

'Humanitarian' land mines await next president's OK

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The United States will decide in April whether to proceed with full-scale production of the new "humanitarian" system of anti-personnel land mines called "Spider," according to a report by the Defense Department's deputy inspector general for auditing.

The Spider system, which will be operated remotely with lethal and nonlethal munitions, can be ordered to self-destruct so it will not threaten civilians after fighting in an area ends, according to the report. Designed, according to the report, to provide "perimeter defense and flank protection to the war fighter," Spider would replace "dumb" land mines, which do not self-destruct.

Spider is the latest U.S. attempt to address the long-term threat that land mines pose to civilians. The United States last deployed anti-personnel land mines in the field during the 1991 Persian Gulf war and has not produced any since 1997.

President Bill Clinton, one of the first world leaders to call for a ban on land mines, announced in 1998 that the United States would "phase out and eventually eliminate" persistent anti-personnel mines except for those in South Korea, where they have been used to reinforce the demilitarized zone, according to the report. Clinton ordered the Defense Department to research self-destructing alternatives for use there.

But in 1999, when the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty came into force, the Clinton administration unexpectedly refused to sign it. Instead, Clinton said he would continue seeking alternatives. Other holdouts included Iran, China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea and Cuba.

In February 2004, President Bush announced that the United States would end the use of traditional land mines by 2010 but would continue developing self-destructing systems that could be used in South Korea and elsewhere. The new policy stated that the United States "is committed to eliminating the humanitarian risks posed by persistent landmines" but would continue to develop alternatives "that incorporate self-destructing/self-deactivating technology and preserve military capabilities," according to the report.

The Spider system has been allocated \$586 million for research, development, testing, evaluation and the procurement of 532 systems and 263 ammunition reload sets by 2013, according to the audit report.

A Spider system consists of up to 63 munition-control units, each of which holds as many as six lethal or nonlethal grenades that can be launched singly or together. They can be used to alert or to throw up smoke for illuminations. The six munitions are arrayed in each unit's base, pointed outward. Each system operator controls as many as 378 grenades.

Although the units must be positioned by hand, each contains tripwires that, on order of the operator, can be deployed to function automatically. When tripped, the sensing system sends a wireless signal to the operator's laptop computer, which can be nearly a mile away, or farther if a repeater communications device is used.

The operator can determine the location of the intrusion and use the computer touch screen to launch all or some of his lethal or nonlethal ordnance. Or, if the operator decides, additional penetrations could be allowed into one area while waiting to see whether intrusions occur in other areas covered by Spider units.

"The system was also initially developed with a 'battle override' mode that triggers the grenades as soon as the tripwire is touched," according to the report.

In July, however, the Army decided that it would field only the Spider with a "man-in-the-loop" function. As now designed, no Spider ordnance can be set off without an operator's command.

The units can be recovered, reloaded and used again. The system can be ordered to self-destruct so that, according to the report, "the munitions do not pose a threat to noncombatants or leave a residual hazard."

Whether the Army goes ahead with full-scale Spider development is a decision that will depend not only on satisfactory testing but also on whether the next president wants to continue down the path on land mines set by the Clinton and Bush administrations.