

SAO PAULO (AFP) - Swedish defense firm Saab, maker of the Gripen fighter jet, has to await President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's 12-billion-dollar decision till after Christmas.

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Brazil's ongoing negotiations to buy 36 jet fighters is part of a strategy to boost defensive capabilities against "potential threats," President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said on Tuesday

"One thing that we are most proud of is that Brazil is a peaceful country, without enemies. But every country has to prepare for potential threats," he wrote in a weekly question-and-response column distributed to Brazilian newspapers.

Lula stressed that the priority behind the fighter talks and a 12-billion-dollar contract signed last year with France to buy five submarines and 50 helicopters was to obtain the technology so Brazil could build the machines itself.

"We are going to increase surveillance of our airspace with the use of satellites, planes and radars," he said.

He added that sea defenses were already operational but would also be reinforced "to discourage any attempted attack on Brazilian interests," which include vast and newly discovered offshore oil fields.

Lula and French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced jointly in September that Brazil was negotiating to buy 36 Rafale fighter aircraft from France's Dassault company. The deal was

Brazil holds up decision on fighter jet deal

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estimated to be worth between four and seven billion dollars.

But pressure from Brazil's air force -- which was still evaluating the Rafale against rival aircraft the F/A-18 Super Hornet by US group Boeing and the NG Gripen by Sweden's Saab -- forced Lula to delay a definitive announcement.

The Brazilian air force evaluation was due to be handed to the government at the end of November.

Senior defense officials are still to meet to agree on their choice, although Lula has made it clear he will have the final word.

Jean-Marc Merialdo, the head of the Rafale bid in Brazil, told AFP on Tuesday that he had not yet received any details about when a decision would be made by Brazilian authorities.

"The ball is in their court," he said.

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