



Defence Revolution: MQ-9 Reaper Drones Propel India's Capabilities and Forge Global Alliances



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Introduction

India's Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) has recently granted approval for the procurement of 30 MQ-9 Reaper (Predator B) drones¹ from the United States, marking a momentous milestone in India's defence landscape. Among these drones, 15 will be allocated to the Indian Navy, which has been leasing an earlier version of the drone for the past few years. The timing of this decision, coinciding with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's forthcoming state visit to the United States, further emphasizes its significance in strengthening India's defence capabilities. The acquisition of these advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has the potential to revolutionise India's surveillance operations and enhance its national defence framework. Additionally, it highlights the strategic partnership between India and the United States, showcasing India's commitment to bolstering its defence infrastructure. This DAC approval, led by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, sets the stage for subsequent deliberations by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). As high-value acquisitions require final approval from the CCS, this decision underscores the government's unwavering dedication to advancing India's defence capabilities and safeguarding national interests.

With the acquisition of Predator drones, the Indian Navy reinforces its dedication to enhancing India's maritime surveillance capabilities. Procuring 15 drones for the Navy demonstrates India's intent to bolster its surveillance capabilities, particularly within its area of responsibility in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This strategic move aligns with India's broader objectives of safeguarding its maritime interests and maintaining a strong presence in the IOR. Expanding the

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UAV fleet strengthens India's ability to monitor activities, deter potential threats, and safeguard its extensive coastline.

Figure 1: US Air Force MQ-9 Reaper armed with bombs and air-to-ground missiles



Source: "Plan to Buy Predator Drones Put on Hold," *Hindustan Times*, February 23, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/plan-to-buy-predator-drones-put-on-hold-101645565612604.html>. Accessed on June 21, 2023.

Versatility and Power of MQ-9 Reaper Drones in India's Defence Arsenal

The Predator B drones exhibit remarkable capabilities, serving diverse functions and incorporating advanced features. Boasting an operational ceiling reaching 50,000 feet and an endurance exceeding 27 hours, these unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) excel in conducting extended surveillance missions². Equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and payloads, they acquire real-time intelligence and execute precise targeting operations. Additionally, the Predator B drones possess the capacity to carry and deploy air-to-ground missiles, thereby providing a formidable offensive capability. Their adaptability enables them to effectively monitor expansive areas, identify potential threats, and support intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) tasks. Moreover, their integration into India's defence arsenal heightens situational awareness, facilitates the response to emerging security challenges, and bolsters the nation's overall defence posture.

The acquisition of the Predator B drones highlights the pressing need to address India's evolving security concerns, particularly in the face of regional threats. While the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) is actively engaged in developing an indigenous armed

drone, the complexity and urgency of the situation necessitated the direct procurement of the Predator-B drones. Opting for the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) route, the Indian government ensures a streamlined acquisition process, upholding transparency and integrity in defence deals. The advanced capabilities of these drones, such as precision targeting, air-to-ground missiles, and surveillance payloads, significantly bolster India's capacity to counter emerging security challenges effectively. Moreover, the deployment of Predators would greatly enhance national ISR missions, ultimately benefiting the region by enabling tracking and monitoring of activities like illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, marine pollution, narcotics and terrorism traffic, sanctions enforcement, and safeguarding the sea lines of communication with heightened safety and security. Presently, ISR of the Sino-India border in high-altitude areas of Ladakh is being done by Heron and Searcher drones. Due to their limited power, endurance, and height ceiling, the continuous and effective monitoring of the Sino-India border is a challenge. The acquisition of the MQ-9 Reaper would eliminate this chink.

A Hunter-Killer

While it is widely acknowledged that targeted killing raises ethical concerns, the MQ-9 Reaper drones have been specially designed for a 'hunter-killer' role rather than just for ISR. The advanced features of the MQ-9 Reaper, including its long endurance, high-altitude capability, and precision targeting systems, have made it an effective tool in combating specific threats. The lethality of these drones stems from their payload of Hellfire air-to-ground missile (AGM), which is often a warhead-less missile (to reduce collateral damage) especially developed for precision³ drone strikes against high-value targets.

The key principles of the laws of war are necessity, distinction, and proportionality in the use of force. Drone attacks and targeted killings serve these principles better than any use of force that can be imagined.

— Richard Pildes

The instances of the elimination of high-profile terrorist leaders and individuals involved in insurgent activities by MQ-9 Reaper drones have been widely documented. It would be pertinent to mention some historical instances of the MQ-9 Reaper drones employed for such purposes. A prime illustrative example of its hunter-killer capability was the elimination of British-born ISIS terrorist Jihadi John in 2015⁴ by the US Air Force. In January 2020, MQ-9 Reaper was again in action, killing Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Quds Force. Soleimani was killed in a Hellfire missile strike fired by MQ-9 Reaper drones at Baghdad International Airport.⁵ These drones have

also been utilised in the past for targeted killing operations by the United States in regions like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.

In extraterritorial lethal counter-terrorism operations, including in the context of asymmetrical armed conflict, it is often alleged that the increasing use of remotely piloted aircraft, or drones, in the past has caused a disproportionate number of civilian casualties. However, the MQ-9 Reaper drone has earned distinction for minimising collateral damage.

The Indian Air Force and Indian Navy already have a complement of Hellfire missiles. This acquisition of MQ-9 Reapers would arm India with the capability to strike hard at our asymmetric adversaries. The tactical military capability of the US, demonstrated by many successful remotely piloted air strikes, had enabled the US to pursue a very effective anti-terror strategy against non-state actors holed up in adversarial states. However, engaging in a nuanced discussion about the legal, moral, and accountability dimensions surrounding the targeted killings is crucial to ensure that the use of these drones aligns with international humanitarian standards and respects the principles of human rights and due process.

Fostering Global Partnerships

The approval granted by the DAC for the acquisition of the Predator B drones, preceding Prime Minister Modi's state visit to the United States, holds significant implications. This visit marks Prime Minister Modi's inaugural meeting with the present administration during his nine-year tenure, underscoring the importance of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

The acquisition of the MQ-9 Reaper drones signifies a significant achievement for India's defence capabilities and paves the way for future defence agreements. The strategic partnership between India and the United States has experienced remarkable growth, with defence cooperation serving as a crucial foundation. The procurement of advanced UAVs, including the Predator drones, further strengthens this partnership, fostering avenues for information-sharing, interoperability, and joint exercises. This milestone establishes a precedent for future collaboration and the exchange of defence technologies between the two nations. As India continues to prioritise defence modernisation and self-reliance, it is evident that such acquisitions will play a pivotal role in bolstering its defence capabilities and fostering international partnerships.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

- ¹ Anisha Dutta, "Officials Targeted in New Phishing Bid via Govt IDs," Hindustan Times, January 18, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/officials-targeted-in-new-phishing-bid-via-govt-ids-101614282608264.html>. Accessed on 25 Jun 23.
- ² General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, "MQ-9A Reaper (Predator B)," General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc, <https://www.ga-asi.com/remotely-piloted-aircraft/mq-9a>. Accessed on 26 Jun 2023
- ³ "Ayman Al-Zawahiri: Taking down a Terrorist," The Times of India, August 3, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/ayman-al-zawahiri-taking-down-a-terrorist/articleshow/93310613.cms>. Accessed on 19 Jun 2023.
- ⁴ Ben Quinn, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Alice Ross, "Mohammed Emwazi Killed in Raqqa Strike, Says Rights Group," *The Guardian*, November 13, 2015, sec. UK news, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/13/jihadi-john-definitely-killed-syria-raqqa-dead.0> Accessed on 19 Jun 2023.
- ⁵ Russ Read, "World's Most Feared Drone: CIA's MQ-9 Reaper Killed Soleimani," Washington Examiner, January 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/worlds-most-feared-drone-cias-mq-9-reaper-killed-soleimani>. Accessed on 19 Jun 2023.