

# Australia's SkyGuardian drones shot down by spicy cybers

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Image: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

The Australian government has cancelled the SkyGuardian armed drone program for the Royal Australian Air Force. The funding is being redirected to the [newly-announced REDSPICE](#) cybersecurity and intelligence program.

REDSPICE, the Resilience, Effects, Defence, Space, Intelligence, Cyber and Enablers program, is a flagship component of the federal Budget announced on Tuesday.

The program aims to double the staffing levels of the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) over the next four years, creating some 1,900 new jobs. The total program budget is AU\$9.9 billion over the next decade, boosting both offensive and defensive cyber capabilities.

"This is the biggest ever investment in Australia's cyber preparedness," said Treasurer Josh Frydenberg.

However in Senate Estimates on Friday, defence officials confirmed that little of this is new money.

Of the AU\$9.9 billion total, only AU\$4.2 billion is budgeted to be spent over the four-year forward estimates period through to 2025–2026. And of that amount, only around AU\$588.5 million is new funding.

A big chunk of the existing funding will come from the now-cancelled project AIR 7003, a planned AU\$1.3 billion program to develop an armed remotely piloted aircraft system.

In November 2019, the government had [confirmed](#) that defence's preferred platform was the General Atomics MQ-9B SkyGuardian, a variant of the Predator B drone known in the UK as the Protector.

AIR 7003 had been scheduled for government consideration in the current 2021-22 financial year.

According to *Asia Pacific Defence Reporter*, General Atomics had proposed developing a multi-national service hub in Adelaide.

"The company has probably spent around \$30 million on the project over a decade and is unlikely to recover a single cent," wrote editor Kym Bergmann.

"The scant information available indicates that Defence Minister Peter Dutton has asked the Department to identify projects that need to be cancelled to free up funds to hire more personnel, particularly in support of the cyber security announcement."

According to defence officials, around AU\$10 million had been spent on AIR 7003 before its cancellation.

The remainder of REDSPICE funding comes from other cancelled projects. This includes about AU\$3 billion of "both unapproved and approved" funding which had been allocated to the now-cancelled Attack-class submarines, the SEA 1000 Future Submarine Program, and around AU\$236 million for "an ICT remediation project around modernisation and mobility".

Funds also come from previously planned ASD projects which have now become part of REDSPICE.

Witnesses before Estimates on Friday morning were unable to shed any light on where the name REDSPICE came from.

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