



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on June 3, 2021

Pentagon OKs Chinese Drones Previously Banned over Espionage Concerns

After years of citing potential spying by China via sophisticated drones, the Pentagon has approved the U.S. military to acquire two Chinese-made “Government Edition” drones.

A recent Pentagon report seen by [the Hill](#) found “no malicious code or intent” in two drone models manufactured by Da Jiang Innovations (DJI), a Chinese company, and one of the world’s foremost drone makers. The May 6 report, released on Tuesday, concludes that DJI’s drones are “recommended for use by government entities and forces working with U.S. services.”



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“This U.S. government report is the strongest confirmation to date of what we, and independent security validations, have been saying for years — DJI drones are safe and secure for government and enterprise operations,” DJI spokesperson Adam Lisberg told the Hill.

Almost 80 percent of all drones used in the United States and Canada are made by DJI.

The Department of Defense green-lighting controversial drones comes after escalating concerns at the federal level around the security of DJI and Chinese drones more broadly.

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DJI was added to the Commerce Department’s “entity list” — i.e., the list of bodies considered a “national security concern” — late last year, effectively blacklisting the company.

[The specific filing](#) on DJI said the company “enabled wide-scale human rights abuses within China through abusive genetic collection and analysis or high-technology surveillance.” This is [likely a reference](#) to DJI’s involvement in providing drones to the Chinese government to surveil detention camps in the Xinjiang province, as detailed in a *Bloomberg Businessweek* [report](#).

The filing also allows for a “case-by-case review for items necessary to detect, identify and treat infectious disease; presumption of denial for all other items.”

This latest in a series of security measures against foreign drones. Individual U.S. agencies have taken their own measures, including the [Pentagon](#) and [Department of Justice](#), while in 2019 the Department of Homeland Security issued [an alert](#) that Chinese-made drones were stealing data.

“We know that a lot of the information is sent back to China from those [drones], so it is not something that we can use,” [said](#) Ellen Lord, under secretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment in 2019.

The DHS [alleged](#) that Chinese drones can record and store sensitive data — flight paths for example — and transmit it back to Chinese intelligence agencies. Companies using the devices were advised to



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shut off their network connectivity to avoid theft of information.

“While companies operating within any country are typically expected to comply with applicable law and government regulations, foreign governments may require companies to disclose far more information without significant legal protection for customers,” the bulletin reads. “UAS [unmanned aircraft systems] data is often sent to servers controlled by or accessible to the UAS manufacturing company or third-party application vendor ... Data servers run by or accessible to foreign companies, especially those located in foreign countries, may be susceptible to foreign law enforcement and government seizure without the benefit of the types of legal protections under US law.”

The document referenced another industry bulletin titled “Chinese Manufactured Unmanned Aircraft Systems.” That [document](#) warned the private industry of Chinese-made UAS-connected devices capable of collecting and transferring data, citing China’s “unusually stringent obligations on its citizens to support national intelligence activities.”

The Justice Department also [banned](#) the use of agency grants last year to purchase drones from foreign companies deemed a threat, seeking to address potential cyber and foreign influence threats.

[Commenting](#) on the ban, Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen said that “We take seriously concerns about the use of foreign-made UAS and the potential for related data compromise. It is paramount that funding recipients take effective measures to safeguard sensitive information and the public’s privacy and civil liberties while operating these systems in a safe and secure manner.”

DJI officials [denied](#) any such accusations.

Lawmakers are currently weighing restrictions against the use of Chinese drones.

The massive bipartisan U.S. Innovation and Competition [Act](#), which was introduced as a substitute amendment to the Endless Frontier Act last month by Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), includes the American Security Drone [Act](#).

That latter bill, introduced in the Senate in January by Senator Rick Scott (R-Fl.) and cosponsored by a bipartisan group of senators, would prohibit the federal government from purchasing drones manufactured by countries deemed to be a threat to the United States, such as China. It would also prohibit local governments from using federal funds to purchase such drones.

At present, most drones are operated under direct human control. Increasingly, though, manufacturers are getting smarter with higher levels of on-board artificial intelligence, building drones capable of carrying out not just landings and takeoffs but entire missions. It remains unclear why the Department of Defense explicitly [calls](#) China a “pacing threat,” yet approved the military use of China-manufactured drones that were previously banned by multiple U.S. federal entities over espionage concerns.



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