

The UK Opted for the British Merlin Over the American Seahawk in the Defence Procurement Decision

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In the early 2000s, the UK Ministry of Defence seriously considered purchasing American Sikorsky MH-60 Seahawk helicopters instead of adopting the British-designed Merlin for a key naval aviation role. This procurement dilemma reflected broader debates over defence trade-offs

between international cost savings and maintaining sovereign industrial capability.

At the time, the Royal Navy was evaluating options to replace its ageing Westland Sea King fleet. One contender was the Sikorsky MH-60 Seahawk, a proven US maritime helicopter. Trials and discussions reportedly took place, but due to concerns over interoperability with UK carriers, ammunition lift arrestor systems on ski-jump carriers, and political resistance to relying on foreign platforms, the Seahawk option was ultimately abandoned.

Instead, the government awarded the contract to EH Industries for the EH101 Merlin as an amphibious and anti-submarine warfare helicopter. That decision aligned with prior controversy around the Westland-Sikorsky partnership in the late 1980s, which had led to the infamous Westland Affair and forced the cancellation of a British variant—the WS-70 Black Hawk.

The choice to continue with Merlin preserved jobs in Yeovil and sustained British airframe design capacity. Over time, 30 Merlin HM2 helicopters entered service, many adapted to carry the Royal Navy's airborne surveillance and control system, known as Crowsnest. These aircraft replaced Sea King ASaC.7 helicopters and reached full operational capability by mid-2025 after overcoming early software and production delays.

Despite Merlin proving its worth, critics say that buying off-the-shelf Seahawks could have filled capability gaps faster and at a lower upfront cost. However, the strategic value of supporting domestic defence

manufacturing and retaining control over sensitive systems factored heavily in decision—making.

Today, the UK is again assessing future maritime airborne early warning requirements under programmes like Project Vixen and the New Medium Helicopter competition. The debate continues between acquiring proven foreign designs and nurturing home—grown platforms.

Some commentators argue that placing too much emphasis on domestic industry limits flexibility, while others insist it safeguards sovereignty and ensures long—term capability. The Merlin’s eventual performance has vindicated many of its defenders, even as lessons remain for future procurement choices.

In sum, the British decision to prioritise Merlin over Seahawk was not merely about helicopter features; it reflected longstanding tensions between operational expediency and national industrial strategy. That choice, rooted in cautious pragmatism, continues to shape the evolution of UK rotary—wing forces.