EDA CONFERENCE 2009 - "HELICOPTERS '09 - KEY TO MOBILITY"

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Intervention of General Henri BENTEGEAT

Chairman of the European Union Military Committee

HELICOPTERS AND THE MILITARY NEED FOR THEM

Mr Secretary-General,

Dear Alexander,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like firstly to thank the European Defence Agency and its director for having organised this seminar devoted to a topic which, as all of you know, has been a cause for concern to the European Union Military Committee for several years and, unfortunately, will no doubt continue to be so for some time to come. I know you have clearly pinpointed the issue, judging from the titles of your two round table discussions: a clear military need exists here, which is not being fulfilled in the current state of affairs, and we thus need to find and apply solutions.

As already mentioned, the European fleet consists of around 1700 helicopters, 70 % of which belong to only one quarter of the Member States. These helicopters are for the most part old, with some airframes having been in service for over thirty years, often under severe conditions of use.

Spare parts for them are in short supply, and there is an increasingly urgent need to maintain them. All in all, barely 50 % of the aircraft are available at any one time. Of this volume of aircraft available, a proportion must also be used for training and schooling aircrew. Finally, aircraft that have been deployed for several months require increasingly lengthier and more costly operational overhauls.

Our common problem is that all ESDP operations require helicopters to be present in the field in sufficient numbers. Everyone will have in mind the difficulties experienced at the time of the EUFOR Tchad/RCA force generation, which echoed roughly the problems encountered with the NATO operation in Afghanistan … The same concerns exist regarding operation Althea in Bosnia ... . And it would seem to me that helicopters were also a key issue when planning the deployment of the observer mission in Georgia.

Those of you who, in uniform, have been more or less closely involved in operations are well aware of the strong points of helicopters in any theatre. They make it possible for resources to be transferred swiftly from one place to another, sometimes covertly, for reconnaissance, protection or attack missions to be carried out, and, finally, for urgent evacuations to take place. The full range of capabilities of this type of aircraft was showcased, on a relatively small scale (but admittedly it was for the first time), during the French operations in Algeria at the end of the fifties and then, on a much grander scale, by the Americans in Vietnam. To give you an idea, at the start of operations in Algeria the French land forces had 35 helicopters; five years later, at the end of the conflict, they had a fleet of 400. In Vietnam, numbers of these aircraft were in the tens of thousands, and their sorties were numbered in millions. The helicopter used as a means of transport – or the utility helicopter – has at least two fundamental advantages.

On the one hand, it enables rapid movements of troops – small special forces units, for example – or of equipment, without having to depend on even the most rudimentary of airstrips and, on the other hand, it reduces the visibility of troop movements.

Besides the military value of covert movement, this can be genuinely important where one of the decisive factors for victory lies in winning over the "hearts and minds" of populations. A few helicopters at high altitude in the night skies will not have the same effect on minds as a convoy of armoured transport vehicles, clearly armed, making its way along a busy road.

The helicopter can also be the only effective means of moving about, because the network of roads or tracks is impracticable, or because of weather conditions, or even more and more often because of too high a level of risk. This is frequently the case in asymmetric operations, where there is no frontline and where there is a proliferation of improvised explosive devices and landmines.

The option to use utility helicopters will thus be dictated by striking a balance between three requirements: the mobility, visibility and protection of our forces. But it is essential that the operation commander be able to make that choice, and therefore he should have a sufficient range of means at his disposal and he will be ultimately alone in judging that they are used effectively, depending on the military effect he is seeking to achieve.

This permanent need for mobility within a given theatre, whether for logistical missions or to deploy troops, is a characteristic of modern operations and will not decrease. This is why programmes for developing heavy helicopters that can lift significant loads of freight of the order of tens of tonnes or a number of troops equivalent to two combat sections are essential. I genuinely hope that the Franco-German Heavy Transport Helicopter project (13 tonnes or 70 men with a range of 1000 km) will come into being and be shared by other Member States.

I personally remember the participation of 2 heavy lift South African helicopters in operation ARTEMIS in 2003. Given the poor state of the runway in BUNYA, this contribution happened to be a key enabler for the deployment of EUFOR: 1200 troops in less than 15 days.

The helicopter used in combat mode – or attack helicopter – has precise reconnaissance, attack or protection missions. For this type of mission, polyvalence is an asset, whereas over-specialisation can rapidly become a handicap. The battalion of American Apache helicopters deployed in Albania in 1999 was unable to adapt to air-to-ground combat duties against forces that were dispersed, camouflaged and embedded in the civilian population, whereas eight years earlier, the same aircraft very effectively destroyed the Iraqi armoured forces in actions coordinated with ground forces.

Similarly, in a hostile environment, the protection of utility helicopters or of a road convoy by a few attack helicopters, in support of ground troops, the security of an exfiltration after an engagement and, more generally, rendering transit routes and drop zones secure, will be enhanced by aircraft armed with cannon, rockets or machine-guns, particularly where the enemy is equipped with light weapons. In attack tactics, the surprise effect of a low altitude approach at least partially offsets increased vulnerability due to proximity to the ground.

In 2004, the only break-through that the Ivory Coast government forces were able to achieve against the rebel lines were carried out with two MI 24. Unfortunately for them, their Infantry companies were not able to exploit the break-through. In other terms, the effectiveness of attack helicopters relies on combined actions. They cannot act separately.

Lastly, the capability to reconfigure helicopters is an important criterion. The ability to convert a utility or attack helicopter into a means for medical evacuation provides a force commander with essential reassurance as to the raised morale of his troops and ensures that he has greater flexibility in the use of his airborne capabilities. I remember when I was a student at the French War College, there was a Israeli student, who had taken part in all the Israeli-Arab wars, who was extremely critical of our balance between attack helicopters, transport helicopters and medical evacuation helicopters. What he said to us at this time was that in the Israeli Armed forces in fact 70% of the helicopter fleet was devoted to medical evacuation, because it was extremely important to keep at the highest level the morale of the troops. I would not say that this the right balance, I have just mentioned that at this time the Israeli's judgement was the best possible for their own operations.
A helicopter fleet is well balanced if it can meet all these military needs.

Since the conflicts I referred to a moment ago, the use of helicopters in operations has clearly remained unchallenged. I say "clearly" since the type of operations in which we are engaged – and this trend will certainly not change for a long while – constantly calls for great mobility in order to counter such threats as action carried out by small enemy groups widely dispersed over large areas, and generally benefiting from knowledge of the terrain and the assistance, whether or not willing, of the local population. Here I am naturally thinking of Afghanistan, but the problem is the same in Tchad, although the mission and objectives may differ.
It is very good for our debates that General NASH could join us today.

An adjunct to manoeuvring on the ground which is regarded as essential, the helicopter now forms a basic part of the equipment programmes of modern armies.

Although its military benefits are unchallenged, its disadvantages must also be considered in order to understand the current situation. Flying lower and slower than a fighter aircraft, the helicopter will always remain vulnerable to some degree, which has increased since the appearance of ground-to-air missiles that can be carried and used by a single man. Hence the American *Stinger* missile caused the Soviet forces engaged in Afghanistan in the '80s to lose the advantage of Air Superiority.

This is an important issue. Whatever the courage and the training of the crew, self-protection is now a prerequisite for effective action for all types of helicopters.

The military helicopter is by definition a sophisticated tool. It is a complex piece of machinery, control of which calls for heavy investment in terms of resources, whether human or financial. You will certainly know better than I do, but I believe that I am not far off the mark in putting the cost of the NH 90 at a little more than twenty million euro apiece, and the cost of one flying hour at around EUR 7000.

In other words, in the overall cost of owning the helicopter, the purchase price will once again be reached after 15 years of use at the rate of 200 flying hours a year – which corresponds to the norm, at least in order to maintain the qualifications of pilots, whose training can be put at EUR 100.000 each ... . Here we are well into the realm of fairly considerable levels of costs! This is not surprising, as the machine is a complex one, involving all the key technologies in its design and construction, and therefore costly to develop and manufacture. All the dynamic constraints generated by the rotors (vibration, centrifugal force, etc.), like the aerodynamic constraints, impact to varying degrees on the whole of the machine in flight (fuselage, engine, transmission systems, equipment, etc.).

As each part is thus subjected to severe constraints, its lifespan is limited, and its replacement is an absolute pre-condition for flight safety. In addition to this series of structural constraints, there are the constraints caused by operational use in aggressive weather or environmental conditions (temperatures, sand, etc.) which will cause the machine to age prematurely.

As the level of costs does not allow fresh overall programmes to be launched frequently to renew fleets, preference has been given over the last few decades to reconditioning the aircraft, rather than purely and simply replacing them. While the managers of military budgets tend rather to make do with this short-term strategy, the same does not always apply to the users. In fact, the older the airframes become, the more quickly they wear out and the more spare parts and maintenance hours they require. All in all, a Chief of staff is often faced with the following dilemma:

– either heavy engagement in terms of operations, which is the very reason for armies to exist, but which will give rise to overstretched management of the fleet,

– or limiting operational engagements to what is strictly essential, particularly in a climate of austerity, to improve the average rate of availability of the fleet, which drops inexorably with the ageing of the aircraft.

The latter option obviously tends to have the upper hand when renewal programmes are delayed. And this corresponds to the situation we are in.

The human resources dedicated to using helicopters, whether experienced pilots or maintenance crews, are also becoming rare. In parallel with the development of the military helicopter, over the last few decades we have witnessed the constant growth of the civilian helicopter market. A few years ago the civilian market was confined to State administrations such as the police, customs or civilian security, but it was opened up very swiftly to commercial uses, and even today small leisure helicopters abound ... . All our armies know that it is very difficult for them to resist the constant attraction of the qualified aeronautical jobs on offer on the market. The average salaries on this market are generally higher, living conditions are less demanding and the equipment is not subjected to the same constraints, and therefore requires less effort.

Availability for operations thus depends on all these factors: whether the aircraft is suited to the conditions of its use, the availability of spare parts, the number of qualified pilots and the size of maintenance crews.

Quite apart from any political considerations that might hold Member States back from supplying helicopters for operations, I am convinced that these ideas explain a good proportion of the difficulties we have in meeting the need for helicopters in our force generations.

However, do we have to be fatalistic and wait passively for fleets to be replaced with new or newly developed aircraft such as the NH 90 or the Tiger? The answer is certainly no, as operations do not follow the same timescales as programmes! It is therefore our duty to carry out a stocktaking and make the best use of all the possibilities for rationalisation, synergies and opportunities to share the heaviest investments.

In this regard, I would like to welcome the Franco-British initiative of March 2008, supported by a trust fund, and aimed at increasing the number of operational aircraft by measures involving modernisation, operational training for pilots and improving the availability rate. Several countries have already said that they could both contribute to this initiative and draw benefit from it, either by contributing to the trust fund or, like the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Hungary, by supplying helicopters. I must tell you that I had the opportunity, last week, to visit LOM industries in the CZECH Republic with the P.S.C., and I was impressed by the importance and the quality of the ongoing reconfiguration program. I am glad to see the Agency effectively take over the baton, with studies launched immediately to allow crews of MI-type helicopters to benefit from the best tactics suited to this type of machine, and which could lead later to a genuine training project: the HTP (Helicopter Tactics Program). The training courses in Germany and France – flight training for mountainous terrains, in particular – for Polish and Czech crews and for the associated maintenance crews, before operational deployment in Afghanistan, is a very satisfactory concrete spinoff of this initiative.

Now, I am about to conclude and I realize that I forgot to mention the crucial role played by helicopters in Counter-piracy operations. As you can guess, our warships would are not quick enough to catch pirates riding speed boats and small skiffs without their embarked armed helicopters. All the arrest of pirates since the beginning of the operation were due to the involvement of our helicopters.

In the course of your two round table discussions, you will be going over all this in detail, and analysing the situation, certainly better than I could. I should merely like to conclude by strongly reaffirming that here we are faced with a shortfall, which may be temporary, but is already too large, and too serious for the smooth conduct of our operations. And everything must be proposed, studied and eventually done to ensure that the soldiers whom we order to conduct operations can do so intelligently, with all the military effectiveness that we should expect of them.

Thank you for devoting your best endeavours to this matter.