OPINION: ABSENCE OF 90-SEAT TURBOPROP A CURIOUS MARKET FAILURE

News / Airlines

Only two years ago it was possible to imagine a renaissance of regional **turboprop** manufacturing and innovation not seen since the mid-1960s. Five separate efforts to produce a new aircraft with 70**-90 seats** were in various stages of early development.

Now just one project – China's initially 70-seat Xian Aircraft MA700 – remains active. India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited/National Aerospace Laboratory RTA-70 is not publicly canned, but neither is it any further along since its 2007 launch.

Bombardier is no longer in any financial position to move forward on a 90-seat version of the Q400. And ATR's 90-seat project – once so promising – has been scuppered by resistance from the Airbus half of the joint venture.

Finally, this week brings confirmation that the last of those five projects is no more. Although

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Korean firms KAI and KAL-ASD never warmed to the idea, Seoul's administration pursued a 90-seat development project for several years with great fervour. But the project was quietly shelved a year ago.

It would be easy to assign blame for the disappearance of the 90-seat turboprop to pure market forces. A new era of collapsing fuel prices diminishes the urgency for launching a fuel-efficient turboprop into a market dominated by regional jets.

But the absence of a successful 90-seat turboprop is still a curious example of market failure. Natural upgauging forces have pushed regional jets from 50 to beyond 110 seats in the last 20 years. A modern turboprop larger than the Q400 or ATR 72-600 is long overdue.

The market, however, has failed. Bombardier and ATR should be in a position to respond, but the former's finances and the latter's internal feuding prevent a product launch. Meanwhile, the enormous barriers to entry leave solely state-owned firms in a position to break in. In the last 46 years, only Embraer has navigated that path market success, leading to a curious lack of supply despite clear demand.

A new, albeit less ambitious, project is rising in Turkey, however. It mainly revolves around reviving the jet-powered Dornier 328 and 628 programmes, but includes turboprops too. It combines the expertise of US-based Sierra Nevada with two state-owned Turkish firms.

It represents a new hybrid model for the aerospace industry, a globalised partnership of the private and public sectors. It may or may not prove more successful, but hopefully it can work. The industry clearly needs new ideas.

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02 OCTOBER 2015

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