
Senator to Pentagon: Stop the Sweetheart Russian Helo Deals

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Over a year after *Danger Room* first reported on the Department of Defense's (DOD) plans to buy Russian helicopters, a United States senator is now demanding that the Pentagon put a stop to such purchases all together.

At issue are a series of decisions that were made to buy Russian helicopters for Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, much of it financed by United States taxpayer dollars. In a letter sent yesterday [21 October 2009] to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Republican Senator Richard Shelby blasted the Pentagon for its handling of the Russian helicopter disaster, which has included delays, cost increases, and questionable deals. Shelby wrote:

The United States has spent \$807.2 million on the purchase of Russian-made Mi-17s. Prior to this acquisition, no requirements were defined; no analysis of alternatives was completed; and no other airframes were considered. Of even further concern, there is no predictability of funds to support the Russian helicopter procurement. Multiple services are involved in this procurement effort, and yet there has not been a single aviation program management office appointed to oversee this program. In fact, it took two months of requests from my office to receive material on the subject.

The Pentagon's nearly billion dollar purchase of Russian helicopters has been orchestrated by the Army's Threat Systems Management Office (TSMO). The group chose to route no-bid contracts through ARINC, a communications and engineering firm that had almost no prior experience buying Russian helicopters, and Air Transport Europe, a small Slovak firm best known as an ambulance service. (Air Transport Europe insists it is licensed by the Moscow-based International Aviation Committee, but the Russian helicopter design bureau does not list the company as a certified overhaul facility.)

Shelby says the entire Russian helicopter strategy has been a total failure, citing in particular the ARINC contract for Iraq. "Eighteen months later, the \$345 million United States/Iraqi acquisition contract is nearly a year behind schedule; and the cost of airframes has skyrocketed," Shelby wrote in his letter to Gates.

The question now is whether the problem is really Russian helicopters per se or simply a mismanaged acquisition strategy. For Shelby, the answer is clear.

We should provide the Iraqis and the Afghans with the optimum helicopter for their lift requirements, he writes. We cannot do this by basing our decisions on false assumptions, a total lack of requirements analysis, and the Russians.

Shelby, who is from Alabama, certainly has constituent reasons for questioning the choice of Russian helicopters; his home state is a hub for helicopter manufacturing. It is also not clear whether immediately stopping Russian helicopter purchases now is in anybody's best interest (except perhaps Sikorsky's and Bell's). Mi-17s have been bought for Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for a variety of reasons—some of them sensible—including availability, price, and capabilities.

But Russian helicopters are only cheaper and better if they actually get delivered. Tragically, no helicopters have been delivered under the ARINC contract for Iraq, even though all the money was paid upfront. Another 10 helicopters bought through ARINC for Afghanistan are also nowhere near delivery.