

Beat: Technology

Artillery: What are Spain's technical and political options?

Future of artillery in Spain

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USPA NEWS - Spain isn't spared with the need to upgrade its artillery: the entire West saw in the Ukraine what Russia could now do, and suspect China can do as well. Spain has therefore placed a new order for new-generation 155-mm shells, in the hope to expand its tactical capabilities. But whether technically, or politically, Spain should start thinking outside the box and looking to its neighbors, if it wants to address the emerging security challenge.

A new batch of rounds

Afghanistan may have been a tough fight for troops on the ground, but the lessons learned contributed to shed light on the new strategic era which the world has now entered - and, with 30 000 troops committed to the battlefield over the years, Spain did not miss the memo. The need to increase mobility was highlighted for heavy mechanized Western armies, both by the extended terrain and by the nimble enemy forces, which routinely evaded superior firepower with quick covert movements. These lessons were verified in the later French intervention in Mali. As mid-intensity battlefields are expected to continue being the setting for European and American forces, planners and strategy specialists are looking into solutions to make their fire nippier and sharper. An off-target salvo may be no big deal with a slow conventional enemy, but it's a blown opportunity when facing quick truck-mounted insurgent units.

Consequently, Spain has placed an order with national firm Expal for new 155-mm rounds. Armament specialist Christopher Foss writes for Janes: "Compared with some legacy 155 mm artillery projectiles, the new 155 ER02A1 projectile has a thinner wall thickness for improved fragmentation effect and contains more HE explosive. It can be used in conjunction with the older conventional bag type charge, but Spain will use a modular charge system (MCS), with six being used with the 155 mm/52-calibre ordnance to achieve maximum range. Spain's contract with Expal includes the DM92ES MCS." These rounds will increase the chances of "kill on first strike", which throughout history has not been a specialty for behemoth artillery tubes. Although these new shells will slightly increase the range and accuracy of Spain's howitzers, Madrid is down to its last options to keep up with the breakneck technological pace. Expal is the last Spanish firm to produce such rounds, after years of slow demise of the Spanish industry.

Even the US are struggling

Whether the next enemy is a small but fierce insurgency, or whether the West reverts to facing a large conventional army, it makes no difference. Artillery is coming back in force on battlefields. Russia has made an impressive show of force in the Ukraine, demonstrating their ability to hit targets hard, fast, and far away. China is suspected, given its cooperation with Russia, to have developed similar potential. Either way, all of NATO (not just Spain) needs to boost their tubes and squeeze additional potential, in both land and naval theaters - and the US is having difficulty containing the pressure with large military players like Germany refusing to engage in dangerous areas. Artillery hands commanders two game-changing possibilities: creating vast kill zones, and blocking out entire chunks of territory for the enemy. But even the United States figures it will take them at least 5 years to develop and implement solutions.

Defense specialist Dan Goure writes: "The Army has initiated the Precision Strike Missile, or PrSM, program as a longer-range replacement for the ATACMS. The desire is for a missile smaller than the ATACMS so that two can be carried in a single GMLRS launch cell, but with a range approaching 500 kilometers and a precision-targeting capability. The Army is currently planning to test prototype PrSMs in 2019, with plans to deploy an initial version in the mid-2020s." The United States uses primarily the Paladin self-propelled howitzer and knows it needs to compensate the armored cannon's sluggish nature with increased fire capabilities. France and Germany can supply reinforcements, but only the French ones have seen battle, and can be relied on.

Looking towards French synergies

The United States sells little or none of its own military equipment, and never sells its most recent innovations. Even if it did, Spain could hardly afford it, given its military budget. But, since the American NATO leadership is showing signs of weariness at protecting the old continent, Europe has been reinventing its own defense philosophy, under the leadership of France and Germany, although a

partnership between France and the UK (with higher military activity) would also be an option. In other words, the next Spanish artillery solution may not come from the US, NATO or even Spain, but from a fellow European country. If Madrid decides to purchase Nexter's new-generation mobile howitzer (CAESAR), it may kill two birds with one shell.

Not only is the Caesar fitted with every latest artillery innovation (including MRSI, which enables the simultaneous impact of up to 6 shells), such a purchase would reinforce Spain's position within the inevitable European defense alliance. As European countries gradually lost their ability to build new-generation weapons, France and Germany have started unifying defense efforts across the continent, by acting as an integrator between all of Europe's defense firms. Looking over the Pyrenees for the next generation of artillery systems may therefore yield Spain three separate wins: increase its organic defense potential, reinforce its ties to the European alliance and ensure that Spanish industries will be increasingly turned to, as the Franco-German tandem takes on European orders.

Spain, like many other European countries before it, is coming to an era where it will be compelled to change its military way of thinking: stand-alone stances no longer afford the sovereignty they used to a few centuries ago, and Madrid will strengthen its military and industrial standing far better with a continental team approach. Cramming new shells into its current artillery tubes will extend their range for a while, until the next technological leap. Joining the European leadership will make them enter the new era of European security.

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