

Well, Hum, OK, But...



and the malignant satisfaction of “teaching ‘em a lesson”, would be a very meagre counterbalance to the unmitigated disaster of a cancellation in operational and industrial terms.

Yet, one cannot avoid being disturbed by certain aspects and implications of the decision

Within the space of a single week, European Governments managed to clear their act and put the two main ongoing cooperation programmes for military aircraft back on track. First on 24 July came the decision to try and save the A400M strategic/tactical transport aircraft through a renegotiated contract (and hopefully a revised programme management structure). And on 31 July after much hesitation, bickering and not-so-well concealed attempts at cutting and running if only one could take off the Nessus’ shirt of contractual obligations, the Tranche 3 contract (officially half-tranche, 3A) for the Eurofighter programme was finally signed.

Taken at its face value, this is most certainly excellent news for the Air Forces as well as for industry and I’ll daresay everybody in defence. But the festive mood, justified as it might be should not make us blind to the fact that certain aspects of both moves do give ground for serious concerns.

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With so many exceedingly important factors, interests and considerations being involved in the ups and downs of the A400M saga, and with quite a few of them being in direct contradiction with each other, it was arguably unavoidable that even the most prudent and logical decision being taken in trying to identify a way forward for the programme would leave a bittersweet taste in one’s mouth.

The participating countries have now jointly decided on a further “grace period” until the end of the year, which comes on top of the previous three-month extension granted in April when the contractual deadline for the aircraft’s first flight expired with the A400M still firmly glued to the ground. Needless to say, this implies that the governments would rather save the programme than cancel it, nor do they want to punish EADS by imposing the heavy financial penalties they are legally entitled to. The months ahead will be used to try and define a new overall structure for the programme, that would necessarily require a complete renegotiation of the existing contract in terms of technical and operational specifications, time schedule and costs.

In itself, the decision to carry on with the A400M effort makes eminent sense. The European Air Forces do need a new transport aircraft for both tactical and strategic roles, and there is plenty of political and industrial reasons to argue for this to be a European-designed and -manufactured plane. No matter the very strong reservations one might harbour about the way industry has been handling the project so far, it remains that at this point in time for the participating countries to completely cancel the programme would come dangerously close to cutting off one’s nose to spite one’s face. The money that could be extracted from EADS as penalties and compensations,

as announced in Le Castellet.

First of all, there is nothing in the wording of the communiqué to unequivocally indicate the end of the year as the firm, final deadline for the programme to be brought back on track – or else. Unfortunately, past experience is only too clear a pointer to the dangers of such a nonchalant approach. What is supposed to happen, should current plans for a new contract to be finalised by October and then signed by year’s end fail to produce concrete results? Another six-month extension, perhaps? And so on and so on?

Even more significantly and indeed alarmingly, there is very little in either the official communiqué or the accompanying commentaries to suggest that the lessons of the past mistakes have been duly understood, and steps will be implemented to avoid repeating them.

There is no doubt that renegotiating the contract would unavoidably mean giving EADS and Airbus Military more time and more money to design and produce an aircraft, substantially below the original performance and specifications. EADS has made it very clear all along that this is what they need and want in order to “find an agreement that is technically and contractually acceptable to both sides”, and so be it. But it is not at all clear what the governments have obtained, or at least intend to obtain in exchange for such magnanimous concessions. What seemed to be

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stern warnings in the past few weeks to the effect that “industry must bear the consequences of the programmes delays and contribute to compensating for the resulting capability deficit” have sort of disappeared into thin air. Speculations about the renegotiated contract to include EADS accepting to pay penalties for late deliveries, or/and contributing towards the loan/purchase of some C-17s and C-130Js to bridge the capability gap pending A400M availability, have the unmistakable smell of wishful thinking.

And, there is not the slightest hint at the programme being also revised as regards its management and overall structure – which in all evidence is at the very core of the problem. EADS has finally been able to correct some long-standing weaknesses in the organisation of Airbus Military (to be honest to them, these weaknesses were not their own fault and rather stemmed straight from political interference), and one certainly hopes that this move will have a positive impact on the A400M programme as far as industrial management is concerned. But on the other side of the fence, the governments quite clearly do not have the slightest intention to give OCCAR, which is formally in charge of managing the programme on their behalf, anything even vaguely resembling the level of authority and responsibility it would need.

This is not a good omen. If we really think that a deeply unbalanced programme such as the A400M can be rescued by simply throwing more money and time at it, we are in for further BIG troubles.

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Much the same “That’s well, but...” comment, although in a different context and for different reasons, would apply to the order for an additional 112 Eurofighters under what is officially supposed to be a first “half contract” (3A) for the expected Tranche 3 buy of 236 aircraft.

First of all, it is pretty obvious that unless WW3 descends upon us, this will in all likelihood be the last order by the four

member countries, and there will be no Tranche 3B contract. This is arguably only too logical, given the radical evolution of the strategic scenarios, and the drastic reductions in defence spending since the Eurofighter programme was originally launched. If the United States thinks it can do with 183 F-22s, it is quite difficult to maintain that, say, Great Britain needs 232 TYPHOONS for very much the same missions in a way more modest strategic context. Indeed, one should perhaps regard the RAF’s total orderbook for 160 aircraft, and the corresponding figures for the other three air forces, as an extraordinary procurement success story. If Eurofighter production is to continue beyond the 3A order, it would thus have to depend completely on export.

But while for Eurofighter procurement by the four member countries to be truncated at the current total of 472 aircraft is still fairly acceptable, there is a different disturbing point. Despite much hype being placed on multi-role/swing-role characteristics, enhanced capabilities and the like, the truth is only too painfully evident – the €9 billion Tranche 3A contract covers but aircraft to the Tranche 2 standard, i.e., virtually identical to those currently being delivered. None of the improvements and advanced features that were expected (well, make this hoped) to be introduced with the notional Tranche 3 standard, and which the Eurofighter desperately needs in order to both adapt itself to the evolving operational scenarios and remain competitive on the export market, will actually be implemented under this contract. There will be no AESA radar, no conformal fuel tanks, no TVC nozzles, not even integration of new weapons such as METEOR, STORM SHADOW or TAURUS – nothing, nichts, niente, nada.

According to the official British communiqué, “the aircraft will be equipped for [‘for’, mind you, not ‘with’] electrical, cooling and computing power to deal with projected high-technology future updates, such as new radar and new weapons, to maintain its combat edge over predicted and emerging threats.

The airframe will also accommodate future installation of additional fuel tanks mounted on the fuselage to greatly increase range and endurance”. But the actual implementation of such advances is postponed to a vague and ill-defined future, and would thus need to take the shape of retrofit programmes at substantial additional costs under separate contracts. The other three countries do not even make such cautious remarks, and rather maintain a deafening silence on the issue. Which leads us straight to two exceedingly unpalatable alternatives: either the four MoDs are following a demential procurement policy, whereby they buy aircraft they don’t need, with a view towards eventually modifying them for the real requirements – but without bothering to enshrine such modifications in a clear time schedule backed by contractually binding clauses; or, they rather want to close the Eurofighter chapter as quickly and economically as possible, and have no real intention or agreement to fund further development beyond Tranche 2 standard. Unfortunately, the latter sounds more likely.

One may speculate as to whether this is the tragic result of the air forces being absolutely unable to find the money for the aircraft they really want, or rather having lost faith in the industry’s development and management skill, or possibly a combination of both factors. Be this as it may, the highly unpleasant conclusion is that barring a future (costly) miracle, development of the Eurofighter design is effectively being terminated at Tranche 2 standard level. The aircraft’s huge development potential toward a true multi-role configuration is being senselessly thrown away. And *this* is supposed to be good news ...



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