

Reinforcing European Military Cooperation: EDA's Helicopter Initiatives

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Introduction

Since 2009, the European Defence Agency (EDA) has promoted and supervised a series of initiatives to improve interoperability between the Member States in joint operations involving the employment of helicopters.

The Helicopter Exercise Programme (HEP) has so far produced sixteen joint exercises, which have progressively gained wider participation, with eight countries (France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Portugal) providing their infrastructures for the operations. Besides the HEP, other initiatives include:

- The Helicopter Tactics Symposium (HTS) is designed to share operational experiences, tactics, and doctrines.
- The Helicopter Tactics Course (HTC) and the Helicopter Tactics Instructor Course (HTIS) are primed to provide training programs both for crews and instructors.
- The Electronic Warfare (EW) course provides crews with knowledge of Radiofrequency and Infra-Red threats.

1. Helicopters Relevance in Modern Warfare

The deployment of helicopters has proven to be fundamental in modern warfare, as the success of contemporary military operations largely depends on the armed forces quick reaction and flexibility capabilities, qualities that can undoubtedly be improved through the effective use of helicopters, as they cover a wide range of activities such as assault, transport, reconnaissance, rescue, and operational support. Besides their evident multirole benefits, rotorcrafts enjoy great mobility and have certain advantages concerning aircraft when performing determined tasks, as they enjoy wider flexibility in landing, and thus are capable to alight in remote areas with little preparation, while their static flight capacity allows them to load and unload personnel in conditions not permitting landing (Bali, 2013). The value that helicopters bring to the battlefield has been proven in several conflicts in the 21st Century: in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S Kiowa helicopters showed their adaptability in urban warfare, as their great manoeuvrability avoided them to be hit by air defence systems. In stabilisation and counter-insurgency operations, helicopters were allowed to secure the entire theatre, which was a nearly impossible task for land troops due to their size and the theatre's orographic characteristics. Finally, helicopters played a key role in rescue operations, as the Kabul-based French battalion performed over 150 medevac missions in 2010, displaying a quick reaction time (Durand, Tenenbaum, & Benoit, 2012). Within the CSDP framework, helicopters are deployed on several missions, mostly for patrolling and SAR operations, but also for offensive manoeuvres, such as the attack carried out in 2012 within the EUNAVFOR Somalia scope, where helicopters efficiently stroke a pirate base on the coastline (Bayoumy, 2012).

Helicopters become indeed essential when security and situational conditions (impracticable terrains, mountains, deserts) require these vehicles’ characteristics. Nevertheless, EU Armies seem to agree that helicopters are not employed in military operations as much as they are needed, as such assumption is the premise for EDA’s activities. This under-deployment depends on different factors, namely insufficient training for the crews, a lack of technical equipment for the aircraft, and the difficulties of logistic support to deployed operations.

2. The Fire Blade 2022 Exercise

From 7-24 June 2022, the Hungarian Pápa Airbase hosted the FIRE BLADE 2022 (FB22) exercise, the 16th training session within EDA’s HEP framework., which is ongoing since 2012 and witnessed the participation of eight host countries. The exercise involved twenty-five vehicles and 1000 military personnel from Austria, Belgium, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary, while Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Italy, and Switzerland militaries participated as observers.

1.1 The Activities Performed

FB22 objective was to improve interoperability and to prepare Member States’ armies for joint operations in complex environments, such as Composite Air Operations (COMAO). To this purpose, the initiative enacted exercises on combat service support, close air support, convoy escorts, reconnaissance and surveillance, SAR operations, personnel recovery, and evacuation. The operation involved tactical and doctrinal training as well: Electronic Warfare Emulator platforms were provided by Austria and Slovenia. A multinational Joint Tactical Air Controller (JTAC) and the European Air Group (EAG) led training sessions, with the latter focusing on Forward Arming Refuelling Point. Furthermore, a Helicopter Tactics Instructors team from Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden assisted in planning COMAO missions, providing expertise and mentorship. Overall, the operation resulted in 425 hours flight hours, 730 incursions and 15,700 rounds of ammunition shot

1.1 The Vehicles Involved

Attending countries participated to the exercise with twenty-five vehicles, which included the following models:

Vehicle	Type	Use	Manufacturer	Country
A-109	Lightweight twin-engine helicopter	Multirole	Leonardo	Belgium
NH-90	Mediumweight twin-engine helicopter	Multirole	Leonardo	Belgium
OH-58	Lightweight single-engine helicopter	Observation, Reconnaissance	Bell	Austria
AB-212	Mediumweight twin-engine helicopter	Search and Rescue, Observation, Reconnaissance	Bell	Austria
PC-7	Low-wing training aircraft	Training, Close Air Support	Pilatus	Austria
UH-60	Mediumweight single engine helicopter	Multirole	Lockheed Martin	Slovakia
AS-532	Mediumweight twin-engine helicopter	Multirole	Airbus	Slovenia
H145M	Lightweight twin-engine helicopter	Search and Rescue, Emergency Medical Services	Airbus	Hungary

Mi-24	Heavyweight helicopter gunship	Offensive operations, troop transport	MIL	Hungary
Mi-17	Heavyweight helicopter gunship	Offensive operations, troop transport	MIL	Hungary
JAS-39	Air fighter	Offensive operations	SAAB	Hungary

As the table above shows, the exercise involved a wide range of vehicles, each one presenting differences and similarities with the others in both characteristics and functionalities. Therefore, operations like FB22 are needed to improve joint missions' effectiveness, as they allow participating countries to gain reciprocal knowledge on their available means and how they deploy them in specific situations, thus improving coordination by pooling resources in an efficient manner.

2. The Multinational Helicopter Training Centre

The proficient cooperation in the helicopter sector under EDA's aegis has pushed some Member States to take such cooperation to a further stage. Four days after the conclusion of the FB22 exercise, fourteen Member States (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, and Sweden), have signed a Technical Arrangement defining the scope and the structure of the soon-to-be Multinational Helicopter Training Centre (MHTC), a project dating back to 2019 and which will see its implementation by the end of 2023. The MHTC will take over and encompass all EDA's current helicopter initiatives, and it is expected to operate for fifteen years.

The Centre will be located in the Sintra Airbase in Portugal, where the current EDA helicopter centre is located, but it will be provided with new facilities and infrastructures and with ten international staff members, as well as a Steering Board. The MHTC 's purpose is to create permanent European centre of excellence for advanced helicopter training and to develop, consolidate and share best practices.

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