KOREAN AIR, BOEING PARTNER ON UNMANNED HELICOPTER DEVELOPMENT

News / Airlines, Manufacturer



Korean Air Aerospace Division (KAL-ASD), the manufacturing division of the Korean Air Group, have signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with Boeing to renew its joint cooperation of converting the South Korean military's MD 500MD Defender helicopters into unmanned aerial systems (UAS).

The Korean Air chairman and chief executive Yang Ho Cho and Boeing chief executive Dennis Muilenburg signed the agreement on September 21 at Korean Air's Seoul headquarters that will see Boeing provide technical assistance and support for flight control and test evaluations.

While the intended customer will be the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA), both companies will share their resources for a marketing campaign to sell cargo and armed versions of the helicopter, being developed in parallel, to international customers.

"With this agreement, Korean Air will be able to create unmanned helicopter business opportunities not only in Korea but also in the international market," said Myung Rae Ham, senior vice-president, aerospace division, Korean Air.

"Korean Air and Boeing will fully cooperate in the domestic and foreign unmanned helicopter business and seek to achieve a win-win strategy."

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A 2013 file image of a Republic of Korea Army 500MD. (Korea National Defence Media Agency/Wikimedia Commons)

Dubbed the Korean Air Unmanned System-Vertical Helicopter (KUS-VH) when the helicopter was first unveiled at the Seoul International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition in October 2015, the 500MD UAS is proposed to fly reconnaissance and surveillance missions, conduct short range precision strikes and supply sorties during the day and at night with a four hour duration.

The MoA signing stems from South Korea's purchase of 36 Boeing AH-64E Guardian attack helicopters in 2013 where Boeing signed a two-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to convert an unspecified amount of the ROKA's 500MD fleet into an unmanned configuration fitted with advanced avionics and sensors.

KAL-ASD, which had assembled approximately 200 of the 500MDs under licence between 1976 to

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1984 for the ROKA, has been refurbishing and converting the Republic of Korea Air Force’s retired 500MDs into a UAS utility capability.

Boeing demonstrated its own Unmanned Little Bird (ULB) concept to the ROKA at Nonsan, South Korea back in December 2012 to showcase its proven pilotless capabilities.

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