



Buying Brazilian

The Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) is considering buying a Brazilian-made aircraft, in a departure from traditional procurement practice.

One supplier under consideration is Brazilian company Embraer, which is virtually unknown in New Zealand compared to Boeing and Airbus, but is the third largest aircraft manufacturer in the world.

It has more than 19,000 employees in 10 international factories. One hundred airlines and public and private entities in 90 countries fly more than 8,000 Embraer aircraft manufactured since 1969.

Military aviation accounts for 14 per cent of Embraer's global sales. Its latest model, the KC390 (pictured above), is one of several models under the RNZAF's microscope.

At my behest, New Zealand's leading geopolitical, defence and strategic analyst, Dr Paul G. Buchanan, has compared the Embraer KC390 with its competitors and recommends it as the best choice. Dr Buchanan says the Brazilian aircraft is a turboprop (jet)-powered, extended-range, multi-role, medium airlift platform. It was manufactured in conjunction with suppliers from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Portugal, other European and US suppliers, including BAE Systems, Rockwell Collins and

Boeing, which has a major service contract for the KC390 that extends to on-site servicing in the field.

The key values the RNZAF is looking for in its new aircraft are flexibility, durability, range, payload and cost. It is evaluating the Brazilian Embraer KC390 along with Lockheed Martin's C-130J "Super Hercules," Boeing's C-17 and the Airbus A400M.

A new aircraft must be able to carry heavier payloads over longer distances than the existing C-130 Hercules but still be able to land and take-off on short, unprepared airfields. It also must be flexible enough to perform search and rescue, intelligence gathering and surveillance, air drop (of paratroopers and pallets) as well as to transport troops, helicopters, armour and general cargo.

Bonus features

In addition to fully meeting the RNZAF's stated requirements, the KC390 can perform aerial refuelling for fixed wing and rotary aircraft, undertake medical evacuation carrying up to 74 stretchers and eight medical personnel, perform aerial firefighting, carry the New Zealand Defence Force's largest armoured personnel carrier or a helicopter - something the RNZAF's current Hercules C-130 cannot do - and

perform tactical combat operations.

Dr Buchanan highlights an essential difference between the KC390 and the RNZAF's current airlift options inasmuch as the KC390 has the ability to safely pass the current Point of No Return on Antarctic flights and still be able to turn around and return to New Zealand on a load of fuel while carrying a 14-ton payload, but with a maximum potential payload of 26 tons, which is five more than the existing Hercules can carry.

Beyond its performance specifications, the KC390 offers good value for money, in Dr Buchanan's opinion.

The export version of RNZAF's apparent favourite, the "Super Hercules" C-130J, costs approximately US\$120 million compared to the KC390's US\$85 million. He says this is incomparable value considering the C-130J entered production in the mid-1990s using baseline technologies from the 1960s, whereas the KC390 is a new airframe using state-of-the-art components.

Dr Buchanan concludes that the KC390 represents a new type of airlift capability deserving of serious consideration even if buying Brazilian will be a departure from traditional defence procurement partnerships.