

A EUROPEAN DRONE BY 2025?

The View from Spain on EUROMALE

By Felix ARTEAGA / Senior Analyst, Real Instituto Elcano

May 2016

Comment

In February 2015, after several years of overlapping initiatives and projects, the Spanish Ministry of Defence approved the RPAS Master Plan¹. It identifies the required capabilities in the field of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems for the period 2015-2026. The Master Plan was designed to assess the RPAS state-of-the-art and identify the needs of the Armed Forces at short (2016), medium (2020) and long (2026) term.

According to the assessment, Spain had no RPAS system in the category of over 600 kg (Class III). The Master Plan therefore advised immediate procurement of RPAS as a temporary bridging solution. It also recommended entry into a European research and development program that could deliver an advanced RPAS around 2017-2020. Accordingly, Spain evaluated and acquired the on-the-shelf American MQ-9 Reaper as an interim solution to cover the lack of RPAS Class III systems and began to consider pros and cons of entering into a European co-operative program.

THE MASTER PLAN

The decision to join the European MALE RPAS programme (Medium Altitude Long Endurance Remotely Piloted Aircraft System) was based on operational, technological and political factors. In the operational field, the program would permit Spanish Armed Forces to acquire a strategic/operational capability able to match their Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance requirements (long distance, autonomy, permanence and flexibility). Second, the participation would permit Spanish industry to assess the maturity of the European technologies and to take advantage of the European MALE experience in order to reinforce the national technological and industrial base supporting the lower categories of RPAS (Classes I/II). Such categories offer better opportunities for the Spanish industry to find niches of excellence and open civil and military markets than the upper ones. At the same time, Spain would take advantage of the European efforts to integrate RPAS into common airspace in Europe. Last but not least, the decision to join the European MALE RPAS was motivated by the political will to participate in a new and great European advanced project. This political will is worth taking into account, despite the limited results of the previous European projects (Atalante) and against the opposition of founder members to extend the membership to new partners.

Spain has contributed to former European co-operative ventures such as the UCAV Neuron project or the European Technology Acquisition Program initiative in order to explore the potential of RPAS to replace or complement the current piloted aircrafts in the long term. Besides this, Spain has a long experience in European cooperative programmes and realises the risks and opportunities ahead. The first obstacle, is the

¹ Plan Director RPAS, <http://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/dgamdocs/plan-director-RPAS.pdf>

absence from the definition phase. This could be decided at the last minute with the approval of the Program Management Authorization (PMA) by the OCCAR Board of Supervisors in November 2015. In two years, the study will have to reconcile operational capabilities, system requirements and financial risks in order to deliver a technical demonstrator vehicle before entering into the phase of development. Co-operative programs are not easy to manage because particular goals of the partners use to diverge even if there are only four members as in the European MALE RPAS in this phase (France, Germany, Italy and Spain initially).

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The decision to continue with the development and production of the system is contingent upon many factors, and several of them are outside the control of the partners and managers of the program. On the one hand, the rapid pace of technological change threatens the results of long-term research programs applied to the military systems. On the other hand, warfare needs change faster than ever, thus co-operative programs run the risk of delivering military systems to the battlefield too late, and with little military utility. Therefore, the potential cutting-edge technology of the future European MALE RPAS is key to compete with third countries for external markets. That factor will determine the number of RPAS to be acquired for each State member, pooled among them or delivered to third customers.

As Spain expects some technological returns for its industrial base, the decision to continue with the development phase will be based mainly on the potential spin-offs of the project for the lower spectrum of RPAS systems. In this respect, the possibility should also be considered that other non-European competitors may offer significant offsets to European industries at that time. Financing will be another factor to be considered. In times of austerity for the military budgets decisions will have to be cost-and-risk based. Together with governments and industries it would be convenient to involve the some common funding of the European Union to support the research and development phase. RPAS are considered a CSDP priority for the Council. In addition, the Commission, together with European Defence Agency, are exploring new ways of financing security and defence research and development programs with high impact on the European civil technological and industrial base. Thus their implication in the European MALE RPAS project would make sense.

Finally, and although it is expected that the first system will be delivered in 2025, previous experiences suggest expecting a longer period of delivery and a bigger cost. As in other co-operative programs in the past, delays in the deliveries and cost increases encourage partners and customers to abandon programmes, which in turn further complicates cooperation.

To sum up, European MALE RPAS may deliver a critical ISR capability to the Spanish Armed Forces, given the challenges that insurgency and jihadist combatants are posing in North Africa and the Middle East. Spain as an EU and NATO border country will have to resort to MALE RPAS in order to answer those challenges. A common European platform would increase the interoperability of European Armed Forces as well as develop new CSDP pooling & sharing opportunities. Nevertheless, the participation in the European MALE RPAS program will be conducted under strict political and social monitoring, in order to make sure that operational and technical goals are properly achieved. ■

Comment

A EUROPEAN DRONE BY 2025? The View from Spain on EUROMALE

By Felix ARTEAGA / Senior Analyst, Real Instituto Elcano

May 2016

ARES GROUP

The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group) was created in 2016 by The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (Iris), who coordinates the Group. The aim of the Ares Group, a high-level network of security and defence specialists across Europe, is to provide a forum to the European armament community, bringing together top defence industrial policy specialists, to encourage fresh strategic thinking in the field, develop innovative policy proposals and conduct studies for public and private actors.

CONTACT [Pilots]:

Jean-Pierre Maulny, Olivier de France, Sophie Lefeez

ares@iris-france.org

+33 (0)1 53 27 60 60

www.iris-france.org/ares

#AresGroup