

Defence ministers from the United Kingdom and France have agreed to increase cooperation on unmanned aerial vehicles, following a bilateral meeting in London. French Defence Minister Jean Yves Le Drian and British Defence Secretary Philip Hammond agreed plans, which will see France trial the Watchkeeper Unmanned Aerial System. It is commonly used for surveillance and reconnaissance. The €8m trials will last until mid-2013, at which point France will decide on whether or not to purchase Watchkeeper for its own military.

The plans were first announced in February along with work on a medium altitude, long endurance drone system - now referred to as a Future Combat Air System or FCAS. A second agreement on the FCAS programme, said to be worth some €12m, was also signed to initiate the first phase of a demonstration programme. Funding will be split between France's Dassault Aviation and BAE Systems.

A second memorandum of understanding covering the FCAS, said to be worth some €12m, was also signed to initiate the first phase of a demonstration programme. Funding will be split between France's Dassault Aviation and BAE Systems. Defence Secretary Philip Hammond said the MoUs marked "a major step towards delivering the next generation of military capability, launching our formal cooperation on the Future Combat Aerial System".

He added: "These agreements represent more than just joint commitments. They represent a joint understanding of the threats we are likely to meet in the future, the character of warfare we are likely to undertake and the capabilities required to succeed on tomorrow's battlefield. We are putting into effect the lessons from our joint experience in Afghanistan and Libya, recognising unmanned aerial systems as a future key capability requirement."

Pierre Eric Pommellet, senior vice-president of Thales Defence Mission Systems said: "Collaboration offers perspectives for widespread benefit for both nations - shared support costs, joint development of enhancements to what is already one of the world's most advanced tactical UAV systems, the ability to harness the capabilities and innovation of both British and French industry; and most importantly the provision of world leading intelligence capabilities for British and French Armed Forces.

"The treaty has also already delivered much more than cooperation on systems - the twinning of the British Royal Artillery 32nd Regiment and the French Artillery's 61st Regiment, whose relationship will only be deepened by joint operation of Watchkeeper are the embodiment of the human links which are being formed across the Channel."

Senior research analyst at the Frost and Sullivan consultancy Mahendran Arjunraja said that the UAS market was currently dominated by American and Israeli technologies, and that an Anglo-French programme should be welcomed. "Such joint efforts would be the right strategy to break foreign dominance in the European UAV market," he said. "There are chances for countries like Germany and Italy to become a part of this joint effort. However, inviting new joiners should be carefully considered, so associating too many countries will not result in cost escalations and time delays.

"The recent agreement between the UK and France focuses on developing a combat UAV. The main country players - BAE Systems and Dassault Aviation - have their own individual technology demonstrators: Taranis and Neuron. The cooperation could facilitate common direction for both programmes and thereby regulate the market structure."