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IMPACT OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS ON SELECTED EUROPEAN UNION AIR FORCES AND THEIR CAPABILITIES

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Abstract: *Generally, it is extremely difficult for military leadership to justify investment into security and defence. In case of the European Union, it is even more obvious. European citizens prefer to spend money in sensitive areas like education or health, rather than to solve the problems in distant countries and increasing the domestic safety level. In combination with financial crisis, all European states have started reducing their defence expenditures. Therefore, it is no surprise, that western Europe countries as a one of the largest contributors to NATO expeditionary(deployable) forces are affected either. This article is giving an overview of selected Air Forces and their current problems with limited finances, reductions of aircrafts and with loss of some of their long and hard build capabilities.*

Keywords: *Air Forces, Defence, Capabilities, Aircraft, Security, Cuts*

1. INTRODUCTION

We need to rationalize and to integrate the available assets for better addressing the problems we are currently facing, and which we will face in foreseen future. Ministry of Defence is too big, overstaffed and inefficient. Our today's forces are structured to fight the Cold war conflicts, not the low-intensity warfare increasingly confronting our armed service as a part of a coalition. These and similar statements can be heard almost every day. Impacts of the unpredicted economic crisis have equally reached all parts of the Armed Service. And their Air Forces, as main fund consumer within the Armed Forces, are suffering the most. Defence capabilities are easy and quick to get rid off, but it is extremely hard and expensive to rebuild it. With continuing economic uncertainty, the

defence sector will not be the key area for any government for next years. It is clear that nor desired nor current level cannot be maintained for a long time and defence ministries will be forced to choose priorities, reduce some capabilities, investments, personnel and handle the situation with reduced finances.

2. UNITED KINGDOM

Britain, the world's sixth largest economy, has the fourth biggest defence budget and the third largest contributor after the United States (US) and Greece. Britain is also a member of one key alliance, the so-called "Special relationship" with the US. London emphasizes the imperative of closer financial, military and industry ties with France. The reason is simple. Both nations are the members of NATO, the European Union (EU), are Nuclear

weapon states and have similar national security interests. Their armed forces are of comparable size and capability and it is clear that France will remain one of the UK's main strategic partners. [2]

The cuts have impacted all the aircrafts in its inventory – those already in use, newly purchased and planned to procure. The ageing Tornados will be reduced to five squadrons and an Operational Conversion Unit (OCU). That means the fleet is likely to number fewer than 70 machines. Moreover, between 2020 and 2025, this type will be replaced by Typhoons responsible for all Air Defense missions as Quick Reaction Alert, air superiority, fighter attack and recce missions. Then the future Royal Air Force (RAF) will rely exclusively/solely on Typhoons, with proposed number of 110 and on not more than sixty F-35C, in use by both RAF and Royal Navy (RN).

Era of the RN as a naval power has passed. After withdrawing of the Harrier fleet and retiring of the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal, Britain will not get involved in a potential conflict before the introduction of the new carrier and fixed-wing deck aircrafts. So London has accepted the Carrier Strike capability gap for more than a decade.

Hand in hand with aircraft reductions go the base closures. Some of them have already been closed, but there are still more to come. Actually, base closures are always a contentious issue. The sensitive loss of the Nimrod MRA4, a formidable Combat Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) platform, was the least surprising decision thanks to years of delay and rising. However, the order to stop the production caught some units in pre-finalized phase or just freshly built and the decision to abandon airborne maritime reconnaissance platform is very weird for and island state.

The future of the RAF is very uncertain. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) has apparently reached a point where income and expenditure are broadly matched, yet to do so have seen capabilities slashed in the short term with the promise of rebirth at the end of the decade. UK Defence still has several

procurement minefields to negotiate on the way to fiscal prudence while delivering the capability it needs. The future strategic tanker, tactical transport aircraft, Joint Strike Fighter and new flying training platform contract are all major programmes where cost growth is not just likely, but inevitable as initial requirements change. [2]

Briefly, UK is nowadays affected with a total loss ISTAR capability, financial climate dictates that Britain must be prepared, in short term at least, to rely on her allies to provide capabilities she cannot afford alone. It can be seen from the foregoing that Britain will be fielding many fewer platforms in the years ahead and only time will tell if she will have the capability to meet future challenges.

3. BELGIUM

Of the four services making up the Belgian armed forces (BAC), the Air component will be one of the most affected by a new round of defence cuts. Interesting that no unit will be formally disbanded, but some capabilities will be scaled down by the end of 2012. Only transport will remain largely unaffected. The training of young pilots will continue in the multinational framework. The Franco-Belgian programme launched in 2004 at various French bases – Tours and Cazaux (Belgium has relocated all of its Alpha Jet trainers here) for the students selected for fighter training, Avord for transport and Dax for the future helicopter pilots.

The most numerous type in the BAC fleet remains the F-16AM/BM fighter-bomber, but in dwindling numbers. Back in 1979, Belgium ordered a total of 160 F-16s, but attrition and restructuring of the armed forces have slashed the operational inventory to 54 aircraft. Despite their age and the fact that no decision has been taken on a possible replacement – Brussels refused to join the US led Joint Strike Fighter programme or to procure European origin aircrafts. All Belgian F-16s are available for NATO and/or European Union operations – six of them are currently deployed to Southern Afghanistan to provide Close Air Support to the NATO's ground troops. Overall, while essential assets



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have been preserved for the short term, the prospects are not good for the BAC, as like many other NATO Air Forces, its capabilities are slowly being eroded. The cash strapped Belgian MoD has not launched any new acquisition programmes over the past two years and it will face, during the next decade, the difficult challenge of replacing most of its ageing fleet combat, transport and training aircraft. [3]

4. NETHERLANDS

The new round of defence cuts followed after those from 2003 and 2007 has resulted to the dramatic lost of considerable operational capacity for the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf). The 2003 plans forced the RNLAf to reduce its remaining fleet of 137 F-16s - all have been modified to Mid-Life Update (MLU) standard in the years before – to 108 aircraft. This came with one fighter and two helicopter squadrons disbandment, while two airbases were closed. The 2007 cuts were less drastic, but nevertheless the RNLAf had to give up another 18 fighters, this time reducing the fleet to just 87 aircraft.

With another 19 F-16s proposed to left the inventory, the Netherlands will have just 68 jets left, less than half of the fighter force it had eight years ago. It is important to know the fact that 10 aircrafts are permanently stationed in Tucson, Arizona for pilot training. Together with poor serviceability due to spare parts shortage in last years, available aircraft numbers will be down to somewhere around thirty to forty percent, thus no more than thirty of them will likely to be ready for operations at a given time. And the RNLAf has always been engaged in a great number of activities worldwide, i.e. over Afghanistan, Libya, Baltic Air Policing or various international exercises.

As for the fighter fleet replacement, the MoD has never made a secret of which fighter it prefers as its future combat aircraft. The Netherlands entered the F-35 Lightning II programme in 2002 as a Level Two partner. However, acquisition of substantial numbers of F-35s remains uncertain and the final decision is scheduled to 2014, due to sensitivity of project and development delays and steadily rising prizes of the aircraft. Therefore, service entry of the new fighter is now being foreseen for 2019 and the total number of F-35s to be acquired will probably not exceed 48. Another big problem for the RNLAf is the helicopter shortage which has resulted in limited transport capacity, support of special operations and fire fighting assistance. [7]

The defence cuts will also have implications for many running or planned acquisition and modernisation projects which will be push forward at least one year. Despite being forced to work with a reduced budget, the MoD keeps looking forward and plans to invest in future developments, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

Participation of the RNLAf in numerous international operations has taken its toll and has caused budget overruns that have to be compensated for. For the time being, the Dutch Air Forces will be ready for every possible mission but within its limited capabilities.

5. FRANCE

As one of the ten richest nations in the world, France plays an important international role and a key position in the European Community. Never in its history has the French Armed Forces (FAF) been involved in so many peacetime and wartime operations around the world, with much of its staff and

aircraft dispatched to foreign locations. Moreover, France has four quick reaction alert (QRA) bases available in case of emergency or threat and at least one transport aircraft is on one hour alert in case of a hostage situation. France also maintain a nuclear deterrence, so allocated crew, aircraft and nuclear missiles are always ready. [1]

The Country is well known for operating mainly indigenous types of aircraft. The FAF is currently caught in the middle of a major renewal programme, with numerous new types now operational or about to enter service. Downsizing is also high on the agenda, with countless units to disband to free financial resources for major acquisition programmes within a given financial envelope.

France's Defence White Paper, published in 2008, has outlined a sweeping number of changes to be introduced in the next few years to increase the flexibility of the French Armed Forces. To reduce costs and to optimize the use of resources, the Armée de l'Air's structure was seriously reworked in the last few years, with the number of territorial, organic and operational commands reduced from nine to just four. As a part of very strict base realignment and closure policy, the Armée de l'Air is set to close a number of operational platforms and to concentrate all its assets on larger air bases in order to create economies of scale.

As a result of the cuts the FAF is planning to postpone numerous programmes including the upgrade of fighter-bombers fleet and acquisition of the new domestic Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft. The question is how these delays will affect French combat and deployment capabilities. Now, it is the Rafale that is getting the priority among all others types of aircraft and is slowly replacing the ageing types of aircraft. On the other hand, the Rafale programme is consuming the most of the financial resources dedicated to the FAF and other squadrons equipped with Mirages are fighting against spare parts shortages and low serviceability.

By 2015, the FAF combat fleet will be reduced in numbers (around 240) and types in service, which should assist maintenance and reduce costs. Especially thanks to Rafale, from

an air force with specialised squadrons, each of them accomplishing a couple of missions, units will become multi mission ready. However, due to delays and cuts, Paris will have to deal with lack of transport aircraft and with ageing jet trainer replacements.

6. GERMANY

German defence reform plans revealed a lot of changes and cuts in the Armed Forces. They would still be capable of providing the government with a broad spectrum of capabilities and options to act. While the Army will be hit most by the cuts, loosing two full divisions, the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) seems to be slightly better off, although its personnel will be reduced by almost one third. According to the latest proposals revealed in October 2011,, the Luftwaffe is going to shift its focus „away from combat against enemy air war assets“, while at the same time maintaining the capability to mount front line operations in a high intensity environment. Increased importance will be attached to „air support operations as well as reconnaissance and surveillance“. As part of this process, the Air Force's Divisions will be restructured into Commands overseeing certain assets of capabilities.

The Luftwaffe will rely on multirole Typhoons and ageing Tornados, most likely the recce/electronic combat variant, that is going to convert to the Eurohawk UAV in near future. As of its structure, out of the three fighter and three attack wings, just one large fighter wing and one attack wing will survive. The Air Force Academy and its associated air base will close and the Academy will move to Roth. All rotary-wing assets will be concentrated with the helicopter wing at Holzdorf Air Base and all transport assets are to join together in one transport wing as well. Only the US-based pilot training centre will remain untouched. As for the Air Bases, it has not yet been decided how many and which one/s of them are on the list for closure, but the number will be four at least. [6]

One surprise is that the Air Force is going to exchange the NH-90 utility helicopters for the CH-53s, presently flown by the Army Air



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Corps. The whole German army aviation is also going to downsize. There will be two regiments containing the transport utility helicopters and another regiment of Tiger attack helicopters within a new rapid reaction division, but the force will be cut to a third of its current size.

7. CONCLUSION

It is nothing new that all European Air Forces are suffering from devastating defence cuts. Impacts and consequences of these reductions for the countries mentioned above are shown here in detail. These cuts simply do not allow the current or desired high political and security ambition level to be maintained. All efforts are now aimed at rebuilding the armed forces to a "leaner and meaner" concept. Unless it is tested in wartime, we can never be certain just how much defence is enough, and we will always be in the business of trying to manage and mitigate risks, rather than eliminate them. The countries of former Western Europe are enthusiastic in its promotion of cooperation, and multinational solutions will also feature more prominently in NATO's revised defence planning system. For example, London and Paris have recently announced a major defence cooperation agreement, including nuclear testing, a combined, joint expeditionary force, and aircraft carriers. Belgium and Netherlands are negotiating about establishing a mutual transport base. Generally in Europe, the opportunity to take a truly strategic approach to defence cooperation and partnership has been missed. Nonetheless, there is every reason to expect that collaborative European projects will continue to be features of the defence landscape.

In many respects, then, the economic crisis has merely accelerated post-Cold War trends

in Europe's armed forces, which have seen large warfighting military structures dismantled in favour of smaller, well-trained, deployable, sustainable and flexible units, better suited to deal with the types of conflicts we see today. European Unions' armed forces will certainly be less able to fight major wars, but they may, with the intelligent use of reduced resources – which, as already discussed, presents major challenges – be able to undertake smaller-scale military tasks more effectively and more efficiently. [5]

One important aspect of this economic crisis is that it has reminded us that there are many more risks to our security and well-being than military ones. Risks to our financial security are perhaps more likely to arise than military threats and have the potential to cause substantial and lasting damage.

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