

Germany's European Sky Shield Initiative

Justyna Gotkowska

On the sidelines of the NATO defence ministers' meeting in Brussels on 13 October, 15 countries (Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom) signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) on strengthening European short-, medium- and long-range air defence capabilities. The LoI was initiated by Germany, and was named the European Sky Shield; it had been announced at the end of August by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his speech in Prague on the future of Europe.

The participating nations are to jointly acquire of air defence equipment and missiles in a cost-effective way. The systems acquired will be interoperable with the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINAMDS). The German defence minister listed the possible components of the project: these are the Israeli-US Arrow-3 exoatmospheric anti-ballistic missile defence system, the US PATRIOT medium-range system, and the German IRIS-T SLM short-range air defence system.

Commentary

- The Letter of Intent does not, for the time being, represent concrete plans for joint procurement. Rather, it demonstrates a desire for coordination and cooperation between the interested countries in acquiring specific air defence capabilities. Some of the countries that have joined the initiative are developing their own air defence programmes, and so they see participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative as an opportunity to complement existing capabilities and acquire new ones – to the extent that this suits their needs, modernisation plans and financial resources.
- Germany, the initiator of the project, is guided by several aims. By committing to the development of important yet missing capabilities in NATO, Berlin wants to show itself as a responsible ally and regain credibility in the region, which has been badly damaged by its reluctance to offer more substantial military support for Ukraine. Germany also wants to strengthen its own air defence capabilities: short-range (no capabilities at present), medium-range (12 upgraded Patriot batteries) and long-range (no capabilities). Germany hopes in particular that the joint purchase of an exoatmospheric anti-ballistic missile defence system will lower its price and make the country a European leader in the development of this type of capability. Berlin is also working to promote its own arms industry, pointing to the IRIS-T SLM short-range air defence system (produced by Diehl Defence) as part of the European Sky Shield Initiative. The system has been so far purchased by Egypt; a first battery of IRIS-T SLM was also delivered to Ukraine in

October.

- The signing of the Letter of Intent by as many as 15 countries may also be a tool to pressurise the US into allowing Israel to sell the Arrow-3 system, manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries and Boeing, to Germany. Despite pressure from Jerusalem and Berlin, Washington is dragging its feet in giving such approval, which is necessary because the system includes some of the US-made components. It is possible that the US would prefer its European allies to purchase the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system with similar capabilities (which would be also easier to integrate into NATINAMDS), and therefore wants to get Berlin to change its plans.
- Neither France nor Poland have joined the European Sky Shield Initiative. Paris is not interested in purchasing US or German systems, as it relies on promoting its own military technology, and is also focused on European armament programmes. Meanwhile Warsaw is in the midst of implementing advanced short- and medium-range air defence programmes. It has been developing military-industrial cooperation with the United States as part of the Wisła medium-range air defence programme, and with the United Kingdom in the Narew short-range air defence programme.