

Saab, Bombardier To Launch Maritime Patrol Aircraft Programs

By: Andrew Chuter

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SINGAPORE — With China's island-building strategy in the South China Sea unnerving neighbors, Saab has used the Singapore Airshow to roll out a partnership with platform builder Bombardier to launch two new maritime patrol aircraft programs to compete in a market that may finally be stung into action by Beijing's actions.

Saab is poised to announce Tuesday that it is to tempt potential customers in the region and elsewhere to acquire much needed maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) capability by offering its latest Swordfish mission system installed on either Bombardier's Global 6000 business jet or the Canadian company's Q400 turboprop.

The business jet will likely be armed with Saab's RBS-15 anti-ship missile and a lightweight torpedo; possibly a EuroTorp weapon. The Q400 is planned to carry just the torpedo.

It's the second tie-up to be rolled out in little more than three months by the Saab/Bombardier combo. At the Dubai Airshow in November the two companies announced they had secured the United Arab Emirates as the launch customer for a Global 6000-based multirole airborne surveillance platform known as GlobalEye. It uses the new Erieye ER (extended range) radar and other sensors to simultaneously provide high-grade, long-range detection in air, land and maritime domains.

Previously the Swedish company has focused its main sales efforts in the MPA and Erieye airborne early warning sectors on modified second-hand Saab 340 and Saab 2000 turboprops, both of which have been out of production for years. They have also sold a number of systems in both sectors installed on Embraer 145 regional jets.

"Most customers in the MPA field have a preference toward new-build, in-production aircraft and that is something we are addressing in this program with Bombardier. We can now target for a long way in the future with these aircraft. Also, from a technical standpoint, we were looking for additional space and size of aircraft in order to fulfill all operational requirements," said Joakim Mevius, the head of Saab's Airborne ISR business unit, in an interview ahead of the airshow's opening.

"This is a significant step for us. We are sure [with the new platforms and Swordfish] we are really able to provide high-end strategic capability which is affordable," he said.

The executive declined to talk about the development timetable for the two aircraft but said his company had been working with Bombardier for some time and the platforms would be available in a "competitive time frame; it will certainly fulfill customer requirements for entry into service."

Saab is one of many defense aerospace companies at Singapore 2016 eyeing a potentially lucrative MPA and anti-submarine warfare market across Southeast Asia and beyond as China flexes its growing military muscle in a territorial dispute in the South China Sea with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.

"Even countries such as Malaysia, which generally has warm relations with Beijing, have become alarmed by China's ever-broadening claims to the South China Sea," said Dan Darling, a regional analyst at Forecast International, the US-based market forecasting consultants.

"The need to acquire intelligence-gathering, surveillance and early warning assets in order to exercise control over each nation's own economic, security and territorial interests has now become paramount in countries like the Philippines," he said.

Darling said that potential international confrontation in an area that is home to critical maritime transshipment routes is not the only problem.

“High seas threats such as terrorism and piracy are an issue in these waters as well,” he said.

In addition, the Swedish company, which has maritime credentials that now also extends to building submarines, said the Asia Pacific will be home to over 100 boats by the turn of the decade.

There are too many players in the market to give everybody a mention but with the threats crowding in on regional militaries here it's hardly surprising that industry giants like Boeing and Airbus with the P-8 jet and CN235 turboprop, respectively, to comparative industry minnows like Switzerland's Ruag with the Dornier 228, have been talking here about their ability to meet airborne maritime patrol requirements in the region.

Multimission aircraft are very much in fashion as industry looks to meet customer demands to squeeze as much capability from a single aircraft type as possible.

Example: Saab will find itself taking on L3 and Elbit, both of which have Q400 developments underway for multimission capable aircraft.

Bombardier itself is also working on a baseline solution for a modified specialist version of the turboprop airliner.

L3 executives at the show said they expected the first flight of their modified Q400 demonstration aircraft to take place in the autumn.

It's a very fragmented market and will become more so as turboprop products are challenged by modified business jets to meet requirements.

Saab finds itself head-to-head with Elbit in the modified business jet market where the Israeli company last year announced it was developing an armed version of the Bombardier Global 5000 for maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare.

Boeing admitted at the show that it was studying a possible armed version of the Bombardier 605-based business jet which has been developed, but not yet sold, as a maritime surveillance aircraft.

James Detwiler, Boeing Military Aircraft's business development director for maritime programs, said one issue being studied is the problem of possibly having to sacrifice performance as a result of adding a weapon such as a lightweight torpedo.

He declined to give a timeline for a possible decision on whether to proceed.

So is this the beginning of the end for the turboprop in maritime applications? Fernando Ciria, the marketing director for military aircraft at Airbus Defence & Space, says not.

"We are keeping going with the C295 and CN235 turboprops. We think turboprops remain valid in most markets, offering a compromise of good transit speeds and good capability for loitering operations at low altitude, low speed and low cost," he said.

"Airbus is sticking with its turboprop maritime aircraft line while continuing to look at proposing the A320 family of jets on a case-by-case basis for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance applications," he said.

Forecast International market analysis shows Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines as being among potential buyers for maritime aircraft.

Singapore, which operates old Fokker 50s, also can't be ruled out from a possible buy, said the consultancy. Some people said the city-state might even be a candidate for the expensive, but highly capable, P-8.

While demand in the region is strong, funding remains an issue, said the market analysis company.

"Demand and funding commitments represent two opposite ends of the same pole," they said.

It's been that way for a while but the tensions with China might just break open the purse strings, said executives here.

One way of doing that might be to buy second-hand Lockheed Martin P-3s — Forecast International reports Vietnam and the Philippines as possibly going that route.

With questions over how much life remains in US Navy P-3s, the platform will not impact the market greatly, Ciria said.

"My perception at this moment is the USN will not be the source of P-3s in the next few years," said Ciria. "They have squeezed most of the operational life out of their P-3 Charlies. I don't foresee that second-hand P-3s will impact the market unless people want to spend huge amounts of money on them."

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