Thales to Provide Sonar Systems for Future Dutch Submarine Fleet

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PARIS — The French company specializing in defense electronics, Thales, has secured a contract to supply the entire sonar and acoustic system for the Royal Netherlands Navy's Orka-class submarine fleet, which will be built by Naval Group, the company announced in a statement on Wednesday.

The submarine sonar contract is the first in 15 years for Thales outside its main underwater markets, which include France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, said Emmanuel Michaud, vice president for submarines and surface ships at Thales. The sensor suite for the four Dutch submarines will form the basis of Thales' export offering for other upcoming submarine programs, he added.

The contract "is our springboard towards a new generation of submarine systems intended for export," said Michaud. "This contract is absolutely crucial for us because it is the first of what we hope will be a long series of contracts. The submarine market is currently very active."

Thales has signed an agreement with Naval Group to supply the four sonar suites, with a contract value ranging between 100 million euros ($109 million) and 1 billion euros, according to Michaud, who declined to provide an exact price. "Let's say we are extremely satisfied with this contract." Thales secured a contract from BAE Systems in 2020 to supply the sonar system for the United Kingdom's four Dreadnought-class nuclear submarines, valued at 330 million pounds ($428 million).

The sensor suite will be "heavily derived" from the system equipping the French Suffren-class nuclear attack submarines, according to Michaud. The same Thales team working on the delivery of the last three of the six Suffren-class submarines will work on the Dutch contract, he said.

A year ago, the Netherlands chose Naval Group to build four conventionally powered attack submarines in a project valued at up to 5.65 billion euros to replace the now obsolete Walrus-class submarines. The Dutch submarines will be based on the same Barracuda program by Naval Group that produced the Suffren class.

"We have Barracuda, we have invested a lot thanks to the Ministry of Defense and the French Navy, and this gives us a competitive advantage," said Michaud. "We continue to improve our product with this export submarine contract with very, very strict requirements from the Dutch Navy."

Most of the products included in the sonar suite for the Dutch submarines already exist and are progressively improved in terms of hardware and software, he stated.

The first two submarines of the Dutch contract are expected for delivery by 2034, and "we are already working at full speed to be on time for the delivery of the first submarine," said Michaud. He added that, given the complexity of everything that needs to be assembled, "I will be happy in 2034 when everything is delivered."

Thales claims to be the world leader in sonar, equipping about 50 submarines and holding about 50% of the accessible market share. Customers include the navies of France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, as well as Singapore, Chile, and Malaysia.

Thales will provide "the entire range of what can be installed on a submarine regarding acoustics" for the Dutch submarines, including the main antennas such as the bow-mounted

cylindrical array and the flank sonar array, according to Michaud. Other equipment will include an intercept array on top of the submarine and a mine and obstacle avoidance sonar that can also perform seabed mapping.

The French company is working with the Dutch company Optical11 to develop a towed linear array using optical technology that will be included in Thales' sonar suite. The Amsterdam-based company claims to be the world leader in fiber optic sensing technology for ultra-sensitive early warning systems.

The technology maturity level for the optical array "is not yet at a stage that would allow us to immediately move to full production," Michaud stated. Thales and Optical11 agreed on a feasibility study in November that will last for most of 2025, with the aim of including the technology on the Dutch submarines. "It is a very challenging but very promising technology."

"If this succeeds, and we are working hard to make it succeed, we will definitely adopt this technology or product for our contracts with exporting countries," said Michaud. He added that the French Ministry of Defense is also developing an optical towed array, however, this is proprietary "and we will never be able to export it."

The Dutch submarines will be equipped with a double row of flank sonar arrays as a cost-effective way to increase sensor surface area and improve detection, as developing a new array would have been "extremely expensive" and would have taken too long, Michaud said.

Regarding a plan by Poland to purchase submarines, Michaud said that Thales does not comment on market opportunities driven by Naval Group. He stated that Thales' strategy is to offer a "very versatile" sonar suite that can meet the requirements of many customers, avoiding additional developments that would increase costs, time, and risks.

News link: https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/03/19/thales-to-deliver-sonar-suite-for-future-dutch-submarine-fleet/