



Time to think about a European Union operated airlift capability?

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The European Council of June 2015 will assess concrete progress regarding its conclusions of December 2013 and provide further guidance in the most promising areas. This could be the right time to propose innovative solutions to long-lasting issues and shortfalls - strategic airlift being one of them - and increased civil/military synergies. Could the A400M become part of the answer?

In December 2013 the European Council stressed the need to turn the financial crisis and its impact on national defence budgets into an opportunity, to give a new impetus to European military capability development in order to meet its level of ambition. It also invited its Member States to address remaining shortfalls and to safeguard the defence capabilities required to support the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as well as to achieve national capability targets, while avoiding unnecessary duplication. The Council adopted substantial conclusions and identified a number of priority actions and called on the Member States to deepen defence cooperation by improving the capacity to conduct missions and operations and by making full use of synergies to improve

the development and availability of the required civilian and military capabilities to do so. Member States were also encouraged to improve the EU rapid response capabilities as well as to be able to plan and deploy the right civilian and military assets rapidly and effectively. Here reference to humanitarian aid and disaster response is rather obvious.

For responding to natural and man-made disasters the Union has an array of instruments, notably those managed by the European Commission. The European Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG ECHO) is responsible for the delivery of Community humanitarian assistance and the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) has been established to enable the EU and its Member States to respond to the disasters in a timely and efficient manner. The ERCC and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism improve joint planning and response coordination in Europe and therefore complement the role of the Member States. These, and other Community instruments managed by the Commission, have specific roles and responsibilities in the Union's response towards disasters. Community humanitarian aid aims at providing relief and assistance to victims of

natural disasters in third countries, in an impartial manner and taking solely into consideration the needs of the victims. The Commission has adopted specific, unique procedures for humanitarian assistance that allow it to provide a very rapid financial response in case of emergency through United Nations agencies, international organisations such as the Red Cross, and NGOs. Humanitarian assistance covers the immediate relief response during the emergency phase as well as assistance to the victims in the transition out of a crisis or until the arrival of more structural reconstruction and development assistance. In addition to direct assistance to the victims (food, shelter, health, etc.), Community funds are occasionally provided for logistics and transport that are necessary for humanitarian aid operations.

Bringing an EU response to disasters enhances the Union's reputation and receives strong support both from its population and from the international community. In the early hours of a humanitarian aid or disaster response mission, large sized equipment like helicopters, generators, water purifying stations, etc. is to be sent to the affected regions. To ensure efficiency and an appropriate speed of response, this is most frequently undertaken by air transportation and often by aircraft capable of transporting oversized/outsized cargo as well as having strategic reach like the AN-124, the C-17 or the A400M. In a more general framework it is to be noted that Member State's military owned airlift assets have a unique capability in responding to disasters, because they are often the only assets suited to the task, are wholly owned by Member States and can therefore be targeted promptly and tasked immediately. Generally, military airlift assets are often capable of operating at small unpaved airstrips closer to the disaster scene, and thereby responding directly, which would not be the case for most civilian aircraft. Hence, using military assets in some circumstances may increase not only the speed but also the efficiency of the response.

European air forces own large quantities of tactical and strategic transport aircraft and in addition, since the 2002 NATO Summit in Prague where Member States agreed to improve strategic airlift capabilities, a large variety of projects and initiatives increased the efficiency of these assets: the Strategic Airlift Interim Solution (SALIS) contracting the Antonov AN-124 aircraft, the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) operating three Boeing C-17 aircraft, the European Airlift Centre (EAC) that became multimodal and is known today as the Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE), the European Air Transport Command (EATC) which is already recognized as the European airlift centre of expertise and finally the European Air Transport Fleet (EATF) partnership signed in 2011 under the auspices of the EDA. One could argue though that the current inventories still do not cover the required European airlift capabilities, but the substantial efforts made by the nations in the last ten years in the airlift domain provide today a much more robust, interoperable and efficient capability than before. Moreover, the latter will be further consolidated in the next decade with the delivery of the majority of the ordered A400Ms as well as the further development of EATF. However, although Member States have a large collection of military owned strategic and tactical airlift assets, there is no guarantee these assets will be available for EU's use for a given disaster. This could be due to many reasons, which include prior operational tasking of the assets or political and financial imperatives. At the end of the day the decision to commit military owned airlift assets will always remain the prerogative of Member States.

The crisis in Ukraine highlights the limits of the SALIS contract since the Russian Federation could block the use of the Russian registered AN-124 aircraft by not providing diplomatic clearance numbers for some flights. For a variety of reasons some future European

A400M operators reduced the number of ordered aircraft to be kept in service. In addition, it is recognised that in specific cases the use of military assets might be perceived as having unwelcome diplomatic and political impacts, which might restrict their potential use. This was one of the reasons why the UN guidelines¹ on the use of military and civil and defence assets in support of humanitarian operations were originally drawn up, to ensure there was no blurring of the lines between political and military actions on the one hand and neutral humanitarian missions on the other. This strict demarcation of roles is crucial if the security of humanitarian workers is not to be put further at risk. Work will therefore fully respect the specific nature and the principles of humanitarian assistance, such as the fact that military capabilities are only to be used as a last resort or in case of a lack of other possibilities. In the case of natural disasters, this impact is likely to be less intense. Nevertheless, for all the aforementioned reasons, would it therefore be the right moment for the Union to start thinking about operating an own airlift capability?

Former EU Commissioner Michel Barnier indicated in his 2006 report¹ that European emergency response to disasters is primarily a problem of capacity because pooling of resources exists only on an ad hoc and voluntary basis. Hence, Barnier suggested the creation of a European civilian protection force “Europe Aid”, having the European Union acquiring own equipment and material, in particular field hospitals, transport aircraft, and sanitary means, to be managed by volunteer Member States. The issue of air assets necessary for the air transport is seen as crucial by Barnier and must be considered in the light of existing mechanisms but also of the visibility the Union wants to give to its external action. Hence he suggested that the EU should acquire four or five A400M strategic airlift aircraft as well as some smaller aircraft to be operated from one or more multimodal airbases and be substantially financed through

an annual 10% transfer from the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).

The A400M has been ordered by six member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Luxemburg, Spain and United Kingdom) which will make this aircraft the most commonly used airlift platform in Europe for the following decades. In addition to its strategic reach, the tactical capacity the A400M brings (short distance landing, capability to operate from non-prepared platforms, capability to drop) makes it a unique platform. One hundred and sixty A400M have been ordered by the European partners and in aviation, when cooperating between similar fleet owners, the larger the fleet the lower the cost per aircraft regarding maintenance and operating cost. Therefore, why not having the Union acquiring some A400M from those Member States having aircraft in excess to perform humanitarian aid and disaster response missions or any other mission in support of the European institutions, having them tasked by the EATC and operated under the European flag out of one of the future A400M bases?

One could easily imagine operating and maintaining those civilian A400M’s side-by-side with their military equivalent, thus taking advantage of each other’s fleet, personnel and financial means. Initial investment costs have to be taken into account but operating the aircraft out of an existing A400M airbase will reduce them substantially. The biggest saving potential lays in the common life cycle costs though. A civil / military integrated airlift unit operating with crews under common rules and regulations should be the most cost effective solution to develop. Common training based on identical procedures, syllabi, and manuals would be the key factor to achieve an integrated civilian / military A400M unit. The participants should use the same existing training centres to guarantee efficiency and interoperability which should also lead to standardized qualifications for aircrew and technicians. Regarding material support and

supply a solution with common spare parts should be envisaged through a specific or already existing contract of one of the military A400M operators. As for the spare parts, a common solution for tools, ground support equipment, commercial and special vehicles should be looked for. Aircraft maintenance - centred on baseline maintenance - should be carried out at the integrated unit while major inspections should be conducted by the industrial sector.

CONCLUSION

At the European Council of December 2013 Heads of State and Government clearly expressed their willingness to strengthen the CSDP and in a specific framework to increase civilian military cooperation to be able to deploy more rapidly and effectively, especially in the framework of humanitarian aid and disaster response. For the moment, to do this, the EU is relying solely on ad hoc and volunteer commitment from its Member States. Already in 2006 former Commissioner Michel Barnier suggested in a report that the EU should therefore acquire four to five A400M strategic airlift aircraft as well as some smaller aircraft to become more autonomous. The A400M will be

the European standard for airlift in the next decades and in an initial concept for a potential multinational A400M unit Belgium, France, Germany and Luxemburg identified that a number of twelve A400M was the critical mass to reach interoperability objectives. This number would be attained if Belgium would host the EU-flagged A400M at its future A400M location where it will operate its seven A400M together with the Luxembourg one. Creating such a integrated A400M unit would definitely be a giant leap towards more European civil military cooperation. Since in June 2015 the European Council will assess concrete progress on all conclusions taken in December 2013 a proposal like this could attract some attention. Food for thought...

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