

Nov 04, 2016 by *APDS Bloggers*

Aviation Diplomacy Takes Flight at Farnborough, UK ^[1]

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Once every two years, the world's leading aerospace, air defense, and commercial aviation corporations converge approximately 30 miles west of London at a small airfield in the bucolic English county of Hampshire. Throughout the course of seven days in mid-July, the little town of Farnborough transforms into more than just a place where aviation enthusiasts can indulge in a daily course of Red Arrows and black pudding. The Farnborough International Airshow, in most regards, is a premier accelerator of international exchange, advocacy, and trade, a place that may be a business card.



The 2010 show, which I had the privilege of attending, featured 1450 exhibiting companies, over 120,000 visitors per day, 11 UK Government ministers, and 70 delegations from 44 countries. Given the tremendous concentration of international pavilions, corporate chalets, and aircraft on display, it quickly became evident why so many companies are able to accomplish more business in three days than they often can in three months. By the end of the show, orders totaled over \$47 billion. Such a robust figure is a good indication that commercial aviation is poised for a new era of growth that will open doors of international trade and cultural exchange among foreign publics.

Operationally, aviation is a multi-sector enterprise that facilitates the very existence of global commerce. As an economic bellwether, many industry analysts suggest that when aviation companies start to thrive, so do many other associated businesses. The results of Farnborough 2010 suggest that there are scores of strategic innovations that customers, passengers, and foreign governments will experience within the next decade.

In many respects, the key to the future sustainability of global aviation is the reduction of carbon emissions. Farnborough provided a bird's eye view into what tomorrow's green technology may look like. Perhaps one of the most interesting related developments was an

algae-based biodiesel demonstrated by an aircraft operated jointly by EADS Innovation Works and the Austrian-based Diamond Aircraft Corporation. Such partnerships demonstrate why collaboration between the world's leading aviation organizations is necessary in developing a greener industry that thrives on greater environmental responsibility among corporations as well as passengers.

In addition to introducing more economical, energy-efficient aircraft into their fleets, many airlines are also emphasizing how new equipment will also help enhance the onboard experience. Perhaps one of the airlines at Farnborough that placed the most emphasis on onboard luxury was Qatar Airways, the "World's 5-Star Airline." I toured one of their new Boeing 777-300ER aircraft, and was definitely influenced by the charm offensive. With a gracious onboard staff and an economy cabin with supple amenities and legroom, it was hard not to be impressed with such a comfortable display.

Beyond the obvious trappings that Qatar and several others carriers sought to accent at Farnborough, there was an intrinsic sense of national identity and pride on display. In other words, the aircraft were treated not simply as a transportation vehicle for passengers, but as a symbolic embodiment of their originating country. Historically, national airlines have been utilized as branding tools of their respective countries. As such, the Boeing 777 I stepped aboard was more than just an airplane. It was a physical extension of the State of Qatar, with its hopes, ideals, and culture being showcased. However, while Doha may eventually become an aero-transit hub in the Middle East given the expansion of Qatar Airways and construction of the New Doha International Airport, there are other geographic areas with increasing opportunity.

Given such noteworthy events all taking place under virtually the same roof, the ability to interact and engage with the many corporate officials stationed at the air show had tremendous informational value. Naturally, it was also very beneficial to listen to key insights from various government officials at a few of the international stands. As one would imagine, their perspectives tended to be slightly more comparative as they almost always focused on how to attract foreign investment while maintaining domestic growth.

At the end of the week, if you count the numbers, I suppose there were winners and losers. However, for a brief moment in July, nations and airlines of the world gathered together and literally shared common ground as partners and competitors.

It will be another two years before the best minds and proud birds gather again at Farnborough. Next time, it will be right before the 2012 London Olympics. We'll see who wins the day. Still, up at 30,000 feet, there is no gold, but only sunlight and an endless blue sky that extends beyond borders, which must be shared and protected. Aviation is a special frontier of public diplomacy that relies upon international cooperation to influence the delivery of national priorities. Therefore, the impact of aviation is best defined by its inherent ability to transcend the policies that divide our world by connecting people and cultures that otherwise might be kept apart.

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