Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 7.02.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Norway banks on German tanks

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Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre and the country's defence and finance ministers announced on 3 February that Oslo will purchase 54 Leopard-2A7 tanks, with an option to order 18 more vehicles in the future. The overall value of the contract, which also includes training and spare parts, was not disclosed, although the government said it would not exceed €1.769 billion; the deliveries are scheduled for 2026-31. The decision is the result of a multi-year tender and comparative testing between Germany's Leopard tank and South Korea's K2 Black Panther. The new vehicles will completely replace the Leopards which the Norwegian land forces had previously used.

Commentary

- Norway has 52 Leopard-2A4NO tanks, which it bought from the Netherlands in 2001; 36 of them are still in service while 16 are stored as reserves. They are used by two Norwegian battalions (18 vehicles each) based in Setermoen in the north of the country and in Rena north of Oslo, which operate as part of Norway's sole army brigade. The purchase of the new vehicles was criticised by the Norwegian defence chief General Eirik Kristoffersen, who argued that the funds for this purpose should instead be used to acquire new helicopters (Norway has retired its NH90s and needs to replace them) and long-range rocket artillery. His objections sparked discussions in the expert community about the role of tanks and the need to keep them in the Norwegian Armed Forces. In the event of a potential war with Russia, a Norway without armoured forces would have to rely heavily on the military capabilities of Sweden, Finland and other allies to defend and retake its own territory.
- The comparative tests showed that both the K2 and the Leopard-2A7 met Norwegian technical requirements. The strong point of the Korean offer was that deliveries could start quickly, as early as this year; the cooperation already existing between the two countries also favoured this option. In 2017 Norway ordered 24 K9 howitzers, which have already entered service, and in 2022 it procured another four. The Norwegian Armed Forces will have to wait longer for the tanks from Germany as their manufacturer, the German company KMW, has limited production capacity. The 44 Leopard-2A7HUs that Hungary ordered in 2018 will be delivered between 2023-5, and it is not viable for KMW to increase its annual production volume given the lack of large orders. However, Berlin has reportedly offered better conditions for bilateral cooperation in the fields of industry, logistics and maintenance support, although the details have not been disclosed. Oslo's decision to buy Leopard-2A7 tanks also stems from the broader context. Various versions of the Leopards are used by Sweden, Finland and Denmark, which means that

choosing another platform would reduce the interoperability between the Norwegian land forces and their immediate allies in the Nordic region.

- The desire to further strengthen the Norwegian-German security relationship was an important reason for the decision taken by Oslo, whose cooperation with Berlin has so far mainly involved the navies of both countries. In 2019, Norway ordered four 212CD submarines made by Germany's TKMS, the first of which is due to enter service in 2029. Then, in 2021, Germany acquired an undisclosed number of Norwegian NSM anti-ship missiles for its F124 and F125 frigates. Due to concerns about the security of the energy infrastructure on the Norwegian shelf following the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines, the German navy has (together with the UK) been involved in increased patrolling of the North Sea since the autumn of 2022. In November 2022, Oslo and Berlin proposed setting up a NATO surveillance centre for subsea infrastructure. In addition, Norway became a key gas exporter to Germany in 2022, after Russia had cut off supplies; Germany also imports Norwegian oil. Both countries are expanding their energy partnership into new areas (for more detail, see '*The German-Norwegian energy alliance*').
- As deliveries of the new tanks are set to start late, Norway will not be able to quickly transfer a significant number of its Leopard-2A4NOs to Ukraine without degrading its own capabilities. The Norwegian government announced its decision to join the international coalition to provide these vehicles to Kyiv on 26 January, but it has not defined the extent of its participation as yet. Consultations on this matter between the defence ministry and the armed forces are still ongoing. As for heavy weapons for Kyiv, Oslo has so far provided 22 M109A3GN self-propelled howitzers, and is also financing the purchase of 16 Slovak Zuzana-2 howitzers together with Germany and Denmark. Norway has also supplied three M270 MLRS multiple rocket launchers to the UK (for modernisation); that has allowed them to hand over the same number of British launchers to Ukraine.