

The New Dimension



UAVs IN INDIA

GA-ASI's SkyGuardian RPA

As has been in the news for sometime, the United States has reportedly offered India an armed version of the Guardian drone that were originally authorised for sale unarmed, only for surveillance purposes. According to a senior US official, if the deal comes to fruition, this would be the first time Washington has sold such armed drones to a country outside the NATO alliance and would certainly be the first high-tech unmanned aircraft in this region.

In April 2018, President Donald Trump's administration had announced a long-awaited overhaul of US arms export policy aimed at expanding sales to allies, in that "it would bolster the American defence industry and create jobs at home". The plan included a new drone export policy that allowed lethal drones that could fire missiles, and surveillance drones of all sizes, to be more widely available to allies. Last June, General Atomics said the US government had approved sale of a naval variant of the drone: India has been in discussions to buy 22 of the unarmed surveillance aircraft, MQ-9B SeaGuardian, worth more than \$2 billion. Besides potentially including the armed version of the drone, the sources said the number of aircraft had also changed.

An Indian defence source said that the military wanted a drone not just for surveillance but also to be able to eliminate targets at land and sea, arguing that otherwise "such acquisition was not justified" in buying an unarmed drone. However, the cost and integration of the weapons system are still open issues, as well as Indian assent to the *Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement* (COMCASA) which Washington insists on as a condition for operating such advanced defence systems.

US drone manufacturers, facing growing competition, especially from Chinese and Israeli rivals "which have a more relaxed approach" have lobbied hard for the changes in US export rules. Among these will be a more lenient application by the US government of an arms export principle known as "presumption of denial." This has impeded many drone deals by automatically denying approval unless a compelling security reason is given together with strict buyer agreements to use the weapons in accordance with international law.

The MTCR – a 1987 missile-control pact signed by the United States and 34 other countries – will still require strict

export controls on Predator-type drones, which it classifies as Category 1, those with a payload of over 500 kg. However, the Trump administration is seeking to renegotiate the MTCR accord to eventually make it easier to export the larger armed drones.

Meanwhile, India's first private sector Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) manufacturing facility has been inaugurated at Hyderabad, the facility set up by Adani Defence & Aerospace with Elbit Systems of Israel and inaugurated by Telangana Home Minister Mohammad Mahmood Ali on 14 December 2018. The 50,000 square feet facility is also the first outside Israel to manufacture Hermes 900 Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) UAVs. As Adani Group Chairman Gautam Adani stated, "Our foray into defence and aerospace has a deep personal significance for me. I want us to be able to look back and reflect that Adani Group did its bit to help build a more self-reliant India, a nation that is second to none in its defence manufacturing capabilities." The factory will be engaged in manufacturing complete carbon composite aerostructures for the Hermes 900, followed by Hermes 450, aiming at the global market and will be further ramped up for