



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Significant F-35 purchases in Eastern Europe are reviving NATO's nuclear deterrence programme



The NATO Eastern European wing armies have initiated a rapid acquisition of F-35 fighter jets as a crucial component of modernising their air forces. This also suggests the strengthening of NATO's nuclear capabilities along its border with Russia.

Romania has been the latest in a series of Eastern European NATO members to announce its intention to buy Lockheed Martin F-35, fifth-generation jets.

The government has informed the parliament about the plan to procure 48 aircraft. The procurement starts this year and will cost around \$6.5 billion.

Almost at the same time, the government of the Czech Republic announced its plan to purchase the F-35. It will buy 24 aircraft from the American manufacturer for almost the same amount, and expect the first delivery in 2031. It is the largest single purchase of weapons in the history of the Czech Republic.

Production of the F-35 for Poland began at the Lockheed Martin factory in Georgia, USA, last April. The first planes are expected next year. Poland bought 32 planes, whose delivery will continue until 2030.

Finland concluded a purchase contract for 64 F-35s in February last year, even before becoming a NATO member. The delivery will start in 2025. Last June, the Finnish defence industry, Patria, concluded a deal with Lockheed Martin. According to this deal, fuselages for more than 400 F-35s will be assembled in Finland.

The Danish Air Force received 4 out of 27 ordered F-35s 2 weeks ago. Their delivery was a condition for Denmark to start donating 19 F-16 aircraft to Ukraine so the first aircraft could be delivered to Kyiv around the New Year.

The nuclear sharing programme is back

Large deliveries of modern stealth fighters to European NATO members, particularly those along the border with Russia, will, in a relatively short time, renew their air forces and replace older equipment or Soviet-made aircraft still used by some NATO armies in the East.

At the same time, the widespread introduction of the F-35 into the European armies in the East may potentially herald the revival of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Programme, which has been heavily criticised in Europe as a relic of the Cold War.

The programme refers to the participation in nuclear defence, but, above all, in the deterrence of a nuclear attack of those NATO members that do not have their own nuclear weapons. Apart from the US, the UK and France, these are all the remaining members of the Alliance.

Their role in the programme is to have aircraft that could carry tactical nuclear weapons and use them to strike targets in the territory of a potential attacker.

The F-35 provides this opportunity because, as a more modern aircraft, it can successfully replace the current carriers of nuclear weapons (dual capable aircraft) such as the F-16 and Tornado.

Russia accelerated the modernisation of the eastern part of NATO

With Russia's aggressiveness against Ukraine and because of the Kremlin's persistent threats to use nuclear weapons against NATO members, the 1960s-era nuclear sharing agreement has been revived.

At the very start of the Russian attack on Ukraine and after Moscow's first threats of using its nuclear arsenal, NATO planners talked about strengthening their deterrence capabilities by accelerating the introduction of the F-35 into the air forces of European

partners.

"We're moving fast and furiously towards F-35 modernisation and incorporating those into our planning and into our exercising and things like that as those capabilities come online", said Jessica Cox, director of the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate.

It is estimated that in Europe, the 5 current partners in the programme (Italy, Germany, Turkey, Belgium and Netherlands) have between 100 and 200 B-61 nuclear gravity bombs activated from aircraft.

Poland leads the way in joining the nuclear programme

Last June, Poland requested to join the group of NATO members participating in the Nuclear Sharing Policy under the pressure of the Russian operation in Ukraine and its constant nuclear threats.

Its motive was Russia's threat to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus, which borders Poland, and in the Kaliningrad region, a Russian enclave near Poland. The purchase of the F-35, along with Warsaw's expressed willingness to be part of the Nuclear Sharing Programme, presents Poland as a leader in enhancing nuclear deterrence capabilities in Eastern Europe.

The rest of NATO partners in Eastern Europe have so far not expressed such an intention, but their purchases of modern F-35s means that this is a possibility.

The proximity of Russia and its aggressive threat of a nuclear attack on the closest NATO members puts them in a position to think and decide like Poland. However, not for long.

Regarding acceptance of nuclear capabilities as a crucial factor in countering the Russian threat, they do not need to worry about public opposition, which has significantly declined since the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The biggest obstacle was removed at the end of 2021 in Germany when the government of Olaf Scholz included the decision to remain part of the nuclear sharing agreement in the coalition agreement.

Berlin thus ended the significant internal political debates about remaining or leaving the NATO nuclear programme.

Just a few months later, in March 2022, when Russian troops were already in Ukraine, Germany ordered 35 F-35s, which would replace the outdated fleet of its Tornado aircraft as carriers of tactical nuclear weapons by the end of the decade.

"There is only one response to Putin's aggression: unity within NATO and a credible deterrent. That's why there is no alternative to the decision in favour of the F-35", said, at the time, General Ingo Gerhartz, German Air Force Chief of Staff.