

INDIA-US DEAL AMONG ₹46K CR DEFENCE BUYS CLEARED BY GOVT

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NEWDELHI: The defence ministry on Saturday cleared military purchases worth ₹46,000 crore, including the import of multi-role helicopters (MRH), a strategic partnership (SP) to acquire naval utility helicopters (NUH) made in India, and that of locally produced artillery guns, a government spokesperson said.

The defence acquisition council's (DAC) approval for purchasing 24 MRHs to boost the Indian Navy's anti-submarine/anti-surface warfare and surveillance capabilities comes ahead of the 2+2 talks between the defence and foreign ministers of India and the United States on September 6.

India will buy 24 Lockheed Martin-Sikorsky MH-60 Romeo choppers, likely to cost nearly ₹13,000 crore, from the US under a government-to-government deal, said two people familiar with the navy's modernisation efforts who asked not to be identified.

The MRHs are a replacement of the navy's obsolete Sea King 42/42A fleet.

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“Availability of MRH with the navy would plug the existing capability gap,” said a defence ministry release, adding that these choppers form an integral part of frontline warships, including aircraft carriers. The Sea King 42/42A helicopters were retired around 18 years ago. The new MRH will be the future mainstay of the navy’s anti-submarine/anti-ship warfare and airborne early-warning capabilities. The navy came very close to buying 16 Sikorsky S-70B Seahawk MRHs in 2016 but the deal did not materialise.

The council, headed by defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman, also approved a project worth Rs 21,738-crore for building 111 NUHs under the government’s ‘strategic partnership’ (SP) model to replace the navy’s outdated fleet of French-designed Chetak choppers.

“This is the first project under the ministry’s prestigious SP model that aims at providing significant fillip to the government’s Make in India programme,” the statement said. Guidelines for the NUH programme were cleared on July 30.

Military affairs expert Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikhande (retd) said lack of helicopters in the navy had been a crippling operational constraint.

“Now the process for getting the MRHs and NUHs actually operating at sea needs to be expedited while also creating indigenous manufacturing capacity,” he added.

The navy uses NUHs for several purposes, including search and rescue operations, medical evacuation, communication duties, anti-piracy and anti-terrorism operations, humanitarian assistance, surveillance and targeting.

The US, European and Russian rivals are expected to compete for the NUH programme by stitching up alliances with Indian partners under the SP model which lays down the template for cooperation between Indian and foreign firms to build high-tech weapons in the country through transfer of niche

technologies.

Next-generation submarines, fighter planes and armoured vehicles are covered under the SP model. DAC also cleared a project worth Rs 3,364 crore for equipping the army with 150 locally produced advanced towed artillery gun systems or ATAGS. The government sanctioned the ATAGS project in September 2012 and the Defence Research and Development Organisation partnered with Bharat Forge and Tata Power (Strategic Engineering Division) to develop two prototypes of the 155mm 52-calibre artillery guns.

The ATAGS set a record during trials in Rajasthan's Pokhran last September, firing shells to a range of 48km against the army's requirement of 40km.

The council also approved the purchase of 14 vertically launched short-range missile systems to boost the capability of warships to defend themselves against missiles attacks.