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Author:

Kosuke Takahashi

,Tokyo

James Hardy

,London

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The US Navy (USN) is preparing to deploy Boeing P-8A Poseidon multimission maritime aircraft to Misawa Air Base in northern Japan and Kadena Air Base in southwestern Okinawa Prefecture as early as late 2013, an official told

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on 20 September.

The official said the P-8A will replace Lockheed P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft that have been in service since the early 1960s.

"The P-8A will follow the same deployment in the Pacific theatre as P-3Cs," said the official in charge of the initiative in Washington. "P-3Cs routinely deploy to Misawa." The official added that the first P-8A, which made its operational debut in the 'Rim of the Pacific 2012' exercise in June and July, will probably deploy to Japan in around late 2013 or early 2014.

He also revealed that the USN will begin preparations to deploy the Northrop Grumman MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial system to Andersen Air Force Base (AFB) in Guam in Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14). Procured under the Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) programme, the first MQ-4C is scheduled to arrive in FY17.

Designed for high-altitude, long-endurance ISR tasks, Triton has a range of around 2,000 nautical miles and will be able to cover more than 2.7 million square miles in a single mission, complementing the capabilities of the P-8A and other more conventional naval surveillance assets.

"The MQ-4C Triton will support USN maritime operations and is not a replacement for US Air Force (USAF) RQ-4B Global Hawk assets," the official said.

COMMENT





The MQ-4C Triton is essentially an RQ-4 Block 20 Global Hawk airframe that has been fitted with USN-specified ISR payloads, primarily the AN/ZPY-3 multi-function active-sensor radar.

Triton will replace the existing BAMS-D (Demonstrator) system, which comprises four legacy Block 10 RQ-4A Global Hawks acquired by the navy from the USAF. BAMS-D has flown more than 5,500 hours in support of combat operations since 2008, primarily in support of the Fifth Fleet operations in the Middle East and southwest Asia.

The MQ-4C's deployment to Guam is one element of a global BAMS programme that will see the navy procure 22 BAMS systems to be deployed in five orbits, funded for 55,000 flight hours per year, in parallel with the acquisition of 117 P-8A Poseidons.

The growth in maritime ISR is perhaps the most underrated development in military capabilities to occur in the Asia-Pacific region in the past few years. In addition to the USN's BAMS and P-8A deployments, China and the United States are competing to provide coastal surveillance systems for Southeast Asian countries. Indonesia has installed, or is installing, systems from both countries, while the Philippines has expanded its Coast Watch South surveillance system to the rest of the archipelago.

In August, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Japanese Minister of Defence Satoshi Morimoto agreed to use USAF RQ-4 Global Hawks based at Andersen AFB to monitor Chinese military activities in waters around Japan, including the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

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