

Opinion – Europe is Still Able to Build Tanks

Written by Robert Palmer

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ROBERT PALMER, SEP 23 2020

Since the end of the cold war, numerous tank programs have been launched, but by a decreasing number of countries. In short, the market is consolidating, and the big players are increasing their exports. The capacity to conduct tank programs is often used as marker of a military power's overall capacity. The market shift has profoundly changed the face of the European military industry, but Europe has adapted to this new phase. The old continent isn't dead, when it comes to making tanks. In fact, it has just come back stronger. The art of warfare is particularly sensitive to innovation: while older equipment can still be used outside high-intensity combat areas, each military force simply needs to match or surpass the capacities of the opposing party. Therefore, each upgrade triggers a chain of responses within all the surrounding forces, so as to maintain strategic balance. Over the years, as different countries had various levels of resources and committed to different degrees, leading countries were able to systematically answer the need for innovation, while others found it increasingly difficult to stay abreast when it came to complex programs.

The difficulty in building high-tech and complex military vehicles, such as main battle tanks, isn't new: the Germans were already putting massive efforts into their armor technology during World War Two, resulting in the legendary Tiger tank. It is true, that quantity can be used to compensate for quality (as the United States chose to do with sub-par Sherman tanks), but only with an overwhelming imbalance. What was possible in 1944, when in industrially flourishing America overran resource-starved Germany, simply is no longer feasible, now that the Eastern bloc, Europe, Asia and America have reached balanced economic levels. Therefore, technological innovation has become the only way to safeguard sovereignty. King's College professor Nick Butler writes:

For European countries, the difficult strategic and economic times they face mean that they will have to become accustomed the idea of constrained defence budgets for a foreseeable future. For all European countries, budget constraints are compounded by the range of commitments defence budgets must cover.

The trouble is Europe barely has any countries left able to produce a modern main battle tank. The few countries which still have the engineering capacity to produce, like Germany, don't have much to show for it: few of those equipments have withstood the test of fire, because tepid foreign policies keep them systematically away from danger zones.

Europe is a particularly innovating continent, with high-performance firms working in virtually all countries on propulsion systems, armor technology, ballistics, etc. But if the capacity to develop high-tech sub-segments of a tank program is still very common in Europe, the capacity to integrate (build a tank from start to finish) is not. As an illustration, the Leclerc tank program came with a price tag of nearly 6 billion Euros: more than the entire defense budget of Sweden, a quarter of Italy's and half of Spain's. In other words, European countries are certainly not out of the defense market (in fact, they contribute to it greatly), but only a handful of European countries are now able to take on the financial and industrial strain of programs such as tanks.

In 2016, only Germany, France and the UK exceeded 30 billion euros in defense budgets, and the UK's defense budget has collapsed since, although it is still at the top of the game, in operational capacities. London is therefore now unable to launch a new production, leaving the continental market to France and Germany. Additionally, the necessity to pool resources and share the burden of programs' costs isn't only industrial, it's also political. As stand-

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alone countries, the first European nation in the ranking of military expenditure is France, coming in 5th with 64 billion euros, according to the Stockholm International Peace Institute. If Europe works as a block, its financial and industrial capacity equates that of China's, second only to the US. The scattering of financial and industrial resources has always bled Europe of its military potential, as explained by defense specialist John Detrixhe:

Also troubling for Europe, however, is the area of defense where it surpasses the US, which is in the number of redundant weapon systems. The American military has one main type of battle tank system, for example, whereas the EU has 17, according to the white paper. Overall, the US has 30 separate types of weapon systems in the white paper's selected categories, versus 178 for the EU.

The United Kingdom is struggling with an out-of-shape military and Germany is running into its own share of troubles, in the military-industrial field. Germany's Bundeswehr has been trying to hide its current embarrassing state, to no avail, as newspapers publish an endless stream of articles on non-functioning equipment, absent funding and overall disrepair. Politico reporter Matthew Karnitschnig writes:

There is neither enough personnel nor materiel, and often one confronts shortage upon shortage," Hans-Peter Bartels, a Social Democrat MP charged with monitoring the Bundeswehr for parliament, concluded in a report published at the end of January. "The troops are far from being fully-equipped.

Decades of timid operations, away from hotspots, have bled Germany of its military know-how and most of its equipment is in such poor state that Berlin keeps its operational numbers closely guarded. France, however, has taken the leadership on European defense matters, by fiat. Even French President Emmanuel Macron made no secret of his ambition to give Europe's defense a new impetus himself. Countries such as Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and even the UK, have understood the political, industrial and military advantage of a France-led integrated defense market. Political analyst Nicole Koenig writes:

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has become one of the most dynamic fields of European integration. The destabilisation of the EU's neighbourhood, Brexit, and uncertainty in the transatlantic security partnership were important drivers behind this revitalisation. France and Germany reacted by jointly propagating the vision of a European Security and Defence Union.

French industries call upon many European firms to partake in the complex military programs it launches – programs which would simply not exist if each country were left to its own devices. Foreseeing the military troubles it is now in, the UK signed in 2010 the Lancaster House agreements, setting the scene for increased cooperation and resource-pooling between France and England. Belgium and Germany have joined partnerships with France, leading to the CAMO program (for Belgium) and the Nexter-KMW Euro Tank program (for Germany). Partnering countries therefore achieve, through those French partnership, satisfying balance: top-tier military equipment, at affordable prices, while protecting their national industries. In the past five years, France has achieved by fiat what Europe had failed to do by law over decades.

The fragmentation of defense has been a European plague ever since the first efforts to build the new Europe started. With firms competing against each other, instead of working together, technologically superb productions were plagued with high prices and ensuing sluggish exports. In addition, failure to cooperate severely depleted the overall capacity of Europe to defend itself. Starting now, Europe will be far more difficult to conquer, as it is no longer militarily divided.

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