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Russia Awards Fighter Jet Pilots Involved in U.S. Drone Skirmish

March 17, 2023



U.S. Military Releases Footage Of Russian Jet Forcing Down Drone. **U.S. European Command / Zuma / TASS**

Russia has awarded the pilots of two fighter jets involved in this week's confrontation with a U.S. drone over the Black Sea, the Defense Ministry said Friday.

The United States accused Russia of an "unsafe" and "unprofessional" intercept of its MQ-9 Reaper surveillance drone that forced it to be brought down over the Black Sea on Tuesday.

The Russian military said it had scrambled its air defense unit jets after detecting the U.S. drone but denied causing its crash, saying the unmanned aerial vehicle had lost control.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu presented state awards to the Su-27 pilots for "preventing" the MQ-9 Reaper from "violating" international airspace restrictions that Russia put in place during the conflict in Ukraine, Russia's military said in a statement.

"The drone flew with its transponders off, violating the boundaries of the area of the

temporary airspace usage regime established for the special military operation [and] communicated to all users of international airspace."

Related article: Russia Races to Salvage U.S. Drone Wreckage in Black Sea

The incident has ratcheted up tensions between Moscow and Western allies which were already soaring over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but top security officials from the United States and Russia have made rare phone calls to address the incident.

The U.S. military released a declassified video Thursday showing an Su-27 bearing down on the propeller-driven MQ-9, twice releasing streams of fuel in an apparent effort to harass the drone.

Russia said it planned to try to retrieve the downed craft but was unsure if the effort would be a success.

State media, citing an unnamed Russian Defense Ministry source familiar with the effort, said the MQ-9 has been detected 60 kilometers from the Crimean port city of Sevastopol at a depth of 850-900 meters.

AFP contributed reporting.

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