

## EDA and Nato look at ways to work together on air to air refueling

Written by Rajnish Singh on 10 October 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

Growing security threats and pressure to be less reliant on the US, is driving the development of Europe's AAR capabilities, explains Rajnish Singh



**Photo Credit: European Defence Agency**

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Military operations in Mali and Libya exposed critical shortages in air to air refuelling (AAR) capabilities, where European planes had to rely heavily on US air tankers.

To address this shortfall the European Defence Agency (EDA) has been tasked to find short, medium and long term solutions for the EU's AAR requirements.

As part of this process, the EDA organised its first AAR conference in Brussels, in September, to find

ways to fill the capability gap. Around 200 experts, stakeholders, industry representatives and political and military decision makers from both the US and Europe attended.

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They discussed the current situation, as well as future opportunities and challenges for AAR from a European, transatlantic and international perspective.

Opening the conference, Belgian defence minister Steven Vandeput admitted that following the collapse of the USSR, Belgium and other European countries decreased defence spending leading to cuts in force numbers and capabilities.

However, in the last ten years the security situation Europe faced had become more threatening. "Our continent, although at peace, is surrounded by a periphery of chaos. Today, it's clear that our security and prosperity are no longer automatically guaranteed, and that defence requires continuous and combined efforts."

"AAR tankers are among the most significant of all air power force multipliers, and a critical enabler for the projection of air power" Belgian defence minister Steven Vandeput

Vandeput pointed out the growing threat from Russia, and political instability across Northern Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East.

He also highlighted the emergence of China as a military power, as well as the melting of the polar icecaps, leading to competition for shipping routes and access to resources, as possible future areas for defence concerns. "We need to do more, we need to do better, and we need to do so together, as countries and across organisations," stressed Vandeput.

Critical to improving capabilities was EU and Nato cooperation to "reinforce each other's efforts." However he warned that duplication of capabilities had to be avoided. He also identified gaps in other strategic capabilities such as drones, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and transport aircraft. However, "AAR tankers are among the most significant of all air power force multipliers, and a critical enabler for the projection of air power."

Highlighting how far behind Europe was to the US, he pointed out that it could only field 42 tanker aircraft of 12 different types, compared to the US's 550 aircraft of only four types.

EDA chief executive Jorge Domecq agreed, arguing that AAR provision was too US dependent. But he still made a point of welcoming Nato delegates, including many from the US, saying "The work we do together in AAR is an example of how we can promote close EU-Nato cooperation."

Addressing concerns over duplication, he stressed, “The EDA AAR project was totally synchronized with the Nato roadmap. This prevents duplications, but more importantly creates opportunities for more collaboration.”

Through the EDA’s Multi-Role Tanker Transport Fleet (MMF) programme, Europe had already acquired eight Airbus A330 MRTT aircraft, with possibilities to buy more. According to Domecq this can be achieved through “firstly, coherence in defence planning and capability development at the European level, and secondly coherence with Nato’s defence planning process.”

For Domecq, “the overreaching object is to develop a coherent set of usable, deployable, interoperable and sustainable capabilities, for use in EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions or with the UN and Nato.”

Despite progress being made in acquiring tankers, the EDA head admitted, 40 more planes are still needed by 2025. A suggested short-term solution was to provide AAR pods for the newly acquired Airbus A400M transport planes, already flown by six member states.

Nato assistant secretary general for defence investment, Camille Grand said it was only ‘natural’ that Nato and the EU were increasingly working together. “We face similar threats and challenges. From both state and nonstate actors, from terrorism, hybrid warfare and cyber-attacks. We also share 22 members and both Nato and EU are force multipliers.”

“The political landscape for Nato-EU cooperation is not easy. The consequence of Brexit is not yet fully understood and political limitations sometimes influences cooperation between our two organisations” Nato assistant secretary general for defence investment, Camille Grand

He believed that there were many benefits to ‘enhancing’ cooperation. “As member heads of states and governments often state, a stronger EU will make Nato stronger too.”

Though welcoming significant improvements in AAR capabilities and commitments, there was still a 30 per cent shortfall in required capacity. For the Nato official though buying more planes was one solution, “perhaps we need to make better use of what we already have.”

Grand highlighted that increasing personnel numbers, improving interoperability, and streamlining processes and procedures on AAR between countries could all contribute towards increasing capacity. “Not addressing these issues will mean we will have to continue dealing with limitations, like those faced during operations over in Libya in 2011.”

Grand warned that despite growing inter-institutional and military relations between the EU and Nato, political issues could be a challenge, especially the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

“The political landscape for Nato-EU cooperation is not easy. The consequence of Brexit is not yet fully understood and political limitations sometimes influences cooperation between our two organisations.”

Domecq also highlighted that though they could provide AAR refuelling pods for A400M transporter planes, it was up to member states to provide the political will to use them. “There is no point in investigating how to pool pods if no aircraft are available to hang them under, in times of crisis.”

## **EATC KEY TO CAPABILITIES**

Since its creation in 2010, the European Air Transport Command (EATC) has built up expertise in air transport, Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR) and aero-medical evacuation.

EATC is fully engaged in standardising daily AAR operational processes and in running multinational training operations, such as the European Air-to-Air Refuelling Training (EART).

With the implementation of the MRTT unit, the achievement of full AAR capability for the Airbus A-400Ms and the arrival of new Lockheed C-130Js, the multinational AAR fleet under EATC authority will be tripled in the next few years, committing all seven EATC member nations, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain.

The EATC will be the major AAR force provider in Europe. This is even more relevant as refuelling is a force multiplier and therefore one of the most demanded capabilities among modern air forces. It enables air power projection and sustained air combat operations.

Relying on its expertise and commanding authority, EATC is the keystone to ramping-up the European AAR fleet. The EATC also enhances interoperability among European nations through harmonization of procedures and common training.

### **About the author**

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