
Brazil Earmarks US\$ 2.2 Bi for 36 Fighter Jets. Just for Starters

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The Brazilian government is planning a major increase of Brazil's armed forces budget and a long term boost to the local defense industry and military technology, which includes the purchase of 36 fighter jets worth US\$ 2.2 billion, revealed the Brazilian press over the weekend.

The announcement follows a recent decision by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva administration to create a National Defense Strategy group designed to program the recovery of the "capability of our armed forces and the technological edge we once had in certain fields."

This will begin with a 50% hike of the defense budget as of next year which will total approximately US\$ 5 billion.

According to the main guidelines of the long term strategy outlined by Lula, the Brazilian defense industry must again take the lead in the export of missiles, aircrafts and several different kinds of equipment. "We must convince ourselves that we can become a world power this century," pointed out Lula.

Although no details were given about the fighter planes purchase, the US\$ 2.2 billion operation must ensure military technology transfer to Brazil, said the São Paulo press reports. Currently 37% of the Air Force 719 units are grounded.

Candidates include the Eurofighter built by a consortium of European corporations; the Swedish-British built Gripen; France's Rafael and Russia's Sukhoi. Apparently the French have the lead because they are offering a more complete package and Brazil has a long tradition of working and operating Dassault aircrafts.

This is not necessarily true of some of the United States corporations, which at one time was the main supplier of Brazil's forces.

"Whatever the final contract it must be closely linked to national development, to help advance in the creation of a strong defense industry and therefore the technological edge we are requesting," said Defense minister Nelson Jobim.

However Jobim also revealed that Brazil has informed neighboring countries of its defense industry plans and insisted that "we're not embarking in an arms race."

The National Defense Strategy Group has been given 12 months to come up with a defense development plan for the next 10/15 years.

"We must overcome the lack of strategic planning and the technological dismantling of the last two decades," said Lula, who insisted that recovery of the defense industry, promoting research and training more qualified staff "are central to a defense strategy."

However the report must also address possible constitutional and legal sensitive reviews such as "participation of the military in law and order issues," which means "strategy targets in conflict and peace circumstances."

"In peace times to keep watch over Brazilian territory, fluvial and land borders, and sovereignty of the Amazon, and in conflict, quick display of human and physical resources to impede any threat to Brazilian territory."

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, head of Long Term Planning Department, said that Brazil "can't further tolerate the hiatus in military lack of protection" and civil and military intelligence must work together to think "what is we want as a sovereign nation from our soldiers."

Although Brazil has no conflicts with any of its ten neighboring countries or world powers, "its borders are highly permeable to all type of criminal activities such as drug and arms trafficking, contraband, car stealing and even the Colombian guerrillas move freely in the Amazon region," said Unger.

"We have an inattention debt to our armed forces," he underlined.

But political analysts from São Paulo university see another more immediate and practical reason for Lula's sudden interest in revitalizing Brazilian armed forces and that is the northern neighbor regime of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Overflowing with oil dollars, and banned from US military equipment, the former parachute commander has embarked Venezuela in a full re-equipment of the armed forces investing billions of dollars in state of the art Sukhoi fighter planes; helicopters; frigates; submarines; tanks and armored vehicles; radars plus a Kalashnikov plant to build the world famous K 47.

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