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U.S. buys Russian choppers for Afghan military

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The Russian choppers are far more basic birds than U.S. models such as the UH-60 Black Hawk or the CH-47 Chinook. The Mi-17 is steered with a stick and rudder and usually lacks such amenities as Global Positioning System navigation. Afghan maintenance crews, accustomed to making do with whatever materials are handy, are skilled in making repairs with used soda cans and other makeshift parts.

The U.S. government has bought Russian choppers for other allies as well. The Pentagon purchased eight Mi-17s for the Iraqi air force, although defense officials say they have no plans to acquire more. The Defense Department has also purchased or leased 14 Mi-17s for Pakistan, although Islamabad recently returned some after a crash raised questions about their safety.

In addition, the U.S. Special Operations Command would like to buy a few Mi-17s of its own, so that special forces carrying out clandestine missions could cloak the fact that they are American.

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"We would like to have some to blend in and do things," said a senior U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the clandestine program. "But the Russians know this. Russia has a small monopoly on Mi-17s. They are now exorbitantly priced."

Critics in Congress said the price per chopper has tripled since 2006, from \$6 million to \$18 million. Pentagon officials dispute this, saying that the lower prices were for used, less capable Mi-17s, and newer models retail for about \$15 million.

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Defense officials and analysts said that U.S. helicopter manufacturers, struggling to produce enough aircraft for U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, might not have the capacity to make more for the Afghan air corps right away.

Still, under pressure from Congress, U.S. defense officials have indicated that they are leaning away from their Russian buying binge.

"As a 'Buy American' kind of individual, I think it's totally appropriate as we go forward that we continue to assess the program," Army Secretary John McHugh, whose service oversees foreign helicopter purchases, told the Senate Appropriations Committee in March.

Staff writer Greg Miller contributed to this report.

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