



# Proposal to Create a U.S. Army Drone Corps

June 18, 2024

## Introduction

A provision of the House-passed [H.R. 8070](#), the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025, would establish the “Drone Corps” as a basic branch of the U.S. Army, one responsible for small and medium uncrewed aircraft systems (UAS) and defensive counter-UAS. If the House provision is adopted in law, Congress would be responsible for the oversight and funding of this new branch of the Army. This product provides a background on the Army’s basic branches, as well as a discussion of the proposed legislation and potential considerations for Congress.

## What is a Basic Branch of the Army?

The U.S. Army organizes its members according to their roles and abilities and to authorities prescribed by Congress. Basic branches consist of career fields in the combat, combat support, and services support roles; these include the infantry, aviation, military intelligence, and ordnance branches, among others. Special branches are comprised of personnel with professional qualifications in medicine, law, or religion. The Continental Congress authorized the establishment of five separate departments—later, basic branches—of the Army in June 1775. In time, Congress added new departments like the Signal Corps and Chemical Corps.

The Army Organization Act of 1950 (P.L. 81-581) [consolidated](#) the changes made to the Army prior to and during the Second World War. Under Section 306 of the Act, codified as Title 10, [Section 7063](#) and [Section 7064](#) of the United States Code (U.S.C.), Congress established 12 basic branches and formalized the distinction between basic and special branches. Congress also authorized the Secretary of the Army to assign its members to “such other basic branches as the Secretary considers necessary.”

Since 1950, the Army has used its authority under 10 U.S.C. §7063(a) to establish seven [new basic branches](#), as well as divide artillery into two branches, Air Defense Artillery and Field Artillery, bringing the total to 20 basic branches. The Army last established a new basic branch, the [Cyber Branch](#), in 2014.

Existing authorities notwithstanding, Congress has on at least one other occasion since 1950 sought to establish a basic branch. Under Section 582 of the Fiscal Year 2018 (FY2018) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) ([P.L. 115-91](#)), Congress would have established the Explosive Ordnance

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IN12382

Disposal Corps as a basic branch had the Army not submitted a report to Congress on the matter. In the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283), Congress extended the Army's deadline to submit the report to October 1, 2025.

A military occupational specialty (MOS) signifies the career path of Army enlisted and warrant officer personnel. In most cases, an MOS corresponds to a basic branch. Personnel responsible for operating and maintaining medium and large UAS belong to the MOS 15 series, the Aviation Branch. Army personnel responsible for counter-UAS systems typically belong to the MOS 14 series, the Air Defense Artillery Branch. To date, the Army has not established an MOS for counter-UAS, and Army doctrine [states](#) that countering drones is “not a stand-alone effort or the sole responsibility” of any branch. Neither small drones nor handheld counter-UAS systems are branch- or MOS-specific; instead, the Army treats these systems as individual or crew-served “weapons” much like machine guns.

## Proposed Legislation

Section 924 of [H.R. 8070](#) would amend 10 U.S.C. §7063(a) to establish the Drone Corps as a basic branch of the Army. The House bill would further amend [10 U.S.C. Chapter 707](#) to insert under the heading §7082 a description of the organization and function of the Drone Corps. The proposed Drone Corps would be responsible for overseeing “programs, projects, and activities” involving the Army’s small and medium UAS and counter-UAS systems, as well as for recruiting and training personnel, among other tasks.

The House bill defines small UAS as those with a gross takeoff weight of less than 55 pounds and medium UAS as those weighing between 55 and 1,320 pounds, definitions that correspond to Groups 1-2 and Group 3, respectively, of the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) UAS classification. The House bill does not cover large UAS, those in Groups 4-5, which are currently an Aviation Branch responsibility.

## Discussion

Both the Army’s small and medium UAS and counter-UAS capabilities are in states of transition. The Army’s UAS Project Office is developing requirements for new classes of small drones in Groups 1-2 (see CRS In Focus IF12668, *The U.S. Army’s Small Uncrewed Aircraft Systems*) and for the Future Tactical UAS, a Group 3 system. Meanwhile, under the Force Structure Transformation Initiative, the Army plans to establish new counter-UAS units (see CRS Report R47985, *The 2024 Army Force Structure Transformation Initiative*).

Advocates for the proposed Drone Corps [argue](#) that a new branch would acknowledge the growing prevalence of drones on the modern battlefield and foster specialized training and skills development. Opponents of the proposal, including Under Secretary of the Army Gabe Camarillo, [counter](#) that a new branch is premature, given that the Army is still considering requirements for new small and medium drones and experimenting with how these systems might be effectively employed. In a [statement](#) on June 11, 2024, addressing a draft of H.R. 8070, the Biden Administration said that it “strongly opposes” the establishment of a Drone Corps, arguing that the new branch would create “an unwarranted degree of specialization.”

## Potential Considerations for Congress

In addition to deciding whether or not to establish a Drone Corps as passed by the House, Congress may consider other options, including but not limited to the following:

- Congress could require that the Army study the feasibility, efficacy, and cost of establishing a basic branch for small and medium UAS and counter-UAS.

- Congress could require a study by a non-DOD entity, such as a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC), of the ways in which the Army and Marine Corps organize and train their members responsible for small and medium UAS and counter-UAS.

## Author Information

Daniel M. Gettinger  
Analyst in U.S. Defense Policy

Andrew Feickert  
Specialist in Military Ground Forces

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