



WorldNews

In France, Dissent Over MALE UAV Pick

By PIERRE TRAN

PARIS — France's choice of the Heron TP medium-altitude long-endurance UAV has military officials wondering whether the Israel Aerospace Industries drone will weaken interoperability with allies and undermine industrial cooperation with Britain, according to sources close to the deal.

The joint chiefs of staff voiced their reservations at a September ministerial investment committee meeting, sources familiar with the talks said.

"It was a contested choice," one source said.

The military would have to assume the consequences, which had been underestimated at the time of the selection. The Direction Générale de l'Armement (DGA) procurement office's work on the technical specifications had little effect on the decision.

A Defense Ministry official confirmed the dissent. Asked about the nature of a dispute at the September ministerial meeting, the official said, "UAVs."

The joint chief of staff and DGA declined to comment.

The Heron TP pick reflected a political choice by President Nicolas Sarkozy to support Dassault Aviation in France's drive to consolidate its defense industry, said Patricia Adam, a member of parliament.

Work on UAVs is seen as essential to maintaining and building aerospace design and engineering competences in Europe as a bridge to any future fighter jet program.

By picking Dassault, the French government effectively selected a national champion over EADS, which is jointly owned by France, Germany and Spain.

The presidential pick led to a surprise announcement in July by Defense Minister Gérard Longuet that the government would open negotiations with Dassault, based on its offer of the Heron TP.

The choice of an interim MALE UAV pitted Dassault against EADS, which offered the Predator B, or Reaper, from General Atomics.

Military officials had quietly pushed for the Reaper, as that would have France joining American, British and Italian forces in flying the U.S. system, and increasing French

forces' interoperability in the field, notably by sharing maintenance.

The Reaper can also be armed, which is seen as a key requirement.

The Heron TP UAV would be an interim solution adapted to French needs, creating work for domestic companies and providing added value, the Defense Ministry said in a July 21 statement. The adaptation work would help restructure the industrial sector for a next-generation MALE UAV to be built under Anglo-French cooperation in 2020, the ministry said.

That was the intent, but there is skepticism in some circles.

Jean-Pierre Maulny, deputy director at think tank Institut des Relations Internationales & Stratégiques, said there was concern at the DGA about selection of the Heron TP.

"The Heron TP risks slowing down development of a European UAV program," he said. "There are concerns that the Heron TP would be mostly Israeli, with very little contribution from Dassault, allowing very little scope for French or European work."

That would hamper the French contribution to the UAV with Britain under the bilateral cooperation treaty, Maulny said.

Chief Executive Loïc Tribot La Spiere of think tank Centre de Prospective Stratégique said part of the reason for selection of the Heron TP was a political response to the U.S. Air Force's choice of Boeing over Airbus for the \$35 billion KC-X air tanker tender.

Support for the Dassault/Heron TP came from parliament member Jean-Claude Viollet, who said it was a "a reasonable choice," one that would meet an immediate need and allow skills to develop for the future Anglo-French UAV.

The U.S. authorities granted unprecedented access to French chief of staff Adm. Edouard Guillaud during his July 2010 visit to Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, the operations center for the Reaper fleet in Afghanistan, a U.S. official said.

Also in July, U.S. Defense Undersecretary Michèle Flournoy and a deputy defense secretary discussed the Reaper in their meetings with DGA chief Laurent Collet-Billon.

France stopped short of sending a letter of request, which would have officially asked for price information



ISRAEL AEROSPACE INDUSTRIES

Controversial Choice: The French government's choice of IAI's Heron TP UAV has raised concerns about interoperability and cooperation with other nations.

on the Reaper. That meant the Defense Ministry could say it lacked pricing to compare the competing UAV systems, which would have shown the U.S. product to be cheaper than the Israeli one, critics of the procedure said.

'Sovereignty Kit'

The critics argue there was more work available for French companies under a "sovereignty kit" agreed between General Atomics and EADS, which would adapt the Reaper to needs set out by the DGA.

French firms, including Thales, Safran's Sagem and Zodiac Data Systems, could work on the modifications, worth up to 40 percent of the Reaper system's total 270 million euro (\$371 million) value, an executive familiar with the offer said.

That compared to 300 million euros for the Heron TP system, including five years' maintenance, for which the French work was limited to 10 percent of the total value, the executive said.

Dassault and EADS declined comment.

In March 2009, EADS Defense & Security France signed a cooperation agreement with General Atomics, the executive said. The agreement included clauses to:

- Open access to interface data for onboard and ground systems.

- Replace the Reaper's line of sight and satellite communications with systems developed for EADS' Harfang MALE UAV.

- Integrate a communications server.

- Replace the Raytheon optronics bubble with a high-definition optical camera.

- Use EADS' onboard mission computer.

- Plug the Reaper into the French système de commandement et de conduite des opérations aériennes command-and-control system, and the NATO air C2 system.

- Create a mission test bench in France.

- Integrate the Reaper into the French Air Force's logistics system.

- Certify French airworthiness.

- Perform mission planning.

The cooperation agreement also allowed France to operate the Reaper autonomously through civil satellite links, and recognized EADS as the design authority for mission

and communications.

The EADS/General Atomics offer covered seven air vehicles, comprising four operational units, two units for attrition and one for the systems integration bench, two ground stations, and five years of maintenance.

There was also the possibility of cooperation with Britain, the executive said. U.K. industry could install:

- A Seaspray-type radar from Selex UK for maritime surveillance.

- Communications or Astac electronic intelligence pod, working with Cobham or Thales France.

- A yet-to-be-developed tactical communications pod using professional mobile radio technology with Cassidian UK or Thales France.

- MBDA's Brimstone missile, or the light modular missile from Thales UK.

EADS had also made seven unsolicited proposals for upgrades of the Harfang UAV, which flew in Libya as well as over Afghanistan.

General Atomics had three options for supplying the Reaper: a basic model with delivery in 12 months, a "medium technology" version, in 18 months, and a "heavy technology" or French adapted one in 24 to 30 months.

An analyst said the Heron TP-Dassault selection did not seem to make industrial or operational sense.

"The solution proposed by Dassault seems 'not affordable,'" the analyst said. "I am not sure the Heron TP, even adapted to French requirements, would offer total operational sovereignty."

That might give grounds for dissent by the joint chiefs and the DGA, the analyst said.

In operational sovereignty, for example, would Israel allow France to fly the Heron TP in support of forces deployed as part of the U.N. peace-keeping force in southern Lebanon? a parliamentary source asked.

There was worry, however, that an interim gap filler might mutate into a long-term reality.

Member of parliament François Comat Gentile said, "The temporary UAV should not become a permanent solution because of budgetary pressure. We should not forget the Anglo-French project, which should be the basis of cooperation." □

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