

Suspected NKorean drones crude, reflect new threat

April 4 2014, by Hyung-Jin Kim



In this file photo provided on Wednesday, April 2, 2014 by the South Korea Defense Ministry, an unmanned drone which was found last week in Paju, a South Korean city near the land border with North Korea. South Korean experts say two small drones believed to have been flown across the border by the North amid rising military tensions were crude and decidedly low-tech - with cameras available on the Internet for hundreds of dollars - but underscore a potential new threat that must be taken seriously. (AP Photo/South Korea Defense Ministry, File)

South Korean experts say two small drones believed to have been flown across the border by the North were crude and decidedly low-tech—equipped with cameras available on the Internet for hundreds of dollars—but underscore a potential new threat that must be taken seriously.

North Korea has recently been touting its drone program, a relatively new addition to its arsenal. It has prominently displayed large drone-like aircraft in military parades. According to the North's state-run media, leader Kim Jong Un watched a drone attack drill on a simulated South Korean target last year.

If the South Korean claims that the drones were from the North on military surveillance missions are true, they would be the first solid, public evidence that North Korea is using its drones to infiltrate South Korean airspace, including the skies over the capital Seoul and its surroundings.

The captured drones were basic, at best.

One crashed in Paju, a city near the border with North Korea, on March 24. The other crashed Monday on the island of Baengnyeong. South Korean defense officials say they are rudimentary, equipped with Japanese-made cameras capable of taking only still photos that cannot be transmitted in real time but must instead be retrieved.

The Paju drone was equipped with a Canon camera and the other one carried a Nikon camera. Defense Ministry spokesman Kim Min-seok said the Canon camera can be bought for about 1 million won, or about \$950, on the Internet.



In this March 31, 2014 file photo released by the South Korea Defense Ministry Wednesday, April 2, 2014, an unmanned drone lies on the ground damaged on Baengnyeong Island, South Korea, near the West Sea border with North Korea when the two Koreas fired hundreds of artillery shells into each other's waters. South Korean experts say two small drones believed to have been flown across the border by the North amid rising military tensions were crude and decidedly low-tech - with cameras available on the Internet for hundreds of dollars - but underscore a potential new threat that must be taken seriously. (AP Photo/South Korea Defense Ministry, File)

Both drones were painted sky blue, probably cost only a few thousand dollars to build and were 140 centimeters (55 inches) and 180 centimeters (71 inches) long—giving them the appearance of the large model planes associated more with hobbyists than militaries.

Kim, in a briefing Thursday, said lettering on the battery of the drone

found at Paju and other forensic evidence suggest it was of North Korean origin. He said it had enough fuel to return to North Korea. Defense officials say it took 193 photos of South Korea's presidential residence and other areas in Seoul and Paju but refused to disclose which other specific sites.

The second drone took photos of two front-line islands—Socheong and Daechong—near the disputed western sea boundary with North Korea.

Kim said the first drone probably crashed due to an engine problem and the second ran out of fuel. They evaded detection because they are so small and made of polycarbonate.

North Korea's state media hasn't made any comments on the drones.

While the capture of the two surveillance drones appears to offer a rare glimpse into the North's technology, analysts stress they do not necessarily represent the best unmanned aerial vehicles the North can field. They also note the captured drones are a far cry from the U.S.-made Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle, which South Korea plans to introduce to its military in the near future, at about \$208 million a pop.

Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told parliament Friday that North Korea has been developing unmanned drones since the 1990s. He said ministry officials are urgently working out measures to cope with North Korean drone threats as it's possible for the North to acquire a technology to develop small unmanned aircraft with self-destructive capabilities in the future.

The claim that the drones were flown by the North was announced earlier this week just after North and South artillery batteries fired barrages into each other's territorial waters in a tense but in the end

harmless game of military tit-for-tat.

"Our government and military were not aware of the flight of the drone even when it was on a potentially dangerous mission," the mass-circulation JoongAng Ilbo said in an editorial. "The drones' technology is not so impressive, but it could be used for terror if improved—either for a kamikaze attack or an attack with biological or chemical weapons."

Some experts say that's an overreaction.

"They can carry at most a hand grenade," said Lee Hee Woo, a retired air force general who heads the Integrated Logistic Support Research Center at Chungnam National University in South Korea. "A small aircraft won't be easily detected by radar, but they can't carry much so they can only be used for surveillance purposes. A bigger size of aircraft is needed to carry weapons, but that would be detected by radar."

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