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U.S. Air Force Working on Plan to Kill Reliance on Russian Rocket Engines

By The Moscow Times

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U.S. Air Force pilots with the Thunderbirds perform the calypso pass maneuver in F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft during a practice session in Idaho, U.S.

The U.S. Air Force expects to make recommendations in early November on how to end U.S. reliance on Russian rocket engines for launching key U.S. military and spy satellites, a senior Air Force general said Tuesday.

The Air Force is evaluating a range of options ranging from seeking a replacement engine to use of different rocket and will develop an acquisition strategy.

Lieutenant General Ellen Pawlikowski, the service's top military acquisition official, said U.S. weapons makers were excited about the chance to work on a new program.

Pawlikowski said many companies responded to an Air Force request for information, and service officials held 19 separate meetings with companies over three days in Los Angeles

last week.

She said officials were now weighing the wide range of responses submitted by U.S. companies as they prepared for meetings in early November where they would hammer out a recommendation to Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work.

Frank Kendall, the Pentagon's chief arms buyer, and top Air Force officials have underscored their determination to end U.S. reliance on Russian-built RD-180 rocket engines to power the Atlas 5 rockets built by United Launch Alliance (ULA), a joint venture of Lockheed Martin Corp and Boeing Co.

The issue took on new urgency this year after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region raised concerns that Moscow could cut off the supply of the Russian-built engines.

Pawlikowski said the Air Force was trying to balance the technical risks involved in any new development effort, costs and schedule as it weighed options.

"What it will really boil down to, is acceptable technical risk ... with the fastest schedule that we can (achieve) at an affordable price," she said. Keeping the cost low would help the U.S. launch providers compete with rivals in Russia, France and elsewhere, she added.

"We don't want to end up in a situation where whatever we have is so costly that doesn't give the American industry a better competitive environment," she said.

Companies that have submitted proposals for a new engine include ULA, which has partnered with Blue Origin, a company owned by Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos; Aerojet Rocketdyne, a unit of GenCorp, and Alliant Techsystems Inc.

Privately-held Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, is also seeking certification of its Falcon 9 rocket to use for launching U.S. satellites — which could provide another option to end U.S. dependence on the Russian engine.

Pawlikowski said the Air Force had dedicated $63 million and 137 experts to the SpaceX certification effort, which must be completed in December for the company to compete for the first of seven launches that will be open for competition.

If SpaceX missed the December deadline, it could still compete for the remaining six launches in the future, she said.

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