

PENTAGON FINALLY SURRENDERS, CANCELS NEW PURCHASE OF RUSSIAN HELICOPTERS THROUGH DEALER SUPPLYING SYRIA

Back in June, I wrote about the deceit employed by the Pentagon in going against the advice of SIGAR (pdf) and explicit language in the NDAA to purchase Russian Mi-17 helicopters through the arms dealer Rosoboronexport. Because Rosoboronexport has been supplying weapons to the Assad regime in Syria, the helicopter purchase took on additional levels of outrage. It appears that the Pentagon did get about half of the helicopters it wanted by claiming to use leftover 2012 funds (use of 2013 funds for the helicopters was banned in the NDAA), but they have now cancelled plans to use 2014 funds for the remaining helicopters that had been planned.

Both AP and Reuters inform us of the cancellation of the order. The Reuters story notes that the procurement system for the helicopters is the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation:

Reuters reported in August that the Defense Criminal Investigative Service had opened a criminal probe into the Huntsville, Alabama, Army aviation unit that oversees the Mi-17 program, and ties between the unit's former chief and two foreign subcontractors.

Texas Senator John Cornyn did a bit of a victory dance over the cancellation. As described in the AP story:

Bipartisan opposition to the Mi-17 acquisition grew as the violence in

Syria escalated and U.S. relations with Russia deteriorated. A growing number of lawmakers from both political parties objected to acquiring military gear from Rosoboronexport, which has provided Assad's regime with weapons used against Syrian civilians.

"I applaud the Defense Department's decision to cancel its plan to buy 15 additional Mi-17 helicopters from Rosoboronexport," Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said in an emailed statement. "Doing business with the supplier of these helicopters has been a morally bankrupt policy, and as a nation, we should no longer be subsidizing Assad's war crimes in Syria."

But this victory by opponents of the sale comes after a large victory by the Pentagon in the earlier battles:

Rosoboronexport announced Monday that 12 of the Mi-17s had been delivered to Afghanistan in the month of October. The shipments, the export agency said, reflected the joint effort between Russia and the U.S. to combat international terrorism.

The AP story spends a bit of time on how Mi-17's were chosen:

Top U.S. military officials have maintained the Russian-made helicopters are ideally suited for the Afghans, who are rebuilding their air force and need a reliable and easy-to-operate helicopter for transporting troops throughout the country's harsh environment.

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Cornyn and other members of Congress also argued the Defense Department

should have more seriously considered acquiring an American-made helicopter for the Afghans. The U.S. Army's Chinook, manufactured by defense giant Boeing in Pennsylvania, and a transport helicopter made by Sikorsky in Connecticut, were among the possible options.

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Carter told House lawmakers in September that multiple reviews and assessments were conducted of more than two dozen helicopters that were either available or in development. Carter said the Afghans are very familiar with the Mi-17 and none of the other aircraft examined met the requirements.

That last bit about "none of the other aircraft examined met the requirements" is the most infuriating to me. And that is where Congress should be directing its energies, but I see no evidence of it. Here is how I described what I thought to be the worst part of this fiasco back in June:

Despite the fact that the US has been at war in Afghanistan continuously for almost twelve years now, and despite the spectacular failure of US helicopters under haboob (dust storm) conditions in the failed April, 1980 Iran hostage rescue attempt, it appears that Russian helicopters are more reliable in desert conditions and easier to maintain in flying order with a less sophisticated ground crew than US helicopters.

Why aren't Congressional war hawks calling for the US to develop a helicopter that can function under desert conditions? This is one actual military development project that could have a real justification and yet I see no calls for a directed effort to solve a huge existing

problem.

There is a second aspect to this fiasco that also is escaping high levels of attention. Tucked nearly at the end of the Reuters article, we have this bit:

It remains unclear whether the Pentagon has alternative plans to bolster the Afghan Air Force's capabilities to fight militants and drug trafficking.

As I noted back in June, among the gigantic errors the US made in attempting to procure the helicopters was the decision of where in the Afghan government the operation should be housed. The US took an existing operation within Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior that was aimed at drug interdiction and moved it to the Ministry of Defense so that the operation would be run by Afghanistan's Special Operations forces. The new operation would be tasked with both counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations. The result of this move has been to create a giant turf war within the Afghan government. Oh, and the counternarcotics bit is going swimmingly, as we learned yesterday that a record acreage of poppies was harvested this year.