LEAP and the C-UAS Turning Point: Perhaps Europe Has Found the Right Path (and Italy Can Truly Count)

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The announcement of the initiative **LEAP – Low-Cost Effectors and Autonomous Platforms**, promoted by **United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland**, should be understood for what it is: not yet another "future" program, but an attempt to respond **immediately** to a harsh lesson learned in Ukraine. The drone war has overturned the cost-effectiveness ratios of air defense: if the enemy attacks with cheap, numerous, and expendable platforms, the response cannot be based solely on expensive and scarce interceptors.

The issue is not just "shooting down a drone." It's doing it **every day**, at a high pace, for months, without depleting ammunition, budget, and industrial capacity. In this sense, LEAP can represent a **more realistic path** to acquiring a true anti-UAS capability: focusing on low-cost effectors, mass production, and rapid innovation cycles.

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Why “low-cost” is the Key Word (Not a Compromise)

The central point is attrition. In modern warfare, the UAV threat presents itself in quantity: reconnaissance, saturating attacks, “loitering munitions,” improvised swarms, adapted commercial drones. Responding with missiles designed to shoot down aircraft or cruise missiles is often technically possible but strategically unsustainable. It’s a logic that burns resources faster than the threat.

LEAP is born to fill precisely this gap: **economically sustainable anti-drone defense**, integrable and rapidly scalable. If the declared goal of quickly starting the production of components and systems is met, the program would introduce a rare discontinuity: from “niche excellence” to **mass capability**.

C-UAS Capability is Not a Product: It’s a System

The risk, as always, is reducing everything to the effector. In reality, a credible anti-UAS capability is a complete chain:

- **Detection and Tracking** (radar, EO/IR, passive sensors)
- **Identification and Classification** (also with AI support, deconfliction)
- **Neutralization** (electronic warfare, “low-cost” effectors, kinetic and non-kinetic interception)
- **Command and Control** (integration with air defense, rules of engagement, saturation management)

If one of these links is weak, the entire system collapses. And here LEAP can be useful if it imposes standards and interoperability: not an additional “object,” but an **operational package**.

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Where is Italy? At the Table, Yes. But Now It Must Choose Whether to Be “Part” or “Pillar”

Italy, in this initiative, has two paths. The first is the most comfortable: participate, contribute to individual subsystems, and stay in the wake of the big players. The second is more ambitious and more useful: **lead a segment** and bind the program to measurable industrial and operational results.

1) System Integration (C2, sensors, network)

Effective anti-UAS is primarily integration capability: connecting different sensors, merging tracks, assigning the most economical response, coordinating with traditional Air Defense. If Italy positions itself as a “system integrator” on architectures and C2, it is not a lateral supplier: it becomes a critical node of the program.

2) Scalable Production and Logistical Sustainability

“Low-cost” is not just design: it’s supply chain, components, maintenance, training, and the ability to produce numbers. Italy can push for a logic of **volumes and continuity**, transforming LEAP from a political prototype to an industrial reality.

3) Protection of Territory and Resilience

The UAV threat does not only concern the eastern front or operational theaters: it involves critical infrastructures, bases, ports, airports, energy, major events. Linking LEAP also to **national defense** makes the capability more fundable and more credible: not “mission spending,” but daily security.

The Condition for Success: Move from Declarations to Commitments

LEAP can be the right path only if it translates into four concrete elements:

1. **Clear Common Requirements** (scenarios, saturation levels, cost-effectiveness thresholds)
2. **Guaranteed Minimum Orders** (without volumes there is no “low-cost”)
3. **Real Interoperability** (standards, NATO integration, connection with IAMD)
4. **Rapid Update Cycle** (because drones evolve in months, not decades)

If these pillars hold, LEAP can become the first European program to treat anti-UAS as what it is: a mass, industrial, and systemic capability.

Conclusion: The Right Path Exists, but It Must Be Fully Pursued

The Ukrainian lesson is simple: the winner is not only the one with the most sophisticated system, but the one with the best combination of **effectiveness, cost, and availability**. LEAP seems to start from this awareness.

For Italy, the question is not “if it’s there,” but **how it’s there**: as a bystander or as a structural actor. If Rome focuses on integration, volumes, and territory protection, this initiative can become not just a European project, but a real acceleration to finally build a credible and sustainable anti-UAS capability.

News link: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-european-allies-to-develop-low-cost-air-defence-weapons-to-protect-nato-skies