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U.S. Navy Drones: Coming To A Carrier Near China?

5/16/2011

The U.S. is developing aircraft carrier-based drones that could provide a crucial edge as it tries to counter China's military rise.

American officials have been tightlipped about where the unmanned armed planes might be used, but a top Navy officer has told The Associated Press that some would likely be deployed in Asia.

"They will play an integral role in our future operations in this region," predicted Vice Adm. Scott Van Buskirk, commander of the U.S. 7th Fleet, which covers most of the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Land-based drones are in wide use in the war in Afghanistan, but sea-based versions will take several more years to develop. Northrop Grumman conducted a first-ever test flight – still on land – earlier this year.

Van Buskirk didn't mention China specifically, but military analysts agree the drones could offset some of China's recent advances, notably its work on a "carrier-killer" missile.

"Chinese military modernization is the major long-term threat that the U.S. must prepare for in the Asia-Pacific region, and robotic vehicles – aerial and subsurface – are increasingly critical to countering that potential threat," said Patrick Cronin, a senior analyst with the Washington-based Center for New American Security.

China is decades away from building a military as strong as America's, but it is developing air, naval and missile capabilities that could challenge U.S. supremacy in the Pacific – and with it, America's ability to protect important shipping lanes and allies such as Japan and South Korea.

China maintains it does not have offensive intentions and is only protecting its own interests: The shipping lanes are also vital to China's export-dependent economy. There are potential flash points, though, notably Taiwan and clusters of tiny islands that both China and other Asian nations claim as their territory.

The U.S. Navy's pursuit of drones is a recognition of the need for new weapons and strategies to deal not only with China but a changing military landscape generally.