

# An emerald green griffin?

Ireland has previously had to rely on French, Norwegian and British jet fighters to intercept Russian strategic bombers. Now it's thinking about its own air combat interceptors.

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**T**he Saab Gripen E could be the Republic of Ireland's first fast jet since the de Havilland Vampire and Fouga Magister if a defence review supports creating a domestic response to combat Russian incursions into Irish airspace.

Possible planning for an Irish intercept capability was referred to in the Irish Defence Forces' five-year equipment development plan, published on June 26, 2020. Since 2015, Russian Federation bombers have frequently entered Ireland's air domain and tactical fast jets from neighbouring countries routinely scramble to intercept the aircraft.

"It's a point of embarrassment that we do not have an air intercept capacity to defend our airspace," says Ben Tonra, a professor at the University

College Dublin's school of politics and international relations. "We don't even know what goes through our airspace. If the Russians turn off their transponders, we have no notion what is going on."

Transponders are an issue, because Ireland does not have primary radar for its west coast, the most westerly part of the European Union (EU), and investment in such systems was also raised in Ireland's June 26 equipment plan as a possible future programme. All of this will be discussed as part of a commission that has been formed to review defence and security policy.

Major General Ralph James, who was head of the Irish Air Corps until 2015, said: "To go from a standing start to fully operational 24/7 interception capability would

cost, and naturally would be seen against other demands on government." James was quoted in *The Irish Times* on February 26 this year stating that Ireland would need about 16 fighters, each with three crew, to be able to provide a rapid 'any day, any time' air combat capability. He expected the cost to be more than €1 billion.

According to sources in the Irish Defence Forces, any interceptor selected would be "an aircraft... capable of policing all airborne craft in Irish sovereign airspace, particularly those that are fast-moving".

Tonra believes the Saab Gripen (named after the mythological, half-eagle/half lion, Griffin) would be a good choice because the politics surrounding fighter procurement would be as important as the

aircraft's capability. Since its inception, the Republic of Ireland has been militarily neutral, while Sweden has a similar neutrality in world affairs and is also an EU member.

According to Saab's fact sheet for its latest version, the Gripen E, it has a head-up display, can fly at Mach 2 at high altitude and faster than Mach 1 at sea level, has a ceiling above 52,500 feet and has an air-to-air refuelling capability. It can withstand 9g manoeuvres, is equipped with a 27-millimetre Mauser gun along with wing and fuselage pylons for munitions, fuel tanks and other equipment. It also has a Selex active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar.

As the Irish defence review carries out its work, Brexit is likely to complicate

matters. The UK-Ireland air defence Memorandum of Understanding assumes both countries are EU members. While the UK must be included in the Irish air defence conversation, Tonra says the conduct of the British government over Brexit "has shown that very practical areas of co-operation can be dismissed for reasons of ideology." If there is an unstable bilateral situation with the UK, Ireland's EU security and defence arrangements will have to be more substantial.

However, the final outcome could still be Irish Gripens. As Tonra reflects: "We have relied on the grace and favour of NATO and the RAF for any substantive air coverage. [As a domestic capability] it's certainly a possibility."