

Leader Spotlight is a Q&A featuring luminaries of the aerospace & defense sector

With several embryonic pan-European development programs on the horizon, Airbus Defense and Space is looking to position itself to lead them. But it also faces a big task completing development on existing programs such as the complex A400M airlifter. Aviation Week's ShowNews caught up with Dirk Hoke, Airbus' CEO for the defense and space business, at the Dubai Airshow, held Nov 12-16.

Q. With the restructuring of the defense side of the business and the spin-off of Hensoldt, is the business now where you want it to be? And is there more to do?

Hoke: The overall architecture is now pretty much in place. But in areas with rich possibilities for innovation and disruption, then we may have to build new structures. For instance, in unmanned, where we have activities straddling defense and commercial, and some fairly traditional military programs, but also ambitious aspirations in commercial data services, then it is clearly a work in progress.

Q. The A400M had a difficult year in 2016, particularly in terms of delays in capability development. Where are you with developing those, has 2017 been a more positive year and what is the outlook for 2018?

In terms of operational capabilities, we're making good progress in all the key areas—airdropping, paratrooping, self-defense and helicopter air-to-air refueling. But what is really exciting is the examples we have seen very recently of A400M beginning to realize its true potential in-service. The UK, France and Germany were up and running on hurricane relief operations in the Caribbean quicker, and with bigger and heavier loads than they could ever previously have achieved. And we're also seeing A400M being deployed on unprepared runway operations in Africa. So the promised transformation of European air mobility with A400M is starting to become a reality. As for the program in general, discussions with our launch customer nations are continuing.

Q. Where are you with getting more export customers for the A400M?

We have been talking to a number of nations for a while and we are optimistic that we can achieve export orders for this fantastic aircraft. However, I would not want to speculate on the timing of such export orders coming in.

Q. As we are here in the Middle East, can you talk about some of the opportunities you see here in the region, opportunities for follow-up sales and new business? Is an A400M sale in this region a realistic possibility?

We have a strong market presence in Middle East and North

Africa right across our product range, including C295, tankers, and combat aircraft. It's no secret that we have been active with A400M marketing here, and we would certainly hope for some fruit from that.

Q. We hear a lot about new technology disrupting the commercial world—urban air mobility, electric aircraft—but where is this disruption going to come from in the defense world?

I suspect the combat arena provides many opportunities. We have already seen the advent of, for example, stealth and ultra-precise weapons transforming warfare in the last couple of decades. But unmanned vehicles alongside manned fighters has vast potential that has barely been explored yet, and wideband, secure communications, including space-based, is going to change dramatically the role of real-time intelligence sharing.

Q. The European Council of ministers meeting in July set out plans for the EuroMALE UAV to be a twin-turboprop platform and there was an expectation that development would begin in 2018. Is that still the case, and if so what sort of work will Airbus do on the platform?

The twin-turboprop configuration is the basis for a series of trade-off studies that are being conducted by us and our partners Leonardo and Dassault, plus the nations, right now. That will lead next year to the preliminary design review. But the final workshares are under discussion between all the parties involved.

Q. The Airbus Aerial business has had a busy time in North America following the recent hurricanes. Can you tell us about that work, how is the market taking to this new business model and what is to come? What opportunities are there for expansion?

Immediately after the hurricanes, we began offering imagery of the affected areas, right down to individual addresses, to insurance companies to enable them to settle claims extremely quickly. That's a big benefit for the companies and also for the businesses and individuals suffering losses. We were also able to support utility companies in assessing damage to their infrastructure and planning repairs, so it was a very encouraging insight into how we can develop that business.

—Aviation Week's ShowNews

