

European Air Power: Challenges and Opportunities

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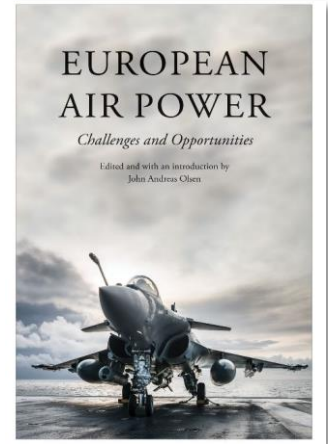
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In the context of a volatile security environment and of drastic budgetary cuts in European defence spending, John Andreas Olsen's *European Air Power* poses a timely question: What is the current and prospective status of the European air power capabilities?

In order to formulate a well-informed and comprehensive answer, this work examines the similarities and differences across national air power debates and choices in eight European states, while analyzing in more general terms the challenges and opportunities in the air power realm for small and medium-sized states.

For the authors, modern air power is an indispensable and versatile instrument in the arsenal of European powers:



starting with the Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, and continuing with the air interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, the counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the more recent NATO intervention in Libya - Operation Unified Protector, air power has proved its utility in a variety of strategic environments.

Nonetheless – the authors argue – air power is not a universal remedy to be applied indiscriminately to all conflicts and its risks and limitations should be carefully considered. Such a close and complex examination of different aspects of airpower requires ‘mastery of the air profession’ which comprises ‘knowledge of the strategic history of air power, insight into airpower’s strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to think conceptually and strategically’ [1].

The central argument of the book is that European air forces suffer from “strategic myopia” as they tend to overemphasize the importance of tactics and technology at the expense of strategic thinking and professional competence.

The book is divided into three main parts as follows.

The first part explores the air forces of four NATO member states: France, Germany, Turkey and the United Kingdom, a selection based on two criteria: first, their great power status and hence, their comparable combat capability; and second, their current or prospective possession of modern fighter-bombers.

Although each of these sub-sections is concerned with the particular national contexts of air power developments (including geographical, historical and socio-economic aspects), there is a red thread of the narrative guiding the reader throughout the text: how do European states respond to the budgetary constraints while maintaining relevance in the air power domain?

In the second section of the book, Olsen’s contributors turn their attention towards the

Nordic air powers: Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, which were chosen for being minor air power nations facing similar constraints in deciding how to plan scarce resources for acquiring and sustaining air power capabilities.

The third part is arguably the most intriguing of the entire work as it encompasses the contrasting reflections on the future of air power for small and medium-sized nations in Europe of two renowned air power experts – Professor Martin van Creveld and Air Vice Marshal (ret.) R.A. Mason.

The debate is opened by the author and historian Van Creveld whose viewpoint draws extensively on the argument of his book *The Age of Airpower*: since World War II, air power has been continually declining in relevance to the success of modern, irregular warfare characterized by intrastate insurgencies.

Moreover, the costs of airpower capabilities such as modern fighter-bombers have risen sharply and as a result, a meaningful fleet is difficult to achieve for the ever-shrinking Western air forces.

The future – Van Creveld argues – is represented by helicopters and by unmanned aerial systems which prove more suitable for fighting counterinsurgencies compared to manned aircraft. For the small and medium-sized nations with scarce resources, acquiring missiles, satellites, drones and other unmanned systems may be the only feasible option for projecting air power.

In turn, R.A. Mason expresses a contradictory view. Air power has not lost its prominent position in irregular warfare, on the contrary, it has remained a powerful military and political instrument in the governments' toolbox and has continued to play a decisive or dominant role in all the military conflicts in which the European states fought together with their US ally since the 1990s.

Moreover, manned aircraft have not been rendered obsolete by the new technological developments for at least two reasons: first, man provides the ultimate protection of space-based systems in the case of large-scale, damaging cyber attacks; second, the human resourcefulness, creativity and skills remain essential for military dominance, an observation which is consistent with the underlying assumption of the book that professional competence is more important than advancements in military technology. To remain relevant across the spectrum of conflict in times of austerity, European states should not attempt to rely solely on unmanned systems, but instead should make efforts to achieve a high degree of interoperability with their partners.

Despite its frequent use in military interventions, its considerable size, and its ongoing retooling, the European air power has received much less attention compared to the US air power in the literature – a gap Olsen and his contributors attempt to fill [2]. In their examination of the current state of the European air power capabilities, the authors provide a comprehensive perspective on the national particularities influencing the development of the air forces in eight case studies, with reference to geographical, historical, social-economic and political-military factors. In addition to its ambitious scope, another notable strength of the book resides in the incorporation of a multitude of perspectives of both independent experts and air chiefs from the four Nordic countries.

Although primarily written for the air power military personnel [3], the topicality of the subject and the clarity of the argument make this book of interest for a more general audience, while Olsen's dual position as a colonel serving in the Royal Norwegian Air Force and a visiting professor at the Swedish National Defence College, allows him and his contributors to successfully combine operational and conceptual perspectives in assessing the status of

European air forces.

European Air Power: Challenges and Opportunities is an important read for all air enthusiasts because it sheds light on the insufficiently covered topic of contemporary European air capabilities and air forces in a comprehensive and persuasive argument.

REFERENCES

- [1] John Andreas Olsen, *European Air Power: Challenges and Opportunities*, Potomac Books, United States of America: 2014, xxi
- [2] Ibid, xv
- [3] Ibid, xiii

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