

Indian Navy evaluates maritime reconnaissance aircraft

The Indian Navy has completed evaluations of maritime patrol aircraft (MRA) in the United States and Spain in support of its urgent requirement to replace its retiring fleet of eight Tupolev Tu-42s.

A four-member navy team led by a one-star officer observed trials in July on MRA derivatives of the Airbus A-319 by EADS Spain and Boeing P-8A Poseidon in the US, official sources said.

But since neither of MRA derivatives exist, the flight trials involved simulations with leased Boeing 737 and A-320 platforms on representative flight profiles and mission system evaluations.

The P-8A MRA is scheduled to fly in late 2009 with initial operational capability set for 2013. The Spanish platform too is expected to be ready around the same time.

Both manufacturers are seriously examining the possibility of partnering Indian companies to jointly develop communications, data-link and identification friend-or-foe (IFF) equipment as an added sales incentive, in keeping with New Delhi's policy of indigenising its defence requirements.

In light of the burgeoning India-US strategic partnership, the Pentagon has also pledged to make additional technical military capabilities available to [New Delhi](#) as they enter the US forces.

Other bidders for the navy's MRA contract are Israel Aerospace Industries and Elta Systems with a Dassault Falcon 900 business jet derivative, Lockheed Martin with a refurbished P-3C Orion and a Russian consortium with the upgraded Ilyushin Il-38SD.

But official sources said since the navy was more interested in the longer range MRAs still under development, it was 'seriously considering' acquiring two or three of the existing shorter range aircraft as an interim measure to plug a vital operational void in patrolling India's vast coastline.

Senior Indian Navy officials have reiterated that the existing surveillance assets are insufficient to monitor the country's vast 7,516 km coastline, 1,197 island territories and the 2.01 million sq km exclusive economic zone.

The immediate measures being considered include two Il-38 MRA upgraded to the IL-38SD standard equipped with the Sea Dragon system, a fleet of 15 Dornier 228-101 aircraft and 12 Israeli Searcher and Heron-II unmanned aerial vehicles. Another three upgraded IL-38SDs are expected to join service but only by end-2008.

Consequently, the navy had begun re-evaluating a long pending US Navy (USN) offer to acquire second hand P 3C Orion MRA's via the subsidized Foreign Military Sales programme having last year turned down, after extended negotiations, Washington's proposal to lease two of them.

The navy called off the P 3C Orion lease on grounds of it being too expensive and because of the extended 18-24 month period it would take Lockheed Martin to retrofit the two MRAs to its specifications.

It was widely believed in naval aviation circles at the time that the navy's proposed P 3C Orion lease was a precursor to it purchasing eight similar aircraft for anti-piracy operations, narcotics control and

to counter natural and ecological disasters like tsunamis or oil and chemical spills.

In anticipation, Lockheed Martin had signed a non-disclosure technical assistance agreement with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in [Bangalore](#) to share export controlled data related to technical and commercial proposals to retrofit the MRAs to the navy's requirements.

The US that has embraced India as a close strategic ally and, against mounting criticism, recently entered into a landmark civilian nuclear agreement with it, wants the navy to play an extended role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to curb piracy and to neutralise terrorist threats.

It considers the Indian Navy a 'stabilising' influence in the IOR and wants India to join the Washington-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) aimed at containing and preventing the transportation via sea of weapons of mass destruction, associated systems and materials.

The Indian Navy remains ambivalent on joining this contentious initiative.

The 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations Association (ASEAN), in addition to Australia and Japan, are also increasingly looking to the Indian Navy's blue water capability and 'long sea legs' to patrol the IOR and also as a counter to China's growing naval ambitions in the region.

The US, Australian, Japanese and Singaporean navies have just concluded multi-lateral manoeuvres off India's east coast involving over 25 ships including three aircraft carriers and one American nuclear power submarine.

Over 150 fighter aircraft also participated in the exercises that concentrated on dissimilar air combat, interception of shore-based fighters and air defence.

Cross-deck helicopter operations to develop inter-operability for disaster relief and rescue missions also featured in the manoeuvres that ended Sunday.

Rahul Bedi (© IANS / India eNews)