

SABR rattling

A UK programme is attracting attention with a potential requirement for up to 100 new support and search and rescue helicopters

JAMES HOWARD/LONDON

THE UK is gearing up to buy 100 new support and search and rescue (SAR) helicopters in what will be one of its biggest purchases of rotorcraft in the last 40 years.

Among the hardest-working aircraft in the UK Ministry of Defence inventory, much of the battlefield support helicopter fleet will need replacing within the next decade after close to 30 years of non-stop deployments and operations. Also due for replacement are the RAF's 25 Westland Sea King HAR3 search and rescue helicopters – thus was born SABR, the Support Amphibious Battlefield Rotorcraft.

SABR emerged from the former Future Amphibious Support Helicopter requirement (FASH), a Fleet Air Arm project to replace its 37 Westland Sea King HC4s – operated in support of the Royal Marines. This requirement has

REQUIREMENTS

THE REQUIREMENTS for the support SABR include worldwide all-weather amphibious capability, high survivability, 200km (110nm) range and the ability to deploy at sea for six months on the Royal Navy's amphibious vessels. In addition, it must have a 4.5t lift capability (for the Light Artillery Multi-purpose Weapons System), support capability to refuel and rearm the Westland Apache AH1 attack helicopter, the ability to lift 28 (army platoon) or 32 (Royal Marines) soldiers and preferably lift capability for whatever replaces the Royal Marines' BV206 snow vehicle.



SABR has a key role in the UK's unconventional procurement programme to replace its Sea Kings

similarities to the RAF's Westland Puma replacement (Future Support Rotorcraft).

While SABR is one requirement, there are two procurement tracks: one for the support helicopter and another for the SAR machine. The in-service date (ISD) for the support helicopter is 2009, with a tentative ambition towards 2007 and 2010/12 for the SAR capability, although this may shift to 2005 depending on the procurement method.

Like many projects born under Smart Procurement, SABR may not be procured in the usual way, says Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) integrated project team leader Chris Trout. "The secret of this is how we will support the aircraft, not particularly what we buy," he says.

The programme, which has a provisional £5 billion (\$7.2 billion) through life cost, is in the industry consultation stage and all options are open. There are, however, a number of parameters that SABR must meet (see box).

"The amphibious nature of the old FASH requirement is the driving requirement and forcing a more complete and polished solution than a pure support helicopter would," says Trout. Potential contenders are the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey, Boeing CH-47 Chinook, EH Industries EH101 Merlin, NH Industries NH90 and the Sikorsky S-92.

A mixed-fleet purchase is possible as no exist-

ing type meets the entire specification. Trout says: "I think we will have a lot of work to do in the next phase, translating from a list of mixes of candidate aircraft to what that really means in terms of cost and capability and solution options."

The DPA has not drawn up a fully fledged requirement in the traditional way. Instead, the industry was presented with a tentative concept and asked to provide observations, particularly with reference to support and industrial options.

"We are hoping that if we allow this to progress, hopefully in two or three years' time we will end up with contract quality proposals from each company that we could turn into a contract tomorrow," says Trout.

The support helicopter "initial gate" is in June, with "main gate" around the end of 2003. With an ISD of 2009, deliveries would be complete by 2018. For the SAR helicopter, initial gate is likely to be later with main gate yet to be determined and the ISD is also less defined.

The SAR need is a joint requirement with four Marine Coastguard Agency flights also to be re-equipped. This could be met with private sector funding.

With the order potentially exceeding 100 helicopters and most of the candidate aircraft entering production around now, SABR will be the focus of attention from both the industry and from eager UK support helicopter crews. □