

Ajai Shukla charts out tough choices for the IAF



Light, medium or heavy fighters?

On the cusp of his retirement, Indian Air Force CAS, Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha, had stated that the IAF requires about 200-250 medium fighters in addition to the 36 Rafale multi-role fighters that were contracted with French vendor Dassault in 2016. Value of that contract was € 7.8 billion (Rs 55,600 crore), so another 200 Rafales, or comparable fighters, would require an estimated € 43.3 billion (Rs 310,000 crore), which is far beyond India's means, given current defence spending.

But Raha did not hesitate to put the IAF's requirement on the table. "We have just ordered 36 Rafales and we require more aircraft in the medium weight category to give [the IAF] an entire spectrum of capability," he said. The IAF currently operates just 33 fighter squadrons against an assessed requirement of 42 squadrons needed to face China and Pakistan jointly. Of these, 11 squadrons of MiG-21 and MiG-27s are operationally suspect, being long overdue for retirement. Referring to this, Raha stated: "We have already used them for four decades plus. It is time to retire them and get new aircraft... Over

the next 10 years, we must have 200-250 aircraft. It has to be balanced out. In the heavy weight spectrum, we have enough. But in the medium weight category, we need to have more. Yes, about 200 will be very good".

An analysis of the IAF's present 'force mix' reveals that the shortfall in fighters is actually in the 'light' fighter segment, not in 'medium' fighters. By 2022, when 11 squadrons of MiG-21s and MiG-27s would have to be phased out, there would be a dire shortfall of such equivalent weight fighters. At best, a limited number of Tejas LCAs would have come in, leaving that segment with just a few squadrons. In contrast, there would remain 12 squadrons of legacy fighters (Jaguar, Mirage 2000, MiG-29) in the medium fighter segment plus a hefty 14 squadrons of Su-30MKI (heavy) fighters.

As reputed aviation analysts have opined "The IAF's needs to immediately replace 11 squadrons of obsolescent MiGs. Their replacement, therefore, must be affordable to-buy and operate light-to-medium fighters. Since we cannot afford 200 Rafale-class fighters, and the Tejas production

line is evolving too slowly, the IAF is left with just one option: setting up a second production line to build fighters of this class in large numbers for the IAF".

The government is actually moving down that path. On 7 October 2016, the IAF reportedly contacted several global aerospace giants, including Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, Saab and Russia's Rosoboronexport, soliciting interest in setting up a production line in India to build single-engine, medium fighters. US firm Lockheed Martin, which is offering the F-16 Block 70 and Saab, which is introducing their new fighter, the Gripen E, are the current front runners, both being marketed aggressively in New Delhi.

Over the last 15 years, the IAF has been framing its fighter aircraft requirements in terms of light, medium and heavy fighters. About the year 2000, Air Headquarters stated that an ideal "force mix" would be 200 fighters each in the light, medium and heavy categories. The rationale for this was never made clear. Traditionally an air force's 'force mix' has been based on aircraft roles, not their weight nor size.