FRANCE STUCK BETWEEN EXPORT AND IMPORT SELECTIONS

News / Manufacturer

France's DGA defence procurement agency predicts that the nation's military exports will have nearly doubled in 2015, thanks in no small part to its first international orders for the Dassault Rafale.

Although exact figures for export sales will not be confirmed until May, the DGA estimates that some €16 billion ($17.8 billion) will have been made in 2015, which would almost double the €8.2 billion achieved the previous year.

Speaking to the media in Paris on 10 February, Laurent Collet-Billon, head of the DGA, said 2015 was a "historic year" for French exports, adding: "We want to export more and more."

On the fighter side, France saw successes in Egypt and Qatar last year, and it is widely accepted that India will also eventually acquire the Rafale as talks between the two nations continue. Prior to 2015, the domestic military had been the sole customer for the type.

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“There are demonstrations every day of the Rafale,” Collet-Billon says. “In the Middle East, they can see that what they [export customers] are going to buy is working.

“We’re looking at how to supply it to new customers three years in advance. We know what the targets for Rafale are – the countries where the Americans aren’t selling the [Lockheed Martin] F-35.”

Paris is also exploring the upgrade of its Dassault Mirage 2000Ds, specifically its ground-attack capability, and a contract for this is expected “within the coming weeks”, the DGA says.

The Mirage 2000 has seen export success for France, with the air forces of Egypt, Greece, Peru, Qatar, Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates currently operating the type, Flightglobal’s Fleets Analyzer database shows. India is already having its examples modernised.

While France is clearly proud of its new export success, and is revelling in its indigenous fighter programme now being a serious contender in upcoming international acquisitions, the nation still has a large dependence on aerospace imports.

An announcement in January confirmed that Paris is to acquire two US-built Lockheed Martin C-130J transports and two extended-range KC-130Js, with the latter to provide a helicopter refuelling capability that its Airbus Defence & Space A400M transport is not expected to ever provide.

It is evident that while France is supportive of the A400M programme – which Collet-Billon reiterated during his briefing – there is still reliance on international systems.

“A400M is used in a very tactical way, which is more important than its ability to refuel – not that that isn’t a priority,” he says.

Unmanned air vehicle use and development is another clear priority for France, but the import versus export approach is mixed.

The French army recently selected the Sagem Patroller for its tactical UAV requirement, instead of the Thales Watchkeeper. While the latter is made by a French company, it is a system sold under the UK side of the business, and was originally designed for a British Army requirement.

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Sagem

France is also involved in the three-country Euro MALE (medium-altitude, long-endurance) effort, alongside Germany and Italy. A design definition decision is expected in the coming months, but a decision on the payload is not foreseen in the same timeframe. The Euro MALE capability is not expected to be introduced until 2025, and in the interim, France is operating the General Atomics Aeronautical Systems MQ-9 Reaper, manufactured in the USA.

France clearly envisages operating the UAV for some time, and it is being evaluated by the DGA as it seeks to introduce a French signals intelligence payload onto it. While France has a wealth of suppliers of such sensors, it would have to first be authorised by the US authorities.

In January, French pilots were authorised to begin training to launch and land their Reapers. Performing take-offs and landings of the MQ-9 are notoriously difficult, due to its glider-like

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configuration, and French personnel will begin undergoing instruction this year at Holloman AFB in New Mexico.

Collet-Billon adds that the Reaper could be operated on French territory in future.

France's current Reapers are not armed, but the DGA chief says that adding weapons is a long-term ambition for its forces. However, defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian would "want a debate on this before making any decisions", he notes.

Meanwhile, more testing is expected in France on another European effort: the Neuron unmanned combat air vehicle demonstrator. Dassault completed a series of tests last year using the aircraft and Collet-Billion says more evaluations will be carried out in 2016.

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