

## CTOT BLUES

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A recent issue of *CHIRP* reported the growing frustration at the imposition of slots (CTOTs). As one business-jet operator is reported to have said, “slots are not necessary in the United States save for some scheduling into the busiest airports and so should not be necessary in Europe”. He goes on to suggest that all aircraft filing “G” in the flight plan should have no take-off restriction. Doubtless this will prompt the usual rejoinder about European airspace being far more crowded, controllers working with older equipment, handoffs to the next sector still being by phone and so on. In my view, the writer deserves a round of applause.

Consider the orthodox rejoinder. It goes something like this. Issuing a CTOT is the only way to implement flow control; in the absence of the latter, the stacks would grow intolerably high and air safety would be compromised. The reason this is necessary in Europe and not the United States has partly to do with Europe’s notoriously foul weather (when minima go below CAT I, the system slows enormously), but mainly to do with Europe’s far denser air traffic---for example, the notorious London-Amsterdam-Paris triangle with traffic converging on such choke points as KOK, CLN, SPY and ABB. Moreover, European controllers bend over their outdated screens while handoffs are made to controlling authorities in the next country, not the next sector as in the United States. Brussels is doing a good job under impossible conditions, and things will improve immeasurably with the advent of tighter BRNAV, mode-S and other high-tech goodies.

Unfortunately the orthodox argument, however widely believed, is badly flawed. Consider the counter arguments.

- (i) Poorer weather? EU weather may be bad, but pilots in the United States face far greater weather extremes: winter blizzards and summer lines of thunderstorms far more disruptive than ours. Let somebody cite figures on the mean rate of weather related disruption at two comparable airports; say Heathrow and Chicago O’Hare or Gatwick and LaGuardia.
- (ii) Higher traffic density? It is perfectly true that *in general* European skies are more crowded than those of the US, but I have yet to see figures comparing like with like. Is the area delimited by, say, JFK-LGA-EWR in New York or DCA-IAD-BWI in Washington-Baltimore any less crowded than LHR-LGW-STN in London? Judged by the relative density of ATC chatter, I find the density argument hard to believe. Nevertheless, as in all such discussions, I am willing to be convinced if somebody can come up with data.
- (iii) Poorer equipment? Based on discussions with several London-based controllers who have participated in exchange schemes in the States, US equipment is no better than UK or French equipment---and sometimes worse; witness a spate of ATC outrages at busy hubs in the States over the past year. What is true, my ATC friends agree, is that US controllers are far more used to dealing with a mixture of commercial jets, slower commuters and much slow GA. In the words of one Heathrow controller, “the Americans deal with the problem more efficiently because they start with a different mindset.”
- (iv) (National boundaries: There is certainly an element of truth in this argument. Coming out of London headed for Belgium I might talk to Thames Radar and two London Control sectors before being handed over to Brussels whereas coming out of a Washington airport I could expect Departure followed by a succession of “Washington Center” sector frequencies all neatly knitted together for hundreds of miles. Yes, boundaries are a problem and computer systems still don’t speak to each other fully in Europe---but surely this is not why we are allocated endless slots.

Perhaps the most perplexing question is why we need slots when we never get the routing we file anyway? Suppose I file a "G" flight plan via Koksy or Lambourne or whatever, the Brussels computer will flag automatically as going through a choke point; hence the slot time I have to make, else risk a lengthy delay. Once airborne, though, I will be turned direct to DVR ten miles before KOK and probably given radar vectors to wherever---or even sent "direct ABC" from several hundred miles away. Where everyone is in a radar environment and all serious IFR traffic required to carry fully certified GPS sets, it remains a mystery why are we in Europe put under the pressure of filing hours beforehand and allocated unpredictable slot times while our US colleagues move towards free flight and the abolition of flight plans?