Europe tipped to spend $14B on drones

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NEWTOWN, Conn., Sept. 28 (UPI) -- NEWTOWN, Conn., Sept. 28 (UPI) -- Europe is being tipped to spend nearly $14 billion over the next 10 years on research and development of unmanned aerial systems and their procurement.

About $8.7 billion of that amount will be spent on R&D efforts, while about $5 billion will be for procurement. However, despite strides in developing its own unmanned aerial systems, much of the aircraft procured will come from outside the continent.

The predictions are part of a larger overall analysis of the UAS market worldwide by Forecast International, a U.S. market intelligence and analysis firm serving the defense, aerospace and security industries as well as government and military organization.

"Just when you think the UAS market cannot go any higher, it does," said Larry Dickerson, Forecast International's senior unmanned vehicles analyst. "No matter how many systems are built, operators want more."

Forecast International said the worldwide market for unmanned aircraft has seen "unprecedented" growth since 2001. Its current projected value over the next 10 years is estimated at $70.9 billion.

Million-dollar UAS contracts that were once big news have given way to contracts in the billions of dollars.

Sales of unmanned systems have slowed in the United States, it said, but they are growing in Asia as well as in other parts of the world.

Despite tightening economies and spending cutback, the United States is expected to spend $11.6 billion on UAS research and development and $13.7 for aircraft procurement through 2021. The R&D amount is 40 percent of the expected world total for UAS research and development. And while Europe will spend $8 billion on R&D, Asia won't be far behind.

The Asian total for UAS research and development projects is predicted to reach $7.1 billion over the same period. Money spent by Asia to procure aircraft will be $14.3 billion, Forecast International said, with China possibly accounting for 60 percent of that amount.

China, while purchasing some foreign-made systems, will also look to local manufacturers for the systems.

But while the military market dominates UAS development and system acquisition, the civilian segment of the UAS market is growing.

"It may not be as extravagant as some observers believe but it could be worth $600 million to $1 billion over the next 10 years," Dickerson said.

In other unmanned system developments, RUAG Defense of Switzerland has announced it plans to focus its research and development efforts on a second area of unmanned, or robotic, technology: unmanned ground vehicles for military and civilian use.

"UGVs are a highly promising technology of the future, and one that RUAG is actively pursuing," said RUAG Defense Chief Executive Officer Urs Breitmeier. "RUAG is researching, developing and investing in this area with the aim of gradually becoming a UGV competence center for the Swiss army and other security forces."

UGVs are used for infrastructure monitoring and reconnaissance work, border surveillance, search and rescue and

explosive ordnance disposal and mine clearance.

RUAG said, however, that in some ways system technology is more challenging than that for unmanned aircraft due to their operating environments.

One project the company is involved in is the Autonomous Rough-Terrain Outdoor Robot research project, which involves technology specialists from the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, Armasuisse, and RUAG to improve the autonomy of a ground vehicle.

ARTOR is capable of navigating autonomously and relies on data captured by sensors mounted on the vehicle, which can negotiate static and moving obstacles.