Revolution in Drone Hunting: The New AW249 Attack Helicopter

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The war in Ukraine has introduced unprecedented operational scenarios, where drones and loitering munitions have become key players in Russian offensives. For the first time, the Kyiv Army has released detailed images of nighttime operations in which Army Aviation Force helicopters intercepted and neutralized Shahed drones, using a coordinated tactic: an aircraft equipped with advanced sensors for target detection and one dedicated to direct attack.

The FLIR UltraFORCE 350 system, integrated on these platforms, has allowed for the identification and tracking of drones even at night, guiding precision fire. A solution originally designed for surveillance and patrol missions, but effectively adapted to counter asymmetric aerial threats.
This operational mode has a crucial advantage: it allows for the conservation of expensive and scarce anti-aircraft missiles, using relatively economical and flexible means such as combat helicopters.

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The AW249 Fenice: The Future of the Italian Army Aviation

The Italian Army has launched the acquisition program for the new attack helicopter AW249 Fenice, intended to replace the AW129 Mangusta after over thirty years of service. Leonardo plans to produce up to **48 units**, with an initial batch of 17 units to be delivered starting in 2027.

The Fenice is designed as a next-generation platform, capable of operating in complex and rapidly evolving scenarios. With a maximum takeoff weight of 8.3 tons, it can ensure escort missions, close air support, reconnaissance, and interdiction. It features advanced avionics, the ability to network with drones and ground assets, as well as a self-defense system that enhances its survivability on modern battlefields.

Its armament includes a 20 mm cannon, 70 mm rockets, and air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles, making it already an extremely versatile platform.

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Opportunities for Italy: Anti-Drone and Anti-Loitering Capabilities

In light of the Ukrainian experience, an interesting prospect opens up: **equipping the AW249 Fenice with a dedicated anti-drone capability**, capable of addressing the threats posed by kamikaze drones or loitering munitions.

The technologies available to the Fenice – modular avionics, advanced mission systems, the ability to integrate with next-generation sensors – make it possible to adopt specific optical and lightweight radar pods for UAS detection, as well as the use of short-range air-to-air munitions optimized against small targets.

A further development could be the integration of small-caliber laser-guided munitions or micro-missiles, specifically designed for drone neutralization. In this way, the AW249 could perform tactical air defense missions to protect convoys, forward operating bases, and ground forces, easing the burden on medium-to-long-range missile batteries.

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Conclusion: A Doctrine to Write

The Ukrainian case demonstrates that the rapid adaptation of existing platforms can make a difference in the face of emerging threats. For the Italian Army, the AW249 represents a unique opportunity not only to replace the Mangusta but to introduce a new capability: **an attack helicopter with an anti-drone function**, capable of integrating into the integrated air defense network and facing future operational challenges.

In a context where drones are now an integral part of the battlefield, equipping the Fenice with this capability would not only increase its versatility but also strengthen the protection of Italian troops in operational theaters.

News link: https://defence-blog.com/ukrainian-helicopters-hunt-shahed-drones-in-night-operations/