

“Future Combat Air Systems”: UK-France Military Declaration Reveals Development of “Combat Drones”

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The final text of the [Declaration on Security and Defence](#) signed at the UK-France Summit last week has now been released and it reveals some details about future European drone projects. The whole document is worth reading to get an understanding of where UK-French military co-operation is heading, for example:

“Based on our experience of leadership in foreign policy and defence, the UK and France believe it is essential to take a comprehensive approach to safeguarding European and trans-Atlantic security. This means tackling instability where it arises, preventing conflict, building the capacity of local forces and encouraging long-term economic development as the most effective means to guarantee both the stability of our neighbourhood, the safety of our citizens and the security of our wider interests.” (Para 5)

But the most interesting section for our purposes are the three paragraphs that directly focus on unmanned systems which it reiterates “are urgently required.”.

14. Future Combat Air System. We believe future Combat Air capabilities and the defence aerospace sectors of the UK and France will be founded on a successful Future Combat Air System (FCAS) Programme. This is why we have agreed to launch a 2 year £120M Feasibility Phase, building on Preparation Phase studies conducted since the last Summit by 6 industry partners (Dassault Aviation, BAE Systems, Thales France, Selex, Rolls Royce and Safran). The Feasibility Phase that we have announced today will develop the concepts and technologies to provide an Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle for our Armed Forces. It will also sustain and enhance vital teams and skills within the relevant industries. As a result, we will be ideally placed to decide by 2016 whether to collaborate on a demonstration and manufacturing phases. To complete the package, the joint Feasibility Phase will be complemented by national work worth around £40M each. We expect a Memorandum of Understanding to be signed at the 2014 Farnborough Airshow.

15. Medium Altitude Long Endurance. We will look to develop cooperative opportunities through a ‘joint user group’ for REAPER, to exchange lessons learnt and work together on air certification, training, through life support and interoperability. This group will be set up in consultation with the United States, and will be open to the European nations operating Reaper.

16. Following fruitful trials in 2013, France is considering the Watchkeeper Tactical Unmanned Air System as a promising candidate with the objective to take a decision on the replacement of the present interim system to be taken

by the end of the year. In addition to joint acquisition, we are looking at the potential benefits of a joint development

The setting up of a Reaper 'joint user group' is a new initiative and was not mentioned at all during the coverage of the summit last week. This scheme seems to be in direct competition with the 'Drone Users Club' that was set-up last November during a meeting of the European Defence Ministers which is to be [open to all "drone-using countries" in Europe](#). This new club is obviously exclusively for those operating Reaper drones only and is pointedly being "set up in consultation with the United States."

The snippet of information regarding Watchkeeper is also new. [France agreed to evaluate the Anglo-Israeli Watchkeeper drone](#) with a view to purchasing it as part of their co-operation with the UK on unmanned systems. The document reveals that a decision will be taken by the end of 2014 whether to purchase the drone or not. However it appears that the mood music is not good, with for example, the document stating that flight trials were merely 'fruitful' rather than successful.

After the MoD's PR push on the use of drones last month and this latest agreement on further funding for UK-France work on a future combat drone announced by David Cameron, it's now BAE Systems turn to push forward its drones agenda with a media briefing on [Taranis](#) scheduled yesterday (Wednesday 5 Feb).

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