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Looking to Ukraine to boost defence

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MALAYSIA has expressed interest in buying arms from Ukraine to improve its defence capabilities, especially in air surveillance and command strategies.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the country could also benefit from a defence industry co-operation with the Ukrainians, given their advanced military know-how.

A small Malaysian team led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on a four-day official visit to Ukraine, was taken on a tour of the Ukrainian Air Command Centre on Sunday evening and the visitors came away impressed with what they saw.

But Najib said no deal had been struck because military purchases needed careful study and would depend on factors like costs, potential for technology transfer and downstream benefits.

Asked if the Ukrainian air defence system equipment could be an alternative to the very expensive American-made Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) the Royal Malaysian Air Force was contemplating buying, Najib said it was not the alternative but "could be a complement".

Najib dismissed the idea that Malaysia's latest interest meant the country was now looking towards the former Eastern-bloc nations rather than the West for military purchases, especially with an imminent deal with Russia for a squadron of multi-role jet fighters (18 Sukhoi Su-30 MKM 'Flanker') and expected delivery of assault tanks from Poland (48 PT-91M 'Twardy' main battle tanks - the Polish version of the Russian T-72 tank) in 2006.

"Nothing of that sort. We believe in a balanced approach and we also look at cost effectiveness," he said.