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Germany's compromise plans: the Super Hornet combat aircraft for nuclear sharing

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According to the German dpa news agency, the German Defence Ministry is planning to replace the country's outdated fleet of around 90 Tornado combat aircraft with both US and European successor planes. The MoD plans to buy 45 F/A-18 (30 E/F Super Hornets as dual-capable aircraft (DCA) for nuclear sharing, and 15 EA-18G Growlers for electronic warfare), as well as 45 Eurofighter jets. According to press reports, the plans have been discussed at the political level and with industry representatives, but the Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, has still not taken the final decision. However, everything indicates that this will be the final outcome, to be announced in spring this year.

In the German Air Force Tornado combat aircraft have conducted air-to-ground tactical reconnaissance, suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD), air-to-ground attacks, and have served as dual-purpose aircraft within NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. Tornados are to be withdrawn from service in 2025. Initially, offers for their replacement were submitted in 2017 by three companies: Eurofighter (the Eurofighter Typhoon), Boeing (the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and the EA-18G Growler) and Lockheed Martin (the F-35A).

Commentary

- The German MoD's plans are the result of the conflicting political and industrial interests which Berlin has to take into account. The split of the purchase signals that the current line of German security policy will be continued and Berlin still wants to invest both into trans-Atlantic and European military cooperation. Politically the participation in NATO's nuclear sharing is for Germany still of high importance. Militarily, however, it seems that enhancing the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence is for Berlin of secondary importance in the face of political and industrial constraints.
- Politically, Berlin has been under pressure from Paris to reject the US offer (in particular the F-35A), and to select the Eurofighter as the sole successor to the Tornado aircraft in all the roles listed above (including nuclear sharing) in the spirit of building up European industrial strategic autonomy. This would imply a possible temporary loss of capabilities for participating in NATO's nuclear deterrence and for electronic warfare after 2025. The process of certifying the Eurofighter to carry US B61 nuclear bombs could be time-consuming, just as the process of adapting the aircraft for the SEAD role. In a partial concession to French pressure, Berlin excluded early on the F-35A from the proceedings

and chose a compromise solution: splitting the purchase into two parts and choosing the F/A-18E/F (for which the process of certifying it to carry the B61 bomb will probably be faster), to be supplemented by the EA-18G for participation in nuclear sharing. The purchase of US aircraft, in particular the F-35A, was also opposed by parts of the SPD party, which is a member of the ruling coalition. Some in the SPD have been opposed to industrial cooperation with the US under Trump administration and in favour of withdrawing US nuclear weapons from Germany, and of resigning from participation in NATO's nuclear sharing. Currently, it is debatable whether the contract for the purchase of the US aircraft will be concluded during this term of the Bundestag (and whether the SPD will support the financing of the procurement in the parliament), or whether it will be postponed after the next parliamentary elections.

- From the industrial perspective, Berlin has been subject to pressure from both France and the German arms industry. Paris was opposed to Germany's purchase of the F-35A, recognising it as a potential threat to the Franco-German 6th generation FCAS aircraft project; the high cost of purchasing the F-35A could jeopardise its financing and/or delay its development. This, along with the SPD concerns and protests from the German arms industry, led to the F-35A being excluded from further consideration by the German MoD in 2018. Moreover, in mid-March this year, representatives of employees in the biggest arms companies and the IG Metall trade union, which represents workers in the metal industry among others, sent an open letter to the ministers of defence and for economic affairs & energy and the head of the German Chancellery. They warned of job losses in Germany and the negative consequences for European industry and its technological capabilities even if a compromise solution planned by the German MoD would be chosen. The chairman of the CSU and Prime Minister of Bavaria, Markus Söder, also voiced his scepticism in February this year about the idea of purchasing the US aircraft. Manching in Bavaria is Airbus's center of competence for military air systems and the site for final assembly of the German Eurofighter aircraft. The US did not put any public pressure on Germany to purchase a US successor to the Tornado; in an era of strained US-German political and economic relations, such a move could only have been received negatively. It is possible, however, that the US signalled potential difficulties with certifying the Eurofighter aircraft to carry B61 bombs, which could mean an interruption in Berlin's participation in the nuclear sharing in NATO, and had negative political consequences for Germany.
- Although the planned purchase of the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet as a dual-capable aircraft shows that Germany wants to participate in NATO's nuclear sharing and is committed to trans-Atlantic relations, Russia will probably not receive this decision as a move to reinforce NATO's nuclear deterrence. The German Air Force has preferred to purchase F-35As as successors to the Tornado aircraft for DCA role because of their modern design and planned long service in the US Armed Forces, their stealth capability, and them being designed as a carrier for tactical nuclear weapons. In addition, the F-35A will be used by the other European allies participating in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements (Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy, the question of Turkey remains open). Some experts have also raised questions whether 4th generation aircraft (the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and the EA-18G Growler), which is more easily detectable, will be able to carry out nuclear missions against states with advanced air defence systems (such as Russia) in the future,

especially together with stealth 5th generation F-35A.