



## **Tactical UVA Patroller: towards French armed UVA?**

*By Aziza Riahi\**

**The wait is over. The ministry of Defence choose the tactical UVA Patroller from the French firm Sagem after more than two years of competition with the Watchkeeper from Thales which had so far been the favorite. Why did they choose as such?**

The decision to replace of Sperwer tactical drone systems deployed by the French army must be approved by the Interdepartmental Committee on Investment in early February 2016. This is a surprising decision while a franco-british cooperation was adopted for the development of Watchkeeper within the Framework of Lancaster House Agreement of 2010. However, we can wonder if its openly displayed production with the Israeli Elbit Systems —accused of violation of international law— played against Thales. Is the Sagem option a sign of a new strategic and industrial position for France?

### **Operational capacities and readiness**

To explain this reversal, the army highlights the endurance of Patroller —up to 14 hours of flight autonomy on a 180 km radius (that can be extended to 500 km)— and the high-performance optronic sensor which will ironically be made by Thales and Sagem.

Tactical drone 1-ton class, capable of carrying more than 250 kgs of ballistic missile payloads, Patroller may be compared to a MALE UVA (Medium Altitude Long Endurance UVA). It can cover a broad range of military and security missions. Besides, this plane has the particularity of embarking a pilot in order to control the manoeuvring operations programmed from the ground. The Capacity and Collision Warning system function enable it to fly in airspace as a basic aircraft. This allows France to quickly get operational UVA on its territory.

By 2019 (end of the current law on military programming), 14 devices must be delivered: two systems with five devices each and four devices for training. All of them require 10 years of maintenance in operational condition. The contract is worth EUR 300 million. The first shipment is expected for 2018<sup>1</sup>. Patroller will equip the 61th Artillery Regiment and replace the old Sperwer tactical drone systems.

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<sup>1</sup> « Sagem préféré à Thales pour les drones tactiques », *Lemonde.fr*, 21 janvier 2016 : [http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2016/01/21/sagem-prefere-a-thales-pour-les-drones-tactiques\\_4851390\\_3234.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2016/01/21/sagem-prefere-a-thales-pour-les-drones-tactiques_4851390_3234.html)

## To maintain and develop French industry

France had originally intended to deliver the Watchkeeper to the United Kingdom with other VBCI armoured vehicles (made in France by the French Nexter)<sup>2</sup>. On the occasion of the DSEI Armament Show (Defense Security and Equipment International) 2015, an official of the British Ministry of Defense affirmed that VBCI will be pitted against similar vehicles, according to *Defense News*<sup>3</sup>. Would this opening up to competition be in favor of the French UVA? Does the choice of Patroller emphasize the end of the Franco-British “give and take” strategy? Also, will it call the interoperability of drone missions into question?

Operational capabilities as well as the future of a potential French industry of tactical drones determined the choice of Patroller. Having started it around twenty years ago, France seeks to develop its own industry of unmanned aerial vehicles. The Patroller is made with 80% of French components (compared with 30% for the Watchkeeper). About a hundred people currently work for its development but the increase of its production will enable the creation of 250 to 300 extra jobs on different sites. More than twenty SMEs and French companies will cooperate for the Patroller manufacturing. However, Thales along with Sagem will develop the high-performance optronics payloads with Optrolead. Their company is fifty per cent shared by Thales and Sagem, based on the gains of PEA Boom program funded by the Directorate General of Armaments (DGA).

France seems to highlight a strategic independence and offensive industrial policy. The choice of the Patroller will allow Sagem to develop its activity in the UVA industry and find a niche on the international market.

After the signing of contracts by DCNS (Mistral vessels) and Dassault (combat aircraft), Sagem enters the Egyptian market. According to a statement on September 24th, 2015<sup>4</sup>, Sagem signed an exclusive agreement with AOI-Aircraft, an Egyptian aeronautics industrial group. This agreement provides for a commercial and industrial cooperation based on the surveillance UVA system Patroller TM in order to meet the needs of the Egyptian Ministry of Defense.

Under this agreement, AOI- Aircraft Factory will be able to handle the assembly of Patroller UVA. It also includes for supporting systems as well as putting them into service. AAOI-Aircraft Factory will develop a training centre to help operators with the implementation and maintenance of the Sagem UVA systems.

## Towards the intrusion of armed UVA ?

The political and military officials no longer refuse the use of armed UVA. On January 16th, 2016, the eve of the announcement of the choice of the Patroller, the Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian highlighted the efficiency of the UVA during his New Year’s speech for the army in Val-de-Grâce: *“In aeronautics, observation UVAs expand our intelligence and action capabilities —we have only just started. Due to theatres of operations we face new situations— I particularly think of ‘access denial’ which can call our freedom of action into question in places where we are operating. In this situation, some of our allies have already used combat UVAs and shown their efficiency.”*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> « Futurs drones tactiques français : un appel d’offre restreint joué d’avance ? », in *Damoclès* n°146, 1-2015 ; « Comment la France négocie désormais avec la Grande-Bretagne », *Latribune.fr*, 19 février 2014 : <http://www.latribune.fr/>

<sup>3</sup> « Le Royaume-Uni lancera un appel d’offres pour choisir son futur véhicule blindé d’infanterie », 18 septembre 2015 : <http://www.opex360.com/2015/09/18/le-royaume-uni-lancera-appel-doffres-pour-choisir-son-futur-vehicule-blinde-dinfanterie/>

<sup>4</sup> « Sagem et AOI Aircraft Factory signent un accord de coopération dans le domaine des drones pour les marchés de défense en Égypte », 24 septembre 2015 : [http://www.sagem.com/fr/media/20150924\\_sagem-et-aoi-aircraft-factory-signent-un-accord-de-cooperation-dans-le-domaine-des-drones-pour-les-marches-de-defense-en-egypte](http://www.sagem.com/fr/media/20150924_sagem-et-aoi-aircraft-factory-signent-un-accord-de-cooperation-dans-le-domaine-des-drones-pour-les-marches-de-defense-en-egypte)

<sup>5</sup> « Drones armés : Jean-Yves Le Drian note leur efficacité », *Ouest France*, 21 janvier 2016 : <http://lignesdedefense.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2016/01/21/drones-armees-jean-yves-le-drian-note-leur-efficacite-15492.html>

Indeed, Reaper UVAs currently used by France in the Sahel are used for ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Reconnaissance) as they are not armed. Any additional equipment or changes on this device would require the authorization of the United-States given that they are still the owner of the “black box”. However, France will be more independent with the Patroller and will be able to have an UVA for domestic field and external operations. The modularity of this device and its high payload capability will make the integration of new captors possible. Eventually new arms also may be integrated such as laser guided missiles and anti-tank missile MMP (Medium-Range Missile) currently used by the French company MBDA<sup>6</sup>.

Will the acquisition of Patroller facilitate the intrusion of armed UVAs in the French Army?

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The « Observatoire des armements » is an independent expertise center founded in 1984 in France. It aims to support the works of civil society on defense and security issues, towards disarmament. The armaments observatory operates on two subjects : armaments transfers and industry, nuclear weapons and their consequences. It publishes reports and a newsletter, Damocles (specimen on request - French version).

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<sup>6</sup> « Drone tactique : le Patroller de Safran gagne la compétition », Latribune.fr, 21 janvier 2016 : <http://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/drone-tactique-le-patroller-de-safran-gagne-la-competition-517213.html>