STOBAR considered to meet CVF requirement

Competitors seek solution to allow fixed-wing operations from the UK's future carriers

Bidders to design the UK's CVF future aircraft carrier are turning their attention to short take-off but assisted recovery (STOBAR) as a means of operating large fixed-wing aircraft. BAE Systems and Thales will conclude phase two of the CVF competition this month, with a winner to be selected in January. The Ministry of Defence decided earlier this year that the CVF would be a conventional carrier, but equipped to operate the short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) variant of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (Flight International, 8-14 October).

STOBAR, which uses a bow ski-jump rather than a catapult to launch the aircraft, coupled with arrestor gear to aid recovery, is not sanctioned by the MoD, which is concentrating on STOVL operations, say industry sources. STOBAR, however, would allow the RN to operate a fixed-wing aircraft to meet its Maritime Airborne Surveillance Capability (MASC) requirement for organic airborne early warning and control. BAE and Thales have MASC study contracts.

Limiting CVF to STOVL operations means MASC is restricted to a helicopter or the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey tiltrotor. The RN is not keen to have a helicopter MASC because it will have altitude, range and speed shortfalls compared with fixed-wing platforms, say sources.

Northrop Grumman is studying the feasibility of operating the E-2C Hawkeye from the CVF. The company says: "Based on the questions we're getting from the customer, nothing has been ruled out and we're being told to go forward to the initial [decision] and that all options are still on the table."

Northrop Grumman says "a certain amount of work" has been done on looking at E-2 take-off using a ski-jump, such as trading take-off roll for fuel. A related but separate study is considering alternative powerplants, which may be a feature of the US Navy's planned Advanced Hawkeye, targeted for service entry in 2010.

The USN is keen for the RN to join the Advanced Hawkeye/Radar Modernisation Programme. But UK officials say the E-2 is regarded as too expensive. A Thales source says the company has identified another, cheaper, fixed-wing platform that could carry the radar and mission system from the Westland Sea King AEW7, which is the MASC baseline equipment.

A UK official says the V-22 would be a better MASC platform than a helicopter, but the price of the green airframe would have to be reduced to make it affordable.

BAE (left) and Thales are competing to supply the CVF

Decision due soon on Brazil's FX-BR

Brazil's FX-BR fighter procurement programme is expected to accelerate again after the election of a new president late last month.

The incumbent Brazilian president and his successor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, will hold meetings in the first half of this month to decide jointly a number of issues, including the final decision on the long-delayed FX-BR programme.

At the start of Lula's campaign, the Embraer/Dassault Mirage 2000BR proposal was favoured politically because it would create the most jobs in Brazil's aerospace industry. But recent statements by Lula suggest this has changed, with the president indicating he will stick with the Brazilian air force's first choice, the Sukhoi Su-35.

No decision has been taken on leasing an interim fighter to replace ageing Dassault Mirage IIIEBR/DBRs until the winning FX-BR enters service. Israel Aircraft Industries appeared to have concluded a deal for 12 Kir C-10s, but Vang VEM has entered the ring with a proposal for 18 ex-Royal Netherlands Air Force Lockheed Martin F-16A/Bs. Valued at $113.4 million, the proposal includes overhauling 16 F-16As and two F-16Bs at Varig's Rio de Janeiro maintenance facilities.

Meanwhile, Greece has ordered three Sperwer systems. As part of the deal, the UAV's operating radius from the ground station has been increased by 50km to 200km.