



The Chilean air force hopes that its looming fighter decision will put it firmly on the path to modernisation

PAUL LEWIS/SANTIAGO

SQUEEZED between the Andes mountains to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, Chile has unique geographical characteristics. This pencil-thin nation stretches more than 4,000km (2,500 miles) from its northern arid reaches to the southern Antarctic ice flows. Defending this airspace presents Chile's air force, the Fuerza Aerea de Chile (FACH), with a long list of challenges.

The FACH has a front-line fighter force of 50 aircraft, consisting of upgraded, but nonetheless ageing, Northrop F-5E/Fs and a mixed fleet of Dassault Mirage 5/50s. This is backed up by

The FACH needs more AEW aircraft but is limited by funding to one Boeing 707-based Condor

a similar number of lighter Cessna A-37s and Enaer A-36CCs (licence-built CASA C-101s). The service's overwhelming priority is to acquire a new fighter and, after a wait of more than four years, all eyes are on newly elected president Ricardo Lagos for a final decision.

Gen Patricio Rios Ponce, FACH commander-in-chief, says: "We have had to look carefully for an aircraft capable of operating in our different climatic regions and, most importantly, one that is able to move from south to north in a short time without losing capability. We've finished the technical evaluation and the final report has gone to the government for a decision."

The report shortlists four aircraft: the Boeing F/A-18C/D Hornet, Dassault Mirage 2000-5 Mk2, Lockheed Martin F-16C/D Block 50+ and Saab/BAE Systems Gripen. The Hornet is no longer thought to be in the running, given that production ends this year, while the Gripen offering was hamstrung for more than 17 months by the UK's detention of Chile's Gen Augusto Pinochet.

Selection of a new fighter has been delayed by more than two years by Chile's economic diffi-

culties and the fall in the price of its main raw-material export, copper. The fighter programme has highlighted the inadequacies of the country's defence procurement practices, giving rise to fears within the FACH that a decision could again be delayed as the new socialist-led government tries to reform the system.

Under the country's copper law, about 10% of revenue from mineral sales goes to the three military services to fund new equipment. In the absence of a central procurement agency, each service receives an equal share to spend and borrow against as they see fit, with no reference to the needs of the other arms. The defence ministry operates simply as a housekeeping agency.

GUARANTEED INCOME

The copper law provides a minimum guaranteed income of about \$210 million a year, below which the treasury provides a top-up. This is well short of what is required by the three services and the fluctuation in the price of copper has made long-term budgeting and multiyear procurements virtually impossible to plan.

Rather than follow the example of the navy, which incurred large debts funding two Franco-