

China's UAVs Proliferate in Middle East

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CASC's CH-4, pictured in development, has been noted in the colors of Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Chinese gains could make it difficult for the U.S. to break back into Middle East UAV market. Reluctance on the part of the U.S. to deliver armed unmanned air systems (UAS) to some of its key allies in the Middle East has resulted in a significant win for China. Chinese UAS manufacturers have been rewarded handsomely with major contracts from several Middle East and Central Asian governments. And China's successes in those geographic areas have prompted it to explore other markets further afield.

In April, Avic demonstrated a model of its Wing Loong II, an MQ-9 Reaper-size air system at an exhibition in Mexico—right in the U.S.'s backyard. In June, it debuted at the Paris Air Show, displayed with an array of Chinese-produced weaponry.

It is hard to determine the actual number of Chinese-made armed UAVs now in service with countries in the Middle East, but the platforms are operational with the air forces of Iraq, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and reports suggest they have found their way into Egypt and Jordan as well.

Some of these countries have also used them in combat. Saudi Arabia has employed the systems during the air campaign over Yemen, while Iraq has flown them in its ongoing campaign against the Islamic State group.

The UAE has gone further and deployed several to Libya's Marj District to support the Libyan National Army against Islamic fighters there.

All these nations had requested to purchase armed versions of the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper, but were denied by the Obama administration due to concerns that selling into the region would break the international Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) rules, which attempt to prevent proliferation of technologies that enable the creation of delivery systems for nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

The UAE was granted permission to purchase unarmed exportable versions of the Predator, known as the Predator XP.

Beijing's success in the region revolves around two almost identical air systems, both virtual copies of the MQ-1 Predator. These are the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp. (CASC) CH-4, known as Rainbow, and the Chengdu or Avic Wing Loong I, designated GJ-1 in the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force service. One analysis puts the price of a CH-4 system at one-fifth that of an MQ-1.

In October, it emerged that the Trump administration had begun exploring the loosening of the MTCR and other arms protocols in order to facilitate the export of U.S.-manufactured UAS, but China's stranglehold could be difficult to break.

In March, it was announced that CASC could open a factory to build as many as 300 CH-4 systems for the Saudi armed forces over the coming years.