

Brazilian Air Force Commander Lieutenant Brigadier Juniti Saito

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Brazil's decision to choose the Saab Gripen E (formerly Next Generation-NG) multirole fighter for its 36 F-X2 combat aircraft programme was based on a 28,000-page document prepared by a "highly competent team of technical experts", Brazilian Air Force (Força Aérea Brasileira - FAB) commander Lieutenant Brigadier Juniti Saito told *IHS Jane's* .

"The government decided to follow the technical advice of the Brazilian Air Force. We had a team of aviators, engineers, area maintenance personnel, and project management specialists working on the project for years," Brig Saito said.

"They examined the three proposals on offer from the French Dassault Rafale, the American Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, and the Swedish Gripen, and came to the conclusion that the Gripen was the best technical aircraft for the FAB.

"Saab also had the best price. The Gripen is tremendous value for money and has low maintenance and fuel costs. As managers of public resources this was important but it wasn't the deciding factor," he said.

In the document FAB experts estimated that the price per flight hour for the Gripen is in the region of USD4,000. The figure for both the Boeing F/A-18E/F and Rafale models is around USD14,000.

"I know the Gripen has been criticised for being a single-engine aircraft, but to be fair everyone says their plane is better," commented Brig Saito.

"The single-turbine Gripen is lighter, with a capacity of up to 7 tonnes of fuel. The plane has a 1,300 km [operational radius] and a maximum range of 4,000 km. Like other continental nations the defence of our airspace is maintained from several bases spread across our territory. Therefore the fighter's prerequisite was not to cover the whole country but to have the capacity to reach other bases, areas on the coast or the Amazon quickly," Brig Saito said.

Although the Gripen's payload capacity is less than that of its competitors, the aircraft can take off with a maximum payload of 16.5 tonnes, including up to 7.2 tonnes of weapons.

"The fighter will be able to integrate arms being developed by Brazilian companies, including air-to-air and anti-ship missiles as well as guided bombs, to attack targets on land and at sea," Brig Saito noted.

"We were also influenced by Saab's willingness to include us in the development of the Gripen project. Overall we took into account performance, effective transfer of technology and cost; not



just the acquisition costs but maintenance costs as well. The choice was based on the best balance of these three factors."

Back in 2011 Saab made the highly attractive offer of promising a near total transfer of sensitive technology. Brig Saito said this initial proposition remains "the basis of the current discussions" and that the "intellectual property to the aircraft is crucial and will be integral to the negotiating process".

The brigadier added: "We see this opportunity as a means of empowering our domestic industry and giving the FAB unprecedented access and involvement, so that in years to come we can develop fifth-generation fighters ourselves."

Both Dassault and Boeing offered the transfer of sensitive technologies and other advantages, such as supersonic wind-tunnels and composite materials, but their aircraft are already fully developed and their design fixed.

"The advantage is the Gripen is a work in progress," Brig Saito said. "The plan is that Brazil will develop 40% of the aircraft's components. The FAB will play a key role in co-ordinating the transfer of essential skills between Saab and the Brazilian companies that participate in the project. We will be responsible for verifying that technology is shared and ensuring domestic industries are able to absorb and meet the requirements laid down in the contracts.

"The contract, including details of domestic industry involvement, will be negotiated throughout the year and signing is likely to be by the end of this year," he added.

There are strong indications that Saab intends to develop a partnership with the aerospace conglomerate Embraer, along with other key Brazilian companies. It already has a four-year deal with Brazilian aerospace engineering firm Akaer, which designs the central fuselage, back, and wings of the Gripen E. In addition, all parts of the airframe could be produced in a new factory that Saab plans to build in São Bernardo do Campo in Sao Paulo state.

With the deactivation of its Dassault Mirage 2000s at the end of 2013, the FAB will be using its Northrop F-5M fighters until the arrival of the Gripen aircraft. As an interim measure, Brazil is currently negotiating the loan of around a dozen earlier C/D versions of the Gripen while it waits for the first consignment of Gripen Es.

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