# King of the sea: The United Kingdom aims to bolster its maritime air power



**The United Kingdom is poised to take delivery next year of its first Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to fill a major gap in its capability to hunt for submarines and monitor naval activity around the country's shores. *Tim Ripley* reports on the UK effort to regenerate its shore-based air power**

In October 2016 the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* sailed through the English Channel en route to the Eastern Mediterranean. The Russian carrier's battlegroup passed fewer than 20 miles from the White Cliffs of Dover, launching Sukhoi Su-33 fighter jets and showing off Kamov Ka-52 Alligator attack helicopters on *Kuznetsov's* deck. Tourists flocked to Dover harbour to photograph the progress of the 59,439-tonne Russian carrier, which the then UK defence secretary Sir Michael Fallon dubbed the "ship of fame" because of the role its air group played in supporting the Syrian offensive against the rebel enclave in Aleppo city.

As the Russian ships had set off from their bases near Murmansk through the North Sea toward the English Channel, the UK armed forces had launched a surveillance operation to try to monitor their progress, but the only fixed-wing, long-endurance patrol asset that could be launched was a Lockheed Martin C-130J Hercules transport aircraft, while the Royal Air Force (RAF) also launched a flight of Eurofighter Typhoon combat aircraft to perform a fly-by past the Russian carrier. Although the UK government had no intention of exacerbating its already difficult relations with Moscow over the transit of the Kuznetsov carrier battlegroup so close to the United Kingdom, the incident did serve to emphasise the RAF's very limited capacity for maritime surveillance and strike. The most advanced surveillance systems on the Hercules were pairs of binoculars, while the Typhoons had no stand-off anti-ship weapons that could have engaged the carrier battlegroup outside of the engagement range of its surface-to-air missile batteries.

## Filling the capability gaps

Although the *Admiral Kuznetsov* incident attracted media attention, the RAF's maritime-air power capability gaps were already well known within the service and the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD). In the November 2015 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) a programme was launched to fill the maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) capability gap, which was left by the termination of the BAE Systems Nimrod MRA4 MPA project under the 2010 SDSR. That defence review concluded that the United Kingdom did not face a conventional military threat and that a "capability holiday" from maritime air power could be afforded in the near term.

*A developmental Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime multimission aircraft. The first P-8As for the United Kingdom should be introduced into service by April 2019. (Boeing)*

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After the near-complete Nimrod MRA4 airframes were broken up for scrap, the Royal Navy's (RN's) AgustaWestland Merlin HM2 maritime helicopters were left as the United Kingdom's sole airframe equipped to detect submarines, with sonobuoys and dipping sonar, but they have a limited range and endurance. The 2015 SDSR also resulted in a delay to the programme to replace the RN's MBDA Sea Skua anti-ship missiles on its AgustaWestland Lynx HMA8/Wildcat HMA2 helicopters, which left a gap of more than five years before the service's main shipborne maritime helicopters would receive the MBDA Sea Venom as a replacement medium-range anti-ship missile. This left the United Kingdom without a dedicated air-launched anti-ship missile.

Needing to fill these capability gaps as soon as possible, the UK government decided against holding a formal competition and opted instead to buy nine Boeing P-8A MPAs off the shelf, with government ministers arguing that a competition would have pushed back the entry into service of a useable capability until well into the next decade. An accelerated procurement process was thus implemented with the US Department of Defense (DoD) to buy the P-8As via the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) process so that the first aircraft would be delivered as part of the ongoing US Navy (USN) production run in 2019.

In US Defense Security Co-operation Agency (DSCA) export approval documents released in March 2016 the P-8A procurement, as well as associated equipment, training, and logistic support, was estimated to cost USD3.2 billion. At the same time the UK government entered into negotiations with Boeing to boost the company's UK presence by providing training and maintenance for the future P-8As and the Chinook H4/5/6 and Apache AH1 helicopters in service with the RAF and Army Air Corps respectively.

**Bringing Poseidon into service**

According to the January 2017 mandate documents for the RAF's senior responsible officer (SRO) running the P-8A programme, which were released to *Jane's* under the UK Freedom of Information Act, the capability the service is seeking to acquire is known as the UK Persistent Wide Area Surveillance – Maritime (PWAS-M).

The documents also noted that it is needed to meet an "urgent anti-submarine-warfare-driven requirement" and that initial operational capability (IOC) is required by April 2020 to deliver anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-surface warfare capabilities.

The SRO mandate set a further series of milestones, including preparations for the delivery of training in September this year, introduction into service of the first UK aircraft in April 2019, and preparation of infrastructure at RAF Lossiemouth in Moray that should be under way by August 2019.

After the intent to buy the P-8As was signalled in the November 2015 SDSR, the contracting process formally began in August 2016 when the USN, acting for the UK government under the FMS process, signed a USD68 million contract for the long-lead items for the first two aircraft. The purchase of the P-8A is being run in co-operation with the USN's Air Systems Command (NAVAIR).

Procurement activity accelerated in March 2017 when the first contracts for full production aircraft for the United Kingdom were placed as part of a batch of 17 aircraft for the USN. The delivery schedule for these Lot 8 aircraft was laid out to *Jane's* by the RAF, which envisages two aircraft being handed over to the United Kingdom in fiscal year (FY) 2019–20, three aircraft in FY 2020–21, and the last four in FY 2021–22.

By opting to take the FMS route the United Kingdom is gaining the benefit of access to USN expertise in P-8A procurement and aircraft acceptance procedures. NAVAIR is essentially acting as the United Kingdom's procurement organisation for the project by running the contracting with Boeing and other suppliers and then assessing whether the finished aircraft meet the required specifications.

The United Kingdom has also decided to follow the USN's lead on certifying the P-8A as safe and reliable to operate. Last year the UK Military Aviation Authority (MAA) revealed that it would run a largely paper-based release-to-service (RTS) certification exercise involving the inspection and validation of NAVAIR's test and evaluation documentation. By following this route the MAA hopes to complete the initial RTS documentation for the P-8A by the end of this year to enable it to enter RAF service early in 2019.

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