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WORLD

Russian Jets Confront U.S. Drones Over Syria

Russian fighters drop flares in actions the U.S. describes as 'unsafe and unprofessional'

By [Michael R. Gordon](#) [Follow](#)

Updated July 6, 2023 6:52 pm ET

Russian aircraft harassed U.S. drones over Syria this week, the latest in a series of Russian actions that an American commander called reckless and unprofessional.

Three U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drones were carrying out a mission against Islamic State targets when three Russian Su-35 fighters began to harass the unpiloted aircraft, Lt. Gen. Alexis Grynkewich, the top U.S. Air Force commander in the Middle East, said in a statement Wednesday night.

The Russian planes dropped flares in front of the drones, according to the statement and video that the U.S. military made public.

One Russian pilot also flew in front of a U.S. drone and fired the plane's afterburner, an action that military aircraft take to increase thrust, that Gen. Grynkewich said made it harder for the U.S. to operate the drone.

The harassment was repeated Thursday when Russian aircraft again flew close to U.S. drones and released flares, Gen. Grynkewich said. A Russian plane also maneuvered close to two French military aircraft, forcing the French pilots to maneuver to avoid an accident, the French military said.

The confrontations follow a similar incident over the Black Sea in March in which a Russian Su-27 jet fighter struck an American MQ-9 surveillance drone, which later crashed into the waters below.

U.S. and Russian warplanes have never come to blows in the Middle East, but there have been a number of close calls over Syria and over the Mediterranean Sea, which have raised the risk of an inadvertent clash.

“We urge Russian forces in Syria to cease this reckless behavior,” Gen. Grynkewich said, “so we can resume our focus on the enduring defeat of ISIS.”

Russia blamed Washington. Rear Adm. Oleg Gurinov, a Russian military official in Syria, said that the U.S. drones had flown into an area that was being used for joint Russian and Syrian military drills that began on Wednesday in northern Syria.

“The Russian side bears no responsibility for the safety of flight of unmanned aerial vehicles, which were not agreed with the Russian side,” he said, according to Russian state news agency, TASS.

Neither side provided the precise coordinates where the aircraft confrontation occurred in the skies over Syria.

The U.S. has about 900 troops in Syria that are helping local partners, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, fight the remnants of Islamic State.

Russia sent military forces to Syria in 2015 to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the fight against the Syrian opposition.

U.S. and Russian military commanders later established a “deconfliction” channel to avoid an unintended clash.

U.S. officials have said over the past year, however, that Russian aircraft in Syria have become more aggressive as the tensions between Washington and Moscow have escalated following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In November, a Russian surface-to-air missile fired at a U.S. drone over Syria but didn’t down the aircraft, the U.S. Central Command has said. There have been other episodes in which Russian planes, armed with air-to-air munitions and bombs, have flown into airspace used by the U.S. military in northeast Syria.

In February 2022, Russian and U.S. planes flew dangerously close when a Russian Su-35 fighter flew within 5 feet of a U.S. Navy P-8 surveillance plane over the Mediterranean Sea.

In June, U.S. F-22 “stealth” jet fighters were deployed to the Middle East. The U.S. had sought to shift advanced planes to the Pacific and Europe, and instead sent F-22s to the region from Europe in response to the aggressive Russian aircraft maneuvers in Syria.

Write to Michael R. Gordon at michael.gordon@wsj.com

Appeared in the July 7, 2023, print edition as ‘Russian Jets Confront U.S. Drones Over Syria’.