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## **With A400M Delayed, France Eyes C-130J Unlikely To Pursue C-17**

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The French Air Force, seeking a stopgap for the delayed A400M airlifter, is unenthusiastic about buying a small fleet of C-17s but is eyeing ways to get access to the C-130J, Air Chief Gen. Stéphane Abrial said. Abrial said the service is considering the Boeing C-17 but is loath to buy a small number of the four-engine jets.

For long range and large volumes, there is the C-17, which offers a lot of capability; but it's very expensive, Abrial said in an interview. As head of the Air Force, I would rather not have to create a micro fleet; and so we're looking at all the possibilities, such as acquiring with a partner, or a lease, or as part of the Strategic Airlift (SALIS) group of countries within North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)]. We're talking a lot with the British.

France is among the seven nations that committed to develop and buy 180 A400Ms, which are larger than the C-130 but smaller than the C-17. But several of the countries are looking at their options in the face of problems, notably on the software that controls the plane's TP400 engines, which are delaying deliveries by three years.

France, which was to receive the first of its 50 A400Ms later this year [2009], is now looking for ways to improve tactical airlift capability to meet its military needs and preserve hard-won aircrew proficiency. Lockheed Martin's C-130J is the front-runner for a gap-filler aircraft.

There is no equivalent product in the tactical segment to the C-130J in the market today, Abrial said. We're studying the possibility of getting access to the C-130J, either through a new buy or leasing. Among the interim solutions are also buying secondhand aircraft or a service contract.

A French Air Force spokesman said there is "a preference for the C-130J because of its size, carrying capacity, and range." He said "ideally 12 or 15" aircraft were needed to form a squadron, and fewer than ten would not make economic sense because of the need for logistical support.

The Air Force flies fifteen of the older versions of the C-130 and also flies 47 EADS CASA [Spanish aircraft manufacturer] C-160 Transall transports. Service officials also would like to add two or three to top up its fleet of 19 C-235s, also by CASA.

The Air Force is eager to pick an interim plane since the A400M is expected to be three or four years late in delivery and a further two years are needed for the aircraft to enter operational service.

The situation is not critical, but it is delicate, the spokesman said. Decisions need to be taken quickly.

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Abrial said the service recently started precision airdrops in Afghanistan and is keen to provide full support to allied ground groups.

The spokesman said there was less need for strategic airlift. France typically participates in coalition operations under NATO, the United Nations, or the European Union flags and could ask for strategic transport from allies or lease Antonov or Ilyushin aircraft. A hypothetical fleet of two or three heavy transports would probably spend most of the time on the tarmac of a French air base.

French Ministry of Defense spokesman Laurent Teisser confirmed that the C-130J is one of the options under review. Other possibilities include speeding up procurement of the A330 multirole tanker transport (MRTT) to replace the C-135 tanker.

The British are also eyeing early use of A330, which is to enter service in 2011 as part of the Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft (FSTA) private finance initiative deal awarded to EADS last year, a company spokesman in London said.

Teisser said the decision will turn on operational needs, a “collective approach” with allies, availability of the aircraft selected, and compatibility with buying the A400M.

By “collective approach,” he meant discussing with the British government on how best to acquire the C-130J. The German Transall fleet still has plenty of operational life, and the other European forces are not as heavily engaged in Afghanistan as Britain and France.

The final decision will likely be [made] by French Defense Minister Hervé Morin, advised by an interministerial investment committee with recommendations from the Chief of the Defense Staff, Délégation Générale pour l’Armement (DGA) procurement office, and the Air Force.

If there is disagreement or need for political cover, it may go to the Office of the Prime Minister or the President, given the political significance.

A Lockheed spokesman said the firm has offered to supply C-130s to virtually all of the A400M partners. James Grant, Lockheed’s Vice President for Customer Engagement for Air Mobility and Special Operations Programs, said the company has proposed five or ten C-130Js and other options to the British Royal Air Force [RAF]. “We have and are having dialogue with the RAF,” he said. Grant added that Lockheed is ready to offer purchase and lease-related acquisition of the C-130J to the French. If Britain and France both bought C-130Js, it could yield logistical benefits, he said. The British already operate K- and J-models. The Ks, which have seen extensive use by special forces, are to be retired as the A400M enters service.

The spokesman said the British have received pricing and availability for new J-model aircraft, and the company had also been involved informally in a dialogue about potential options for revamping the K-model variants. A source familiar with the talks said a key issue for the Europeans right now is availability of early production slots on the busy Lockheed assembly line.

### **Trading Delivery Slots?**

One answer might be for the U.S. military to swap out some of their slots to give the U.K. and others the delivery dates they require, he said. It’s a tactic that’s been used several times in recent years on armored vehicles and unmanned air vehicles to help out the British. The Lockheed spokesman said the company was already doubling annual C-130J production to 24 aircraft by 2010 and that the assembly line could be expanded to build as many as 36 a year if required.

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Robbin Laird, Director of Consultancy ICSA, [a defense industrial analysis and strategic assessments firm] based [in Paris] and in Washington, said, “What makes the C-130J interesting is the multi-mission option. The aircraft has a coast guard and ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] variant, which makes it a useful interim aircraft but also a potential long-term complement to the A400M.”

Lockheed is marketing the J model as a multi-mission platform, with capabilities for special operations and ISR, using a system of roll-on, roll-off pallets. For instance, the company is working with the U.S. Marine Corps on putting an ISR capability on a KC-130J tanker. A gunship application is expected in the future. The firm hopes this flexibility will persuade the French government to continue to operate the aircraft even after the A400M has entered service.

Jean-Pierre Maulny, Deputy Director of think-tank Institute des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, said a French acquisition of the C-130J would be logical.

The Air Force already uses the C-130; the Transalls are out of breath; and when the Transall is retired, there will be a big capacity gap, Maulny said.

Maintenance and support needs mean a fairly large interim fleet would be needed to amortize the costs, he said. Moreover, A400M deliveries are to be stretched out over ten years. The British have also been discussing adding one or two C-17s to their small fleet if the money can be squeezed from the Defence Ministry’s crisis-hit budget. Those conversations are not directly related to A400M delivery problems.

#### **A400M Rescue**

Meanwhile, the A400M partners—Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, and Turkey—are in crisis talks with Airbus over a possible rescue plan for the much-delayed aircraft. Their contract allowed them to walk away from the program in March 2009, but the two sides introduced a three-month standstill to allow the terms and delivery schedule to be renegotiated. The moratorium ends [ended] on June 30, 2009. Even if a way ahead is agreed upon, Airbus Military Boss Domingo Urena told reporters recently a detailed agreement will likely take until year’s end.

Airbus admits the aircraft is seven tons overweight and is suffering from a number of technical issues including problems relating to the certification of the giant TP400 turboprop engines.