

Pakistan to Use China's Technology in Military Drones

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In another sign of the increasingly close relationship between the two nations, Pakistan is to use Chinese technology in its drones.

Pakistan had several requests for drone technology rejected by the United States, and went on to manufacture its own indigenous drones. Those drones have seen combat action in the tribal regions, where Pakistani troops are fighting Islamic militants along the border with Afghanistan, writes Syed Fazl-e-Haider for The National.

Pakistan turns to China for drone tech after U.S. rejection

The first combat mission was flown by the drones last month, killing three important militants in the Shawal Valley of North Waziristan. Far from being defeated by a lack of U.S. cooperation, Pakistan has proven its ability to develop drones armed with precision weapons and high-tech targeting capabilities.

In addition to withholding the technology from a key ally in the war on terror, the U.S. continued to make its own highly-controversial drone strikes on Pakistani territory. These strikes have caused civilian casualties and sparked major opposition in Pakistan, but the U.S. did not hand over control of operations to Pakistan due to worries that sensitive military data might end up in the hands of the militants.

While the U.S. did offer to sell Pakistan a Shadow-200 unmanned surveillance aircraft in 2010, by that stage Islamabad already had the necessary technology to build its own version. Pakistan wanted an armed drone.

Increasingly close relationship between Islamabad and Beijing

The U.S.-Pakistan alliance against terrorists was borne out of necessity rather than a shared interest. As a result, the relationship has been rocky at times, affected by a trust deficit, skepticism and a blame-game between the two sides.

Given U.S. refusal to provide the technology for armed drones, Pakistan was driven into the arms of China. Former Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf confirmed that his administration would seek assistance from China in 2012, railing against the U.S. at the same time.

“Pakistan can benefit from China in defense collaboration, offsetting the undeclared technological apartheid,” he reportedly said.

The fact that Pakistan has developed armed drones is a remarkable achievement. It has since become the second country, after the U.S., to deploy the vehicles in battle.

It must be said that Islamabad did not do so entirely on its own. The aforementioned partnership with China certainly bore fruit, and Beijing has become Islamabad's main supplier of military equipment.

Pakistan continues to improve air force capability

The Chengdu Aircraft Industry Company (CAIC), China's second-largest fighter aircraft production base, cooperated with Pakistan's Aviation Integrated Company to develop the FC-1 fighter jet. The first flight was made in 1997, before delivery to the Pakistani Air Force (PAF) was made in 1999.

Alongside the FC-1, the PAF has a number of Chinese aircraft including F-7PGs and A-5s, in addition to a number of U.S.-built F-16s and French Mirage jets. Pakistan has also been offered CH-3 and CH-4 armed drones from China, the first of which can carry two laser-guided weapons, while the latter has space for four.

While it is a huge achievement to have built armed drones, it must be said that Pakistani drones are limited in terms of payload and range when compared to their U.S. counterparts. Pakistan's largest drone, the Shahpar, has a wingspan of 7 meters, a payload capacity of 50-kilograms, and a range of 250 kilometers.

In contrast, the U.S. Reaper drone is 3 times the size and can fly 1,850 kilometers without landing. However Pakistan continues to develop advanced drones such as the Burraq, which is equipped with laser-guided missiles.

Public opinion backs the use of Pakistani-built drones

Pakistan's drone program has dramatically improved Islamabad's combat capability, especially against militants who hide in hard-to-reach areas. What is more, the program has been well received by the public as an attempt by a sovereign nation to regain control over its territory.

Public sentiment towards the use of indigenous drones is markedly different to that of U.S. drones. The deaths of civilians at the hands of a foreign power sparked waves of criticism, as did the feeling that Pakistan was having its rights as a sovereign nation violated by the strikes.

With the increasing support of China, it looks as though Pakistan is intent on developing its military capabilities in order to take charge of its own security. In addition to the drone program, Pakistan recently agreed to buy 8 submarines from China, and the two nations are cooperating on a \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Pakistan has pivoted away from its uneasy alliance with the U.S. in favor of deeper cooperation with China, and so far it is reaping the benefits.

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