

# Supporting Atlas: Franco-British Co-operation to Service Europe's Military Airlifter

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**Abstract:** European defence policy clearly remains heavily dependent upon the equipment of the French and British armed forces. What remains largely unknown, however, is the extent of co-operation between these forces to maintain this equipment and thereby transform theoretical capacity into actual military capability. Drawn from a study of such bilateral co-operation over servicing the Atlas (A400M) airlifter, this article shows that modest levels of co-operation have developed but also that deeper collaboration continues to be blocked by unfavourable organisational and political structures. The first level of differentiation concerns contracting with the aircraft's manufacturer (Airbus): the British have delegated nearly all support activity to this firm, whereas the French have retained most of it 'in-house'. Secondly, the two countries' defence industrial policies continue to differ significantly. In the British case, defence industrial base concerns are now addressed on a bespoke basis centred upon market conditions in general, and competitiveness of supply in particular. Conversely, neo-*dirigiste* interventionist industrial policy still dominates French equipment support. Weak bilateral co-operation over supporting the Atlas is therefore best explained by using constructivist political economy to unpack the problem definitions and policy instruments it has entailed, together with the national hybrids it has bolstered.

**Keywords:** A400M – contracting - defence equipment support – industrial policy

## Introduction

The Atlas transport aircraft – often called the A400M – was designed to provide European air forces with a capacity for tactical airlift to short, often remote airfields. Beginning in the 1980s, over the course of its development this aircraft has generated considerable, mostly negative, press coverage because of delivery delays, certain technical failings and massive cost over-runs (see Box 1). Nevertheless, a significant tranche of the aircraft has now been delivered to the French air force (currently 15 based near Orléans) and the UK's RAF (20 based at Brize Norton). But this example

of European scale defence procurement has also attracted attention, and even some academic research, for other deeper reasons.

Firstly, the self-proclaimed 'commercial approach' ostensibly used to design, build and pay for this aircraft programme multilaterally has given rise to analysis and comment (Joana & Smith, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Procuring this aircraft has therefore been presented as having entailed considerable shifts in national procurement practices and the emergence of a 'depoliticised' and 'denationalised' European alternative (Mawdsley, 2013: 15).

Secondly, it has been argued that by autonomising key industrialists from their respective states, the very creation in 2000 of European Aeronautic Defence and Space (EADS- the result of a merger of national companies in 2000 and now an integral part of Airbus), was a crucial precondition for this programme actually being realised (Faure, 2016: 232).

As a political product, the Atlas programme therefore provides a means of assessing the degree and durability of integration of Europe's defence industrial base. Analysis of the political work to which it has been subject highlights the policy arrangement around which the aircraft itself has functioned as a 'boundary object' (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that has mobilised various actors over *ad hoc* collaboration on a specific project. But what has happened since then to this example of international integration? Have the arrangements, the instruments and the organisations that support them which were put in place to produce the Atlas remained valid for its maintenance and management? Or has this long-term commitment entailed the establishment of another institutional structure? In other words, have the collaborative conventions developed for the production of the aircraft survived the test of managing its existence in the medium and long-term, or has this management necessitated a new institutional structure?

Analysing data on this question of military capability in general, and that pertaining to the 'through life support' of defence equipment in particular, is precisely what this article sets out to do. Drawing upon recent research into how France and Britain's military capabilities have evolved since the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> our central question concerns the rules, norms and practices which have structured 'in-service' equipment support, together with the sets of actors who have engaged in changing or reproducing them. What room has been developed for multilateral, 'minilateral' (see Faure this issue) or even bilateral co-operation over support? More precisely, our focus here will be narrowed to the Franco-British programme of co-operation established in 2014 in order to mutually service and support the Atlases of both countries. As will be highlighted below, the enigma to be addressed is why, despite the ambitious high-level commitments made on both sides of the Channel, actual Franco-British co-operation over in-service support has turned out to be remarkably low? In short, why has differentiation, and even divergence, between the two national approaches been the outcome?

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1 At least in theory, this approach featured a shift from a logic of arithmetically-based *juste retour* to one where a 'balance' of workshare at the level of the programme as a whole was to be achieved, the designation of Airbus as a primary contractor free to choose and manage its sub-contractors and the positioning of OCCAR as an intermediary between Airbus and national procurement systems.

2 This research has included in-depth analysis of official documentation, ministerial speeches and the business models of the manufacturing and servicing firms involved, together with 30 interviews with relevant politicians, civil servants, air force officials and managers of Airbus.