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## RAFALE FIGHTERS: A BABY STEP FORWARD

**T**HE safe arrival of the first batch of Rafale fighter planes for India's Air Force was good news indeed after the years of political warfare casting aspersions on the bona fides of the transaction and charges of crony capitalism. The matter finally wound up as a petition in the Supreme Court. While the apex legal body refused to delve into the price and related technical specifications of the contract, or to issue notice to the government in the matter, it nonetheless asked the centre to provide details of the decision-making process in a sealed cover. The petition had

**A STEP FORWARD** The national euphoria over the arrival of Rafale planes in India is understandable, but their induction should help focus attention on the huge task that lies ahead in order to modernise the Air Force

sought a directive from the apex court asking the centre to reveal details of the Rafale deal along with price comparisons.

The government finally came out on top, and the nation heaved a sigh of relief that l'affaire Rafale did not bog down defence procurement and the modernisation programme in another Bofors-type scandal. Nevertheless, while the arrival of the jets in the trusted hands of our Men in Blue is a welcome first step—it is just that: A baby first step. The national euphoria during a time when the media is gagging on Covid news is understandable. But the induction of these jets should also help focus national attention on the



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huge task that still lies ahead in order to equip our armed services with state of the art tools of warfare.

The Rafale deal is a defence agreement between the governments of India and France for the purchase of 36 of these fighter aircraft in fly-away condition. It is part of the upgrading process of the IAF equipment. Unfortunately, the defence sector, anointed as the lead agency in what could have been a laudable scheme “envisaged to galvanise manufacturing, continues to languish at the altar of procedural delays and has failed to demonstrate its true potential”.

This is not criticism from some Opposition party or language from the petition before the Supreme Court, but rather, the words of India's own ministry of defence which has written a stinging indictment of the lethargy that so often overtakes and stymies otherwise praiseworthy enterprise.

In particular, the report, addressed to the prime minister, says that the “desired level of indigenisation and self-reliance in defence manufacturing research and development and timely equipping of the Service are some of the areas where the situation continues to be far from satisfactory”.

India has hardly been transformed into a “come hither” nation during the years of Narendra Modi's governance.

The ease of doing business, notwithstanding official statistics, is no easier than before. The corruption index, high taxation, countervailing duties and protectionism remain high. There is a loss of confidence in the banking system. Consumer buying has ebbed since demonetisation. News investments are not even worth talking about and Chinese goods are literally swamping the marketplace.

At a sectoral level—defence—the continuing Rafale purchase for the Air Force appears to be eating into Modi's grandiloquent design. For more than two decades, defence experts have been predicting a virtual existential crisis for the IAF. Its frontline fighter strength has inexorably depleted, with the inevitable phase-out of obsolescent aircraft, scientifically predicted according to their age, airframe fatigue, outmoded systems and laughable armament avionics. The much ballyhooed “two-front war” would be nothing short of a disaster under these circumstances.

The points elaborated below explain these deficiencies in the context of the Rafale controversy in a condensed but comprehensive chronological perspective:

More than 20 years ago, IAF planners began identifying options to keep their strength at the sanctioned 42 combat squadron level, specifically to replace the

20 squadrons of MiG-21 variants plus 10 squadrons of MiG-23/27s which constituted the bulk of the IAF combat force, with next-generation multi-role fighters.

In fact, this situation was well understood much earlier, when in 1983, the Government of India constituted the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) to manage, fund and monitor progress of the light combat aircraft (LCA) to be indigenously designed, developed and manufactured in India to meet the IAF's expected MiG-21/27 replacement requirements from the late 1990s.

This programme has tragically floundered for over three decades. The handful of Tejas LCA Mark-II's produced by HAL for the IAF have fundamental flaws in their essential design due to inexperienced engineers at ADA and inadequacy of production infrastructure at HAL, Bengaluru. In consequence, instead of some 200+ LCAs serving with the IAF already, there is today just one LCA squadron under raising, equipped with just a handful of LCAs which too have doubtful operational capability.

**T**he possibility of this situation had alarmed IAF planners in the late 1990s when the government was urged to hedge against continued delays in the LCA programme and efforts made to induct 126 Mirage 2000s to supplement the 50-odd Mirage 2000s already in the IAF's service, which were considered the most effective multirole fighters extant. This requirement was accepted by the government and was the basis for formalisation of the “Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft” (MMRCA) programme, with the IAF shortlisting four fighter aircraft types that best met its requirement. These were the Dassault Mirage 2000, Lockheed Martin F-16, Saab Gripen and MiG-29M (later renumbered MiG-35).

The initial request for information (RFI) was sent to the four companies in 2004 but inexplicably, the follow-on request for proposal (RFP) was →



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delayed till 2007. When it was finally made, amazingly, it included far heavier, complex and very expensive aircraft types such as the Eurofighter Typhoon, Boeing F-18 Super Hornet and Dassault Rafale.

This was questioned by experts as being most unprofessional since the very purpose of having a “medium” multi-role fighter to replace the MiG-21/27s (by implication also affordable in large numbers) was now completely defeated. The MMRCA competition became farcical as, even though six different fighter types were strenuously evaluated, and included flight-testing and armament-firing, the shortlisted types were not only 50 percent heavier than the MMRCA specifications, but at least twice as expensive to procure and multiple times more expensive to operate. As a wag put it: “Some termed this as comparing apples with pineapples!” Inevitably, the Dassault Rafale was chosen in January 2012, but the contract was not formalised for its procurement

and licence production in India (a total of 126 aircraft) and it floundered till the change of government in 2014. Why?

The new prime minister’s flash announcement while visiting Paris in mid-2015, ordering 36 Rafales directly from France with no follow-on transfer of technology or production in India, took the community by surprise as this not only drastically reduced the IAF’s requirement (from 126 aircraft) but gained absolutely no advantage for Indian industry and the “Make in India” initiative was defeated by the very person who had coined the phrase! Technically too, the MMRCA tender remained “live” and the other contender (Eurofighter) was still in the running. There could have been an international legal dogfight over this but the losers did not choose to pursue it.

The situation has not dramatically improved for the IAF. The only silver lining could be acceptance of its plea to select a single-engine fighter and procure/build this type in India in sufficient numbers to arrest the drastic decline of

**A MILESTONE FOR IAF** The arrival of the Rafale jets in the trusted hands of our Men in Blue is a welcome first step

the combat fleet. The handful of Rafales will only equip two squadrons by 2021, while the blighted LCA will equip perhaps another two by the same time. By 2021, however, the IAF will have lost all its remaining 11 squadrons of MiG-21/27s, leaving the service “on par” with its key adversary, the Pakistan Air Force, which will have about the same number of combat squadrons.

With China now wielding its next-generation fighters in Tibet and the situation in Kashmir remaining explosive, it is imperative that the government pulls out all stops and rapidly proceeds with the process begun in 2016—to identify a suitable lighter fighter which is not only of the next generation but can be procured in large numbers at affordable cost and within the next three years. ■

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