

Obama moves to sell Northrop drones to S. Korea

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WASHINGTON, Sept 1 — The Obama administration has begun consulting the US Congress on plans to sell to South Korea remotely piloted Global Hawk surveillance planes and related ground stations, two people familiar with the matter said.

Among those briefed have been the Senate's and House of Representatives' foreign affairs committees, which have jurisdiction over arms sales, the people familiar with the matter said.

There was no immediate word on when formal notification of a proposed sale might take place, nor on the potential overall value.

Northrop Grumman, which builds the high-flying, long-endurance airframe, said Seoul was considering buying four RQ-4 Global Hawk "Block 30" drones, which can carry intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance payloads.

Associated ground stations would be included in such a sale, Gemma Loochkartt, a company spokeswoman, said by email on Wednesday. Deliveries could take place in 2014 and 2015 if a government-to-government deal is signed this year, she said.

The Block 30 airframes sell for roughly US\$30 million (RM90 million) apiece, not including their payloads. Raytheon Co's "Enhanced Integrated Sensor Suite" lets the aircraft scan large swaths and transmit imagery from 60,000 feet in near real-time using electro-optical, infrared and radar-imaging sensors.

The State Department declined to comment pending formal notification of a proposed sale to Congress. The US Air Force, which would broker the deal, and South Korea's embassy in Washington also had no immediate comment.

The Global Hawk is due to replace the Cold War-vintage U-2 spy plane in 2015, Lieutenant Colonel Rick Thomas, the US Air Force's Global Hawk functional manager, told reporters on August 10.

Japan, Singapore and Australia also have shown interest in acquiring Global Hawk, Loochkartt said.

Global Hawk's export would require a waiver under the Missile Technology Control Regime. The MTCR is a voluntary pact among at least 34 countries aimed at curbing the spread of unmanned delivery systems that could be used for weapons of mass destruction.

The aircraft's range — 22,780 km — and payload capacity — 1,360 kg — subject it to the arms control agreement created in 1987 by seven countries: Canada, France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States.

Then-Defence Secretary Robert Gates said in October 2008 that the United States was "very sympathetic" to South Korea's desire to obtain Global Hawk but added that there were MTCR issues to overcome.

Under the pact, systems capable of delivering a payload of at least 500kg to a range of at least 300km are subject to a "strong presumption" of denial for export.

Wes Bush, Northrop Grumman's chief executive, complained in an August 17 speech that export curbs on unmanned systems were harming US industry without making the United States any safer.

"The good news," he said, "is that the Defence Department is promoting what is clearly the best export reform policy — build higher walls around fewer things."

But tweaking the MTCR would be a mistake, some critics have argued, for instance if it led Russia or China, for instance, to follow suit with sales of such drones to countries like Iran, at odds with the West over its nuclear program.

US Air Force Global Hawks have flown missions over Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. They also carried out imagery intelligence over Japan after the March earthquake, flying from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. — Reuters

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