

Taiwan

US to link up with Taiwan and Japan drone fleets to share real-time data

Military co-ordination with Taipei is 'taboo' issue for China, analysts said



The MQ-9 Sea Guardian drone, a maritime variant of the Reaper drone, can find, track and target enemy ships and radars, making it potentially useful in the event of a conflict around Taiwan © US Navy phot/Chief Mass Communication Specialist Shannon Renfroe

Kathrin Hille in Singapore and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 8 HOURS AGO

The US, Taiwan and Japan are to share real-time data from naval reconnaissance drones, according to four people familiar with the project, demonstrating Washington's push to strengthen co-ordination in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

US defence contractor General Atomics is due to deliver four MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones to Taipei beginning in 2025. The maritime variant of the Reaper drone that the US Air Force widely used in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, it can find, track and target enemy ships and radars.

That capability would be crucial in a war over [Taiwan](#), a scenario in which Chinese surface warships and submarines would operate around the island. It could also enhance the ability of Taiwan and its neighbours to gain a full, real-time picture of the People's Liberation Army Navy's movements in peacetime in the first island chain, which extends from Japan to the Philippines.

Four people familiar with [the MQ-9 sale](#) said Washington would allow the aircraft to be integrated into the same system that US forces in the region and the Japanese Self-Defense Force will use.

This would allow the US and its allies and partners to observe the same information gathered simultaneously by the unmanned aerial vehicles — a set-up referred to as a common operational picture.

“We will be taking a practical approach towards ensuring that integration is done as quickly as possible,” said one person briefed on the project.

Including Taiwan in interoperability structures between the US military and its allies is extremely sensitive. Washington ended its mutual defence treaty with Taipei when it switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979. China frequently accuses the US of provoking tensions by interfering in Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory and has threatened to take by force.

“The sharing of data between Japan and Taiwan, between Taiwan and the Philippines, between the US and all three of them, is so crucial, but it’s also one of the big taboos because China will see it as escalatory,” said a senior US military official.

The Pentagon and Taiwan’s presidential office declined to comment. After publication of this article, Taiwan’s defence ministry said it had “not yet been informed of plans to share real-time data from naval reconnaissance drones with the US and Japan”. Japan’s defence ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin called on the US and Japan to “stop creating military tensions and causing trouble for stability in the Taiwan Strait” on Thursday.

“We firmly oppose military contact between Taiwan and countries that have established diplomatic ties with China,” he added.

A military official involved in the planning said Taiwan’s forces would be trained on how to utilise the drone system along with their US and Japanese counterparts.

“The MQ-9 is a relatively new system to this theatre, and we have tried very hard to begin to develop an M-Q9 web of orbits with our partners out here — much like we have in the Middle East, Africa and other places in Europe,” said Lt Gen Steven Rudder, who retired last year as head of US Marine Corps forces in the Indo-Pacific.

Once the Marine Corps receives its first MQ-9s in Hawaii and the US Air Force receives clearance to fly them out of Japan, and Japan’s coast guard and navy start fielding the drones, the allies will “begin to explore how to build a common operational picture,” he added.

Heino Klinck, a former senior Pentagon official for Asian affairs, said linking up intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems offered a clear advantage.

“The ever-increasing aggression and incursion of People’s Liberation Army assets into Taiwanese and Japanese air defence identification zones certainly present a clear argument for enhanced co-operation between the armed forces of the two and other like-minded stakeholders including the US.”

Additional reporting by Maiqi Ding in Beijing and Kana Inagaki in Tokyo

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