
BULGARIA READY TO PROTECT NORTH MACEDONIA'S AIRSPACE WITH F-16 JETS

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NATO member Bulgaria could help protect its southwestern neighbour North Macedonia's airspace if it completes a deal for the purchase of eight F-16 aircraft from the United States, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov said on Wednesday.

Bulgaria, which is also a member of the European Union, is looking to replace its ageing Soviet-made MiG-29s and improve compliance with NATO standards.

A Pentagon agency said on Monday that the U.S. State Department had approved the possible sale of eight F-16 aircraft and related equipment to Bulgaria at an estimated cost of \$1.67 billion.

However, Bulgaria expects the United States to offer to sell the jets for its air force at a discounted price of \$1.2 billion.

We spoke with (my) colleague (North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran) Zaev last week * to guard North Macedonia's airspace when we acquire the new jets, Borissov told reporters.

This will be good for them and for us.

The official U.S. proposal to sell F-16 fighter jets to the Balkan country is expected to arrive within a week, Bulgarian Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov said on Tuesday.

The expected deal for Lockheed Martin's F-16 Block 70 would be the Black Sea states' biggest military procurement since the end of Communist rule in 1989.

North Macedonia hopes to become NATO's 30th member next year and also expects shortly to secure a date to start EU accession talks following a deal with Greece to change its name from Macedonia. Athens had previously blocked the ex-Yugoslav republics' efforts to join the two organisations.

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