

WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Baby and the Bath Water



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As the A400M saga takes on rather dramatic twists and tempers rise, the temptation becomes nearly overpowering to start pointing fingers, calling names and apportioning blame. This apparently holds true for not only outside commentators such as the undersigned, but even those in government, the military and industry whose decisions and attitudes in the weeks and months ahead will shape the ultimate fate of the programme.

Yet such a temptation much be resisted, because in the end it will amount to a sterile and self-destructive exercise. Rather, would everybody please keep their heads quite cool and start by where we should rationally begin – namely, by rationally assessing whether or not there still is an operational requirement for an aircraft such as the A400M, and whether industry can credibly claim being in a position to develop and manufacture it at a cost our economies can afford.

The original requirement from several European Air Forces for a new generation transport aircraft, one that would carry a significantly heavier payload than the C-130 HERCULES and over longer distances, did make and still makes a lot of operational sense. While the vision of entire brigades and divisions being projected through airlift with all of their heavy equipment is of course baloney (and particularly so in a European context), the fundamental significance of adequate air transport capabilities to sustain the increasingly more important peace support operations all around the globe is plain for everybody to see. To have even a relatively modest deployment such as the ISAF mission to Afghanistan critically dependent on the good will of a private Russian air freight company is clearly not acceptable.

By the same token, the original decision to capitalise on the successful Airbus

experience and have the new transport aircraft developed in Europe, rather than buying it from an American supplier, did make and still makes a lot of commercial and industrial sense. Even by discounting the (substantial) possibilities for export sales to third countries, the cumulative European requirement alone is more than sufficient to fully justify a domestic programme.

This said, it seems rather intuitive to me that the main emphasis should now lie not on identifying a culprit to be tarred and feathered, but rather on finding ways – if such exist – to try and save the programme, for the sake of all of those involved. As one who in the past repeatedly voiced his concern and criticism over the way the programme was being managed, and in particular the industry's nonchalant attitude in taking very serious technological development risks, I feel I can say so in clean conscience and without being suspected of harbouring too subservient an attitude towards industry.

It remains, though, that such a rescue effort cannot possibly be launched and implemented without a determined commitment towards not repeating the same mistakes over and over again. The risk here is not such much to throw the baby out with the bath water, but even worse – to throw the baby out and keep the bath water, i.e. the very same attitudes and ways that have brought the programme on the brink of disaster.

The British Defence Secretary, John Hutton is only too right when he points out the adverse implications of the delays as announced by EADS/Airbus, and clearly enough his colleagues in the other participating nations share the same concerns. He is also very right when he stresses that OCCAR has a valid and legally binding fixed-price contract with Airbus, complete with penalties for late delivery, and industry's problems in this regards are for industry to

solve. Such a stern attitude in clarifying the governments' position is fully justified and hopefully will contribute towards industry cleaning up its act as regards management procedures and cost estimates, but unfortunately it is of little help in providing a quick fix to some very real technical hiccups.

On the other side of the fence, EADS' CEO Louis Gallois has since backpedaled from his exceptionally ill-advised move in September last year, when he effectively threatened to drop the programme unless the development-cum-production contract was amended to his company's liking. EADS' current position could rather be constructed as, "we are in deep you-know-what, and yes, it is our fault but we weren't alone in taking bad decisions, and would anyone please lend us a hand?"

I would suggest that the answer should be yes, and indeed I reckon that eventually such an affirmative answer will be provided. This, however, shall be under two conditions.

First, while there is an obvious need for the programme to be drastically reviewed, this should take place on the basis of what the Air Forces need, and the taxpayer is prepared to fund – and not of what industry would find it convenient to deliver. An aircraft that cannot airlift a BOXER, a PUMA or a WARRIOR is simply not worth the effort, period.

Second, for the European industry to be trusted to remain responsible for this programme, would require a fundamental change in culture and attitude on their part. To say it bluntly, they must drop their deep-seated persuasion that their comfortable status as a monopolistic supplier will forever protect them from having to face the consequences of their own mistakes.


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