

TAL SHIAR



DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE REPORT

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Pentagon To Establish Defense Autonomous Warfare Group (DAWG) For U.S. Autonomous Drone Dominance

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The Pentagon's proposed \$55 billion allocation for the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group (DAWG) in the FY2027 budget request marks a dramatic acceleration in the U.S. military's adoption of autonomous systems, evolving the Biden-era Replicator initiative into a centralized effort to achieve "drone dominance" against peer adversaries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This 24,000% funding surge—from \$225.9 million in FY2026—positions DAWG as a pathfinder for rapid testing, integration, and scaling of attritable and collaborative autonomous platforms across air, sea, land, and potentially sub-surface domains. The Pentagon is drawing lessons from Ukraine and other conflicts where low-cost drone swarms have reshaped the battlefield. DAWG emphasizes evaluating off-the-shelf and modified systems, incorporating live operator feedback from special operations forces, and deploying advanced "orchestrator" technologies. This allows commanders to direct swarms via natural-language commands rather than manual programming.

- DAWG has absorbed the Replicator program, which sought to field thousands of low-cost attritable autonomous systems (ADA2) for INDOPACOM scenarios, such as creating "hellscape" swarms to overwhelm adversary defenses. The new focus includes larger, longer-range attack drones and multi-domain operations, with emphasis on rapid procurement over lengthy development. DAWG will act as a "pathfinder" working directly with industry for real-time testing and feedback.



- A key enabler is the \$100 million prize challenge (launched January 2026 with DIU and Navy) for an Autonomous Vehicle Orchestrator—AI software allowing one operator to task swarms using voice, text, or haptic inputs, mimicking command of human units. This addresses command-and-

control bottlenecks in large-scale autonomous operations. DAWG Director, Lt. Gen Frank Donovan has stressed translating commander intent into machine execution without complex menus.

- The funding request, largely through flexible reconciliation authorities (\$53.6B of the total), exceeds the entire Marine Corps budget proposal and signals intent to evolve DAWG toward a potential unified combatant command for uncrewed systems, similar to U.S. Space Command or Cyber Command. It includes investments in counter-drone capabilities to protect U.S. forces.



Key Developments and Implementation Challenges

DAWG builds on Replicator's foundation but shifts toward more mature, battlefield-relevant systems, including collaborative autonomy and protection against adversary drones. It works closely with SOCOM elements for daily testing by operators, accelerating the iterate-test-field cycle. Recent moves, such as SOUTHCOM's establishment of its own Autonomous Warfare Command in coordination with DAWG, indicate broader service and combatant command integration.

- Emphasis remains on "attritable" platforms—inexpensive enough to lose in high-volume operations—while expanding to bigger UAS with greater range and payload. Officials highlight lessons from global conflicts showing the need for mass over exquisite platforms in contested environments. According to reporting, the group is conducting wargames and live exercises focused on Pacific scenarios.
- Orchestrator technology and human-machine teaming are central; the prize challenge seeks vehicle-agnostic solutions scalable to fleet-level operations. This reduces cognitive load on operators and enables effects-based command in complex battlespaces.

- The scale of the request has drawn scrutiny for potential oversight, industrial base strain, and risks of over-reliance on autonomy without adequate safeguards. Proponents argue it is essential to pace China; skeptics note past acquisition hurdles in Replicator. Internal documents suggest long-term transformation into a dedicated command structure.

Conclusion

The proposed FY2027 investment in DAWG marks a pivotal doctrinal and budgetary commitment to autonomous warfare as a core element of U.S. deterrence and combat power projection, particularly against high-end threats in the Indo-Pacific. By prioritizing rapid fielding, operator-driven iteration, and advanced C2 enablers, the initiative seeks to deliver scalable mass and resilience where traditional platforms are vulnerable. While the funding surge provides momentum, realizing "drone dominance" will require sustained congressional support, industrial base expansion, ethical/policy alignment on autonomous systems, and seamless integration across services. Early indicators from testing and parallel commands (e.g., SOUTHCOM) are positive, but execution risks remain high in a contested global environment.



Tal Shiar was founded by Nadeem Iqbal, a national security expert who served over 16 years as an intelligence officer for the Department of Defense from 2006-2022. His career began as a counter-insurgency analyst on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force (2006–2013), followed by 9 years as a military analyst in the Syria Branch (2013–2022). He deployed five times in support of combat operations (3× Afghanistan, 2× Iraq), including two rotations with

Special Operations Forces focused on counter-terrorism missions in the CENTCOM theater. Additional roles included rotations to CIA Headquarters as the military analyst for the DNI Middle East Task Force and served as the Syria Country Director for Office of Secretary of Defense Policy (OSDP). He was recognized with Joint Civilian Commendation/Achievement Medals, the NATO Medal(x3), the Secretary of Defense GWOT Medal, DoD Expeditionary Award and the OSD Excellence Award.