

The French Navy to become first operator of Airbus' Aliaca vertical uncrewed aerial system

Marignane, France, 03 February 2026 – The French Directorate General of Armament (DGA) has ordered a new version of the SMDM ("Onboard Mini Aerial Drone Systems for the Navy") from Airbus Helicopters (via its subsidiary Survey Copter). This UAS will now be delivered in the new vertical take-off and landing configuration (VTOL). The DGA has ordered a total of 34 Aliaca systems for the French Navy since 2022. Deliveries of this new version will begin in May 2026, following a qualification campaign.

"We are proud to be able to deliver the VTOL version of the Aliaca to the French Navy for the first time," said Christophe Canguilhem, Aliaca programme director at Airbus Helicopters. "The French Navy has successfully operated the Aliaca from its ships and from land for several years. The SMDM, as it is named in the French Navy, has demonstrated its full potential in operation," he added. "With the VTOL version, the French Navy will be able to operate the Aliaca with even more flexibility. This amendment to the initial contract demonstrates that our solution is now mature and available for our customers worldwide."

The Aliaca VTOL was tested on land and at sea at the end of 2024 and throughout 2025. Unveiled in April 2025, the Aliaca VTOL was developed in less than a year from a version already proven in operations within the French Navy. This tactical mini-drone is equipped with four propellers, allowing for vertical take-off and landing while maintaining its fixed-wing propulsion mode during the mission. It has a maximum take-off weight of 25 kg, a wingspan of 3.5 m, and a length of 2.1 m. With an endurance of two hours, a range of 50 km, Aliaca is equipped with a camera, a high-performance gyro-stabilised electro-optical/infrared system, and an Automatic Identification System that is capable of identifying a ship within a radius of several hundred kilometres.

This evolution of the SMDM maintains the performance and architecture of the existing system while offering faster deployment and a reduced logistical footprint due to the absence of launch-and-recovery systems. Operators retain the same ground station, which is already proven and recognised for its ease of use.

Qualified by the DGA and operational since 2022 as the "remote binoculars" of the French Navy, the SMDM currently equips patrol vessels (PHM - high-sea patrol vessels and POM - overseas patrol vessels) and surveillance frigates. Since the summer of 2023, it has also been deployed from the French coast for search and rescue missions in the English Channel. The vertical take-off and landing version will equip other types of French Navy vessels to perform various missions: maintaining tactical situational awareness, combating illegal activities, traffic and coastal surveillance, search and rescue, and detection of

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suspicious behaviour. In the long term, the system is also expected to be operated from land to support the coastal surveillance network.

This new configuration of the SMDM will enter a qualification phase by the DGA in early 2026 for land and sea trials before being declared operational. The SMDM, in its "fixed-wing" version, will continue to be implemented on equipped ships and maintained in operational condition for a period of at least seven years.



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Contacts for the media**Emmanuel Huberdeau**

AIRBUS

Helicopters

+33 6 17 27 93 31

emmanuel.huberdeau@airbus.com**Gaelle Robuchon**

AIRBUS

Helicopters

+33 6 25 25 67 63

gaelle.robuchon@survey-copter.com**Follow us**

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