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Yet another referendum on fighter jets?

Does Switzerland need new fighter planes? If so, should it buy Swedish Gripen jets?

Parliament and, most probably, the Swiss people will decide.

By René Lenzin

Defence Minister Ueli Maurer clearly believes Switzerland needs new fighter jets to replace its outdated Tiger fleet. He also says it should purchase Gripen jets made by the Swedish aircraft manufacturer Saab. Maurer and his generals want to purchase 22 Gripen jets at a cost of 3.1 billion Swiss francs, with the first half being delivered in 2018. The Swedish government has guaranteed that this price will be fixed even if the cost of manufacturing the fighter jets should rise. Maurer gave this assurance at the end of August. The Federal Council has approved the deal and Parliament will make its decision in December.

The issue is not as clear-cut for many politicians and military figures as it is for the national government. The Gripen triumphed over the UK/German/Italian/Spanish Eurofighter and French Rafale jets in an evaluation procedure. It has now become evident that the decision was based mainly on financial aspects. The Gripen is the least expensive of the three jets by some margin. However, it is also the poorest option in terms of performance, which has gone down badly with the pilots in particular. Most of them want the high-performance Eurofighter, which is manufactured by a broad-based consortium and is already being deployed in various countries.

"The greatest risks"

There has been widespread criticism that the evaluation was not conducted properly. This has also been fuelled by lobbyists for the defeated competitors, which, like the Saab representatives, carried out extensive promotional campaigns behind the scenes. The National Council's Defence Committee has investigated these allegations and come to an ambiguous conclusion. Its report states that the procedure was carried out properly. It nevertheless points out that the Federal Council chose the jet that poses the greatest risks.



The Swiss army's F-5 Tiger has served its time after 30 years

The findings indicate that these risks relate to technical, financial, political and temporal aspects. By selecting the Gripen, Switzerland has made itself dependent on an aircraft manufacturer that has not yet completed its product development phase and has not managed to sell the jet elsewhere. The required number of new jets cannot be delivered on time either. Switzerland and Sweden have in fact agreed on a staggered delivery of the Gripen aircraft. Switzerland will hire eleven older used Gripen jets during the transitional period. Maurer dismisses the criticism, stating that the Gripen meet the requirements of the Swiss Air Force and sufficient guarantees have been secured to cover the other risks with the Swedish government as the guarantor.

Parliament's conservative majority is generally backing the acquisition of the new fighter jets. However, opinion is divided as to whether the Gripen jets really are the best option. It will become clear in December whether those supporting the deal will close ranks and back Federal Councillor Maurer's proposal. Prior to the choice of aircraft, they had managed to convince colleagues in Parliament that Switzerland urgently needed to acquire

new fighter jets and that the funds required should be made available.

Referendum on the horizon

The left-wing/green parliamentary minority will vote against the Gripen proposal. This is not because it is opposed to these particular jets but because it does not want any jets at all. The Greens and Social Democrats argue that Switzerland does not need new fighter jets and that this billion-franc investment could be better used elsewhere. If the Christian Democrats, Liberals and Swiss People's Party fail to give the Gripen project their full support, the proposal could be defeated in Parliament.

If not, the Swiss people will have to address the issue. The opponents of the new fighter jets have already announced that they will call for a referendum against the loans required. There may therefore be a rerun of the 1993 referendum. Back then, the Group for a Switzerland without an Army quickly collected over 500,000 signatures against the acquisition of 34 F/A-18 fighter jets approved by Parliament. 57% of the electorate nevertheless supported the procurement of the jets at the ballot box.

RENÉ LENZIN is an editor at "Swiss Review"