MBDA Continues SPEAR EW Development, Looks for "Launch Customer"

By Andrew White

MBDA provided an update on its SPEAR-EW miniature cruise missile at the Farnborough International Airshow in July.

Speaking to *JED,* MBDA business development executive, Jon McCullagh confirmed the solution continues to be developed although it has already reached "mature design." McCullagh said the company is "working with" the UK's Ministry of Defence (MoD) and other undisclosed "partners," as they look to land a launch customer and initiate production of SPEAR-EW.

Discussing observations and lessons learned from across the contemporary operating environment, McCullagh explained how armed forces require "deception and decoys" to protect platforms and accompany "waves of missiles" on their way to a target across a contested battlespace. Given SPEAR-EW shares many of the same specifications as the original SPEAR munition, developed for the UK MoD, MBDA believes it could similarly be integrated on board platforms already hosting the armed variant. Examples includes the F-35 which, according to MBDA, conducted its first flight on a "US test fighter" in the first half of this year.

However, SPEAR-EW has yet to be integrated on board an aircraft, let alone conduct flight tests. "MBDA designed SPEAR with spiral development in mind, and funding from the UK Ministry of Defence accelerated SPEAR-EW development. This novel electronic warfare effector acts as a stand-in jammer, designed to confuse enemy air defence protecting friendly forces and serving as a significant force multiplier," a company statement confirmed.

Looking to the future, McCullagh suggested additional investment had been injected into SPEAR-EW enabling MBDA to continue its development. But he could not specify where that money had come from and timelines associated with it. However, he did disclose how recent work has included the development of a three-pack launcher for SPEAR-EW, developed by MBDA as an internal research and development project.

McCullagh also said he was unaware of any definitive decision by the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) – the UK/Italy/Japan joint development to field a sixth-generation fighter by 2035 – to include SPEAR-EW in its roadmap, although there remains a strong possibility for such a concept of operation in the future.

Also at Farnborough, MBDA showcased its Air Launched Effect (ALE) concept, first unveiled just weeks before at ILA in Berlin, Germany. MBDA is developing multiple variants of the tube-launched UAS, capable of being fired from large rotary or fixed wing crewed and uncrewed aircraft. One of the variants was described by an MBDA executive as providing a “Mini SPEAR-EW” capability.

The development follows calls from customers around the world for a “cheap, agile, scalable and easily integrated” solution. Initial variants of the ALE are expected to be available to customers by September 2028.