

## HARPIA PROGRAMME DIVIDED IN HALF [COMMENTARY]

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**Wojciech Skurkiewicz, Polish Vice-Minister of Defence, announced that the first squadron of the 5th generation fighter aircraft (16 examples) would be acquired within the scope of the current planning prospects, while another one would be procured after 2026. Even though solution as such has some advantage, it also entails some risk. One needs to remember that acquisition constitutes only 30% of all of the lifecycle spending which means that the total cost of ownership may be even three times as high as the procurement pricetag.**

Skurkiewicz made his statement during a heated debate at the parliament.. Czesław Mroczek, a Polish MP, asked the head of the MoD to clarify the “scandalous actions undertaken by the government with regards to acquisition of helicopters for the Polish military”. The matter of fighters was brought up by Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska, asking about the combat value of the military aviation, pointing to the fact that the Polish MiG-29 jets have been grounded several times recently, due to the accidents. According to the Polish Press Agency, Kluzik-Rostkowska also made a suggestion that only 40% of the Polish F-16s remain ready to use.

Responding to the questions, Deputy Head of the Polish Ministry of Defence, Wojciech Skurkiewicz stated that the decision to prolong the MiG-29’s lifecycles for another decade was made back in 2011. Mariusz Błaszczak, head of the MoD, recently decided to accelerate the Harpia program, the goal of which is to replace the Post-Soviet aircraft. However, the most important quote pertained to implementation of the Harpia programme itself:

*implementation of the Harpia programme itself: We are buying 5th generation aircraft. This is a breakthrough decision that would entirely change the position in which the air force is. The above can happen as the first F-35 squadron would be procured during the current timeline, within the scope of the present modernization plan outlining the period until 2026. The second squadron would be procured after 2026.*

*Wojciech Skurkiewicz, Secretary of State at the Polish Ministry of Defence*

Deputy Minister of Defence thus unveiled the specific plan that the MoD has made with regards to the Harpia programme, within the current technical modernization plan. By the year 2026 the MoD is to provide financing for acquisition of a single 5th generation fighter squadron (16 jets most probably).

The second squadron would be covered within the scope of the next modernization plan on the timeline.

The above means that, at least until the new Technical Modernization Plan is adopted, the MoD can oblige itself to acquire a single squadron - such is the Harpia programme budget. It should be strongly emphasized that the above does not exclude asking the US to launch acquisition of two squadrons in line with the FMS procedure, as LOA intergovernmental documents can be signed with regards to a certain portion of the equipment that is designated to be acquired.

And so it happened in case of the Romanian Patriot acquisition. Back in 2017, when an approval was provided concerning 7 batteries, a single battery was acquired, with the subsequent ones to follow. On one hand, this approach makes it possible to distribute payment across a longer timeline. It may also make it possible to deal with other priorities in parallel, as defined by the PMT documents (ground-based air defence assets for instance, destined to protect the bases of the new aircraft).

On the other hand though, some serious risks may emerge in a scenario as such. If agreements are divided into smaller bits, it may be tougher to negotiate a beneficial arrangement that would concern maintenance of the airframes, lifecycle support and industrial cooperation. The above is important, as lifecycle cost, especially in case of systems as complex as the F-35, constitutes the bulk of the total expenditure.

For instance, the Danish MoD issued the „Integrating the F-35 into Danish Defence” report jointly with the University of Copenhagen, in which the authors state that 3-decades long lifecycle management cost for a fleet of 27 F-35 would be contained in an amount of USD 8.6 billion, whereas the acquisition has a pricetag of 3 billion dollars. One should add that this kind of a system, without ongoing software updates or proper maintenance (including the stealth properties) is bound to lose its combat potential soon. Considering the programme cost, it would also be worth to secure the option for the domestic industry to participate.

One shall also remember that introduction of the new aircraft would also entail a need to tailor the infrastructure to accommodate the new fighter. The report cited above also refers to plans made by other nations with regards to the F-35 platform, mentioning the Norwegian requirement to modernize two of its airbases, with the expected investment at the level of USD 350-400 million. In case of Poland the cost may be different and we are unable to provide the reader with a clear estimate. Australia serves as another clear example here. The country is planning to spend AUD 1.6 billion (USD 1.1 billion) to create the F-35 infrastructure. Not only does the above concern an extensive modernization programme with regards to Tindall and Williamtown bases hosting the F/A-18A/B+ aircraft that are to be replaced by the Lightning II, but it also applies to modernization of another six forward operating bases, including ones based around civil airports. These bases may be used to host and accommodate the F-35s during the wartime, thus improving their survival ratio. The Australians are also thinking about reinforcement of the Myambat (NSW) storage facility and its infrastructure. The Australian fleet is to consist of 72 F-35 jets.

One shall also remember that competition is most favorable condition, from the point of view adopted by the buyer. Not only can it drive the cost down, it may also be used to negotiate beneficial industrial and supply-chain-related benefits.

At the same time there is no doubt about this at all: MiG-29 and Su-22 airframes should be replaced. Considering the above factors, a question emerges: would it not be better to place the Harpia programme outside the PMT planning document, as it has been proposed by Andrzej Duda, the Polish President? Obviously, this would require extra legislation and extra expenditure. In exchange Warsaw would have a chance to distribute the acquisition across a longer timeline, as the MoD plans, with an

ability to place the order concerning all 32 aircraft at once which eliminates division of the deal into smaller pieces.

Harpia funds, expected to be spent until 2026, could be used to acquire another F-16 squadron and to expand the operational capabilities offered by the existing fleet (modernization and reinforcement of the maintenance schemes that would render a higher availability of the airframes). **It is probable that new F-16Vs would gain combat-ready status much quicker than the F-35, thus acting as an asset that could lift off some of the operational burden from the Harpia jets.** Contrary to the F-35, the F-16V is available as a twin-seater variant with some of the systems derived from the F-35 directly, which would make it easier for the pilots to transition from the Soviet aircraft to the new airframes.

Notably, the new generation MRCA should be treated as an element of a wider combat system. **That element shall be fused with the F-16s that Poland owns, the ground-based air-defence assets, long range artillery or the electronic warfare elements. The drive towards accelerated replacement of Fulcrums and Fitters is valid, but it shall not overshadow the other requirements, including the ones concerning the recce, C2 or anti-tank defence projects.** So, maybe it would be a good solution to create a special governmental programme?