

India's naval Multi-Role Helicopter contract: NH90 vs S-70B

With a lucrative deal at stake, two helicopter giants are playing to win – but is there much between them?

The competition to supply the Indian Navy with a multirole replacement to its Sea King helicopters continues to create tensions between the two competing vendors. The horns of NH Industries (NHI) and Sikorsky have been firmly locked for years, pitching the NH90 and the S-70B Seahawk, respectively. Much is riding on the package for 16 units, more so than just the \$1 billion contract value. Following this decision, a further 75 helicopters are rumoured to be in consideration for tender.

The once 40-strong fleet of Indian Sea Kings have seen a loss of 10 to accidents in recent years and the remainder are currently being sized up for upgrades on a separate and undecided contract.

Although the Navy conducted field evaluation trials with the two platforms back in 2011, the Defence Ministry is now stalling its decision for the second time, requesting that the companies extend the validity of their proposals until December 2013. No official reason has been made public as to why this extension has been issued.

Adding to the adjournment is a fresh complaint submitted by NHI to the Defence Ministry, which again expresses doubt that Sikorsky's offering meets the guidelines of the Navy's initial Request for Proposals (RFP). The argument comes down to the notion that if Sikorsky has been granted concessions to the original quality requirements, NHI should be extended the same benefit. In light of evaluations, the Navy has reportedly found no delineation to the RFP in either platform.

The NH90 is a relatively modern platform, created in 1992 through a European consortium of France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, and the naval variant - the NATO Frigate Helicopter (NFH) - has only been under delivery for three years. Even so, feedback has been very positive and the NH90 is considered to be one of the most successful European rotary-wing programmes ever delivered.

The Royal Netherlands Navy welcomed their maritime-configured NH90 in 2010 and the French and Norwegian Navies followed suit by 2012. Earlier this year, the German Navy announced plans to convert 18 of its Army NH90s to the NFH variant, Belgium received its first in August of this

year, while the latest figures indicate the Italian Navy to have ordered 56 in total. The Royal Australian Navy already operates six but, ironically, the platforms lost out on a competition in 2011 to replace the RAN's fleet of S-70Bs to Sikorsky's MH-60R.

Speaking to *Defence IQ* at International Military Helicopter 2013, NH90 Programme Manager Peter Harris explained that the enduring goal of NHI is "to take a helicopter that is designed, developed, qualified and meets all the necessary international air-worthiness standards and deliver an end effect to the operational squadrons and regiments, which as we all know, are under a lot of pressure."

Harris also believes that the company has now "turned the tables" on how militaries identify its capacity to communicate, following a longstanding myth that the company was obscured behind a complex and industrial organisation, whereas it is in fact visibly engaged in direct operational exchange, enabling full confidence in its product.



Meanwhile, the S-70B has a longer service life, following introduction in 1984. As such, it is considered a reliable workhorse by its multitude of users. In fact, the S-70B - the export designation of the SH-60 - boasts an arguably more varied global export range, delivering over 400 units worldwide across Australia, Brazil, Turkey, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Greece, Denmark, Spain and Singapore.

Richard Lammers, a retired principal engineer at Sikorsky with extensive hours logged on the S-70B, said that Sikorsky had addressed previous problems with maintenance and corrosion and claimed that "while the NH90 does use more composite material, it is a new aircraft and the lessons learned for that aircraft once it is in actual service are still ongoing."

Lammers also questioned NHI's ability to respond quickly to Indian customization requirements should it win the NRH contract, while stating that the S-70B should not be viewed as an "old design" but as a "proven design" with a history of exceeding customer expectations.

In 2011, India turned down an offer from the US Navy to make an outright purchase of the

Sikorsky SH-60 to fill the Naval Multirole Helicopter requirement through a direct foreign military sale, leading to the open bidding approach to the programme today.

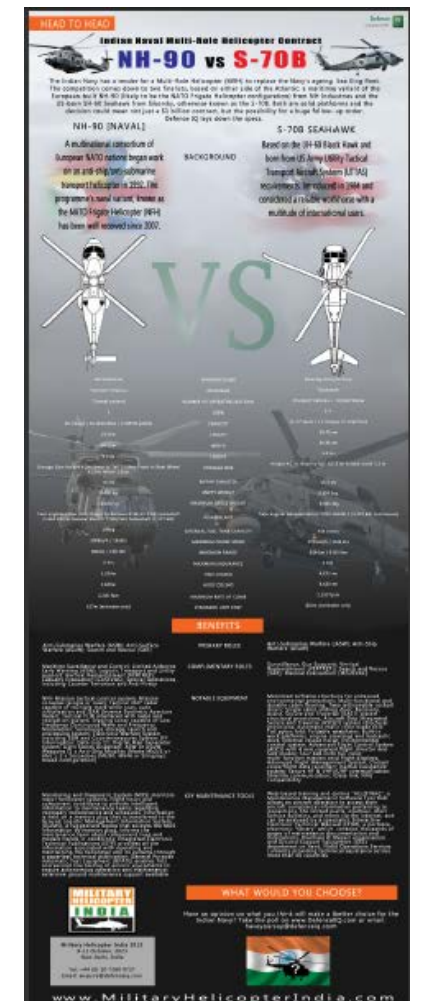
When a winner is eventually announced, the successful company must supply the first aircraft within the following 46 months, during which time a follow on order will likely be issued.

Rear Admiral D.M. Sudan, the Assistant Chief of Staff for the Naval Air Arm and the man responsible for the service's current and future requirements, plans and policies, will be meeting with industry and international military in October at the Military Helicopter India conference to enhance a global understanding of how India is maximising its naval capabilities. Other Tier 2 helicopter system suppliers will also be converging at the event to pitch their innovations, from situational awareness tools to communication suites.

More information on the conference can be found at www.militaryhelicopterindia.com. Bookings can be made by emailing enquire@defenceiq.com or by telephoning +44 (0) 207 368 9737.

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INDIAN HELICOPTER PROGRAMMES

Service	Requirement	Quantity	Cost (estimate)	Bidders	Winner
Air Force	Medium Lift	139	\$2.4 billion	Russian Government	Mi-17 V-5
Air Force	Heavy Lift Helicopters	15	\$1Billion	Boeing, Russian Company	CH-47 Chinook
Air Force	Attack helicopters	22	\$1.4Billion	Boeing	AH-64 Apache
IAF / Army	Utility	159	\$1.4Billion	HAL	Dhruv Mark III
IAF / Army	Weaponised utility helicopter	76	\$1.1Billion (unconfirmed)	HAL	Rudra
IAF / Army	Light Combat Helicopter	179	unconfirmed	HAL	HAL
IAF / Army	Light Utility Helicopter (1)	197	\$1.5Billion	Eurocopter, Kamov	Unconfirmed; still in process
IAF / Army	Light Utility Helicopter (2)	187	unconfirmed	HAL	HAL; still in process
Navy	Utility helicopter	159	\$766Million (unconfirmed)	HAL	Dhruv Mark III
Navy	Multi Role	16 +	\$1Billion - \$2.5Billion	Sikorsky, NH Industries	Tender in process; delayed until Dec 2013
Navy	Naval Light Utility helicopter	56	\$1Billion	AgustaWestland, Bell, Boeing, Eurocopter, Kamov	AgustaWestland; in process
Navy	Seaking Upgrade	18 of 43	\$400Million	AgustaWestland, IAI	Unconfirmed; in process