

What Is the Legal Framework Governing Drones / Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in Japan?

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1. Introduction

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (“UAVs”), commonly referred to as drones, have been increasingly put into practical use in Japan across a wide range of fields, including aerial photography, surveying, agriculture, infrastructure inspection, disaster response, and logistics. The market size of UAV-related businesses in Japan is expected to continue growing in the coming years.

At the same time, UAV operations in Japan are subject to strict legal regulation, primarily under the Civil Aeronautics Act of Japan (the “CAA”). Since 2015, the regulatory framework has been rapidly changing through a series of amendments to the CAA; therefore, the resulting system is complex, and there have been numerous cases in which UAV operations have been conducted without a sufficient understanding of the applicable rules. Indeed, in 2025, it was reported that a foreign pavilion staff member at the Osaka–Kansai Expo site flew a UAV without obtaining the necessary permits and approvals required in Japan and was subsequently referred to public prosecutors.

UAV operations in Japan are governed not only by the CAA, but also by a wide range of other laws and regulations, including the Act on Prohibition of Flights of Small Unmanned Aircraft, the Civil Code, the Road Traffic Act and Road Act, the Radio Act, local government ordinances, and administrative guidelines. Accordingly, an accurate understanding of Japan’s legal framework is essential.

For companies seeking to use UAVs in their business operations, it is critical to fully understand the applicable Japanese regulations and to establish an operational framework that ensures compliance. This article provides an overview of the regulatory framework governing UAVs in Japan and highlights key points that should be borne in mind in practice.

2. Main Regulations under the CAA

2.1 Definition of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)

Under the CAA and related regulations, an “Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)” is defined as an aircraft that is

structurally incapable of carrying a person, is flown by remote control or automated operation, and weighs 100 grams or more. Most commercially available UAVs fall within this definition and are therefore subject to the CAA and its regulations.

2.2 UAV Registration System

A threshold requirement for operating a UAV is compliance with the UAV registration system. As a general rule, UAVs weighing 100 grams or more may not be flown unless they have been duly registered. Such UAVs must be registered with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, display a registration number on the aircraft, and, in principle, be equipped with a Remote ID function. Flying an unregistered UAV is subject to criminal penalties, making registration a fundamental prerequisite for lawful operation.

2.3 Regulations Based on Airspace and Flight Methods

UAV operations are regulated under the CAA from both the perspective of airspace and flight methods. As a general rule, flights are prohibited in certain airspace, including areas surrounding airports, altitudes of 150 meters or higher above the ground or water surface, emergency operation airspace, and above densely populated areas. To conduct flights in such airspace on an exceptional basis, permission from the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is required.

In addition, prior approval is generally required for flight methods that are considered to involve higher risk, such as nighttime flights, beyond-visual-line-of-sight flights, flights in close proximity to third parties, flights over events attended by large numbers of people, transportation of hazardous materials, and dropping of objects. Flights falling under these categories are classified as "Specified Flights" under the CAA and are subject to stricter safety requirements than ordinary flights.

When conducting a Specified Flight, operators are required to take certain measures to prevent accidents, such as immediately suspending the flight if a third party enters the area beneath the flight path. Whether a particular operation constitutes a Specified Flight is key to determining whether permits/approvals are required, and careful advance analysis is essential.

3. Regulations Other Than the CAA and Key Points to Note

When operating UAVs, attention must also be paid to laws and regulations other than the CAA. Under the Act on Prohibition of Flights of Small Unmanned Aircraft, UAV flights are, in principle, prohibited over and around important facilities such as the National Diet Building, the Prime Minister's Office, defense-related facilities, airports, and nuclear-related facilities. Even where an exception applies, the prior consent of the facility administrator must be obtained and advance notification to the police and other authorities is required.

In addition, while flying over public facilities such as roads, parks, rivers, and ports often does not require special permission under the CAA, such flights may be restricted by local government ordinances or rules established by facility administrators. Accordingly, in practice, it is essential to confirm the requirements with relevant authorities and local governments in advance, in addition to complying with the procedures under the CAA.

Furthermore, because radio waves are used for UAV operation and video transmission, the Radio Act may also apply. While many commercially available UAVs use radio equipment that does not require a license, certain large commercial UAVs or overseas products may require a radio station license or registration. Confirmation of compliance with such technical standards certification requirements is therefore necessary.

4. Civil Law and Privacy Considerations

When flying a UAV over land owned by a third party, issues may arise in relation to property rights under the Civil Code. The scope of property rights is generally understood to extend only to the extent necessary for the land owner's interests, and consent is not required in all cases; however, the specific determination depends on the individual circumstances. In practice, regardless of the strict legal requirements, it is often important to provide explanations to and obtain the understanding of landowners and local residents.

In addition, when aerial footage captured by UAVs is published on the internet or otherwise made public, careful attention must be paid to the risk of infringing individual privacy rights. Operators must ensure that their activities appropriately consider the purpose and method of filming, the nature of the subjects filmed, and the rights and interests of those depicted.

5. Conclusion

The use of UAVs in Japan is expected to continue expanding, and correspondingly, the applicable legal regulations and operational rules are likely to be amended on an ongoing basis. From a compliance perspective, businesses and individuals using UAVs must closely monitor the latest regulatory developments, particularly under the CAA, and promptly reflect such changes in their day-to-day operations and manuals. Establishing an organizational framework that can respond swiftly to regulatory changes is essential.

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