

Who to choose? The Slovakia Armoured Fighting Vehicle purchase

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In 2021, the Slovak government announced its intention to purchase several dozen Armoured Fighting Vehicle (AFV) as part of an ongoing effort to modernise its ground forces (The Slovak Spectator, 2021). This is, of course, a welcome development for the European Union's (EU) defence, as it increases the resource pool upon which the EU can rely in the pursuit of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. Indeed, the treaties limit the ability of the EU to acquire military assets by forcing it to rely on the member states. In that sense, a member state updating its equipment is a positive sign for the ability of the EU to be effective in its missions. Perhaps more importantly, this is a clear sign of Slovakia's dedication to the project of European defence. This is an encouraging prospect in light of the renewed interest towards strategic autonomy at EU level. The size of the package is also noteworthy, coming as a part of what is predicted to be the most significant modernisation effort in the country's history. The purchase will include 76 vehicles for a total price of €322 Million (Yar, Euractiv, 2022). However, the choice of the AFVs themselves has the potential of being problematic. An open call for bids was sent to countries that Slovakia had identified as 'strategic partners in defence', which left out several NATO countries, as well as South Korea and Japan (Yar, Euractiv, 2022). This was already controversial on the international scene, although it did not raise any concern within the EU, with every member state being included in that list. However, it is already concerning that the Slovak government did not consider limiting the call to EU partners. Recently, the list of contracts being evaluated has shrunk to five: the Czech Republic, Finland, Romania, Spain, and the United States (US). While most of them are in Europe, it is hard to pass over the presence of the US as one of the remaining candidates. This has severe consequences for EU defence, and it requires further study.

First, the inclusion of the US on this list is concerning for the strategic autonomy objective of the Union. Of course, they are a close ally of the EU, and therefore their inclusion is neither a surprise nor a security issue. However, it does speak to the ongoing difficulty of the EU to ensure the internal supply of armament and military assets. The core of that autonomy is ensuring the EU's own defence, regardless of the actions of its allies. For that to occur, the EU needs to develop sufficient capability. Logically, it also flows from this that the EU must supply its equipment without the threat of it being withdrawn from it in case of disagreement with its allies. This is a large part of the EU's decision to develop an alternative to the US's Global Positioning System (GPS). The same logic ought to apply to the armament of the ground forces, such as AFVs. Although their services cannot be withdrawn once they are sold, contrary to the GPS, this is not to say that the original seller has no control over the buyer. Indeed, those vehicles must be regularly replaced, and a seller could refuse to conduct any further business with the buyer. In that case, the buyer would have to purchase another equipment entirely with the heavy training requirements that it implies. In other words, if the US supply the EU with equipment and decide to interrupt such supply, switching to an entirely different system during modernisation would prove quite difficult. For that reason, one would hope that when the occasion arises, the EU militaries would see the value of investing in assets developed within the Union to ensure that no strings are attached to those purchases. This is what makes this situation somewhat problematic, as there are four other projects from the EU being shortlisted. On the one hand, this means that it is entirely possible that such a bid would be chosen over the US one. On the other, it also shows that the EU field is quite competitive, and one cannot help but think that Slovakia could have limited the call for bids to the EU. The mere inclusion of the US on that list casts some doubt on the EU's ability to supply itself with the necessary equipment for a strong defence capability. In that sense, the mere eventuality of discarding the European bids in favour of a US one is already damaging, regardless of what decision is made.

However, the greater damage is not hypothetical but would arise if the US bid is approved. After all, it was only last year that the US eventually prevailed in the supply of submarines to Australia over the guarantees obtained by the French government. This event sprouted the most significant rift in French-US relations since the second Gulf War, which caused the EU to rally behind their Member State in their outrage at the US manoeuvre (Herszenhorn, Politico, 2021). With these wounds still fresh, the possibility that the Slovak military would choose an American project over three European one is likely to create tensions within the Union. Especially in light of the insistence of the French government on strategic autonomy within the Union. In turn, these tensions are likely to negatively impact the cohesion of the European defence project, an endeavour that is still fragile. While the rift that opened between transatlantic allies and the remaining distrust between the two (Kuo, The Diplomat, 2021), is regrettable, it remains an issue of the EU's position in the world and does not have the same impact as a division within the EU. Because of the nature of the CSDP, tensions between the Member States can bring a lot of operations, which overwhelmingly require unanimity, to a halt. Rejecting EU contracts in that way is likely to cause frictions with the rejected Member States and those that consider strategic autonomy a priority, limiting the development of a unified defence policy.

Additionally, and perhaps even more significantly, this would be a severe blow to the inter-operability of the EU armed forces. Indeed, the basic principle of EU military development is the ability for the Member States' army to be used in concert as part of a single force on external missions. This requires trust, a clear command structure, and ways for the various Member States to act cohesively. This last one is rendered difficult at best and unrealistic at worst if their hardware is incompatible and so different that they are not designed to work together. Therefore, although the decision of which assets to acquire remains purely in the hands of the member states, it has substantial implications for the EU's ability to operate as one. In that regard, the possibility that Slovakia might accept a bid from the US is a worrying development for the EU, especially considering similar systems are being offered from within the EU, where this issue of interoperability would be, of course, lessened.

In the end, only time will tell what decision the Slovak government will take, but the inclusion of the US on that list is not a positive sign for the future of EU defence. It has the potential to be a serious blow to the ability of the EU to act cohesively in the area of defence and security. It could create a severe rift within the EU over the involvement of the US. This is particularly true at present, where the French presidency of the Council will lead to a renewed push for strategic autonomy and defence sovereignty.

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