industrial groups, are centrally funded and drive coordinated innovation across military and civilian sectors. These entities support advancements ranging from fiber-optic-controlled FPV drones to national drone corridors and AI-enabled swarming technologies.

The European Union has launched a unified U-Space framework, mandating integration of drones into national airspace with digital infrastructure to enable safe, scalable BVLOS operations. Countries like Germany and France are already deploying certified U-Space corridors, such as Hamburg's port airspace, supporting routine drone flights with real-time traffic management. Backed by national funding, Europe is building interoperable systems for cross-border drone operations. This coordinated rollout gives the EU a regulatory and infrastructure edge.

Implementation Roadmap

To turn strategic intent into operational reality, Congress must act decisively to support the Executive Order's goals and ensure the U.S. regains leadership in drone innovation. Key steps include:

- Enact or fast-track enabling legislation such as Part 108, granting the FAA clear authority to regulate and approve routine BVLOS and autonomous drone operations across commercial and government use cases.
- Provide dedicated federal funding to:
 - Build out critical infrastructure, including droneports, charging hubs, and digital airspace systems.
 - Expand FAA capacity, including staffing, training, and technical resources to accelerate reviews, certification, and environmental assessments.
 - Establish and support a DoD/FAA joint program office, focused on fast-tracking dual-use drone technologies through investment, rapid prototyping, testing, and acquisition pathways.

To meet the mandate of the Executive Order and enable national-scale drone operations, the FAA must:

- Deliver an actionable, performance-based BVLOS rule within 240 days, truly enabling routine operations without case-by-case waivers, while ensuring safety through defined risk thresholds and operational categories.
- Finalize a fit-for-purpose certification framework for autonomous operations and nextgeneration airframes—distinct from manned aviation standards—allowing for rapid validation of safe, scalable UAS designs.

To accelerate national deployment and earn public trust, the drone industry must take proactive steps to support regulatory and operational success:

- Align on shared standards, data sharing protocols, and safe corridor usage, ensuring interoperability, transparency, and accountability across platforms and operators.
- Partner with state and local governments to launch demonstration corridors and real-world deployments, especially in high-impact sectors like medical delivery, infrastructure inspection, and disaster response.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The Executive Order on Unleashing American Drone Dominance marks a pivotal moment in national airspace policy, offering a once-in-a-generation opportunity to modernize regulation, revitalize U.S. manufacturing, and reassert American leadership in advanced aerial systems.

But realizing this vision requires urgency and alignment. The FAA must move swiftly to deliver final BVLOS rules and to implement Part 108 in a manner that creates a scalable, secure, and innovation-friendly regulatory framework. Fragmentation efforts such as S.1249 must be directly

countered to preserve unified airspace governance and prevent a patchwork of state-level drone restrictions that would paralyze industry growth.

Equally critical is a national recommitment to building industrial capacity. The U.S. must accelerate strategic investment in domestic drone manufacturers, not only those optimized for financial optics, but also companies solving real operational problems with technical depth and hardware innovation. Building next-generation drone systems requires significant capital, and public and private funding alike must broaden support beyond a narrow set of venture-backed firms. Sustained funding should focus on scaling production, fostering genuine innovation, and strengthening the U.S. supply chain for critical components like batteries, motors, avionics, and electronics.

As an American OEM, we stand ready to contribute to policy development, providing technical, operational, and manufacturing insights essential to creating realistic and effective national frameworks. Ensuring that regulatory rules reflect on-the-ground realities is crucial to building a drone ecosystem that is not only compliant but globally competitive.

The path ahead demands clarity, coordination, and conviction. With smart rulemaking, strategic investment, and public-private collaboration, the U.S. can transform this executive directive into lasting economic, industrial, and security advantage. Now is the time to act.

About Darkflite

Darkflite Inc. is a U.S.-based aerospace and drone systems innovator developing dual-use aerial platforms for commercial and defense applications. This white paper is intended to inform policymakers, industry partners, and stakeholders on actionable pathways for U.S. drone integration leadership.

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