

# IAF Chief voices concerns : Single-engine fighter RFI “soon,” but IAF at full strength only by 2032



Describing the IAF’s requirement for a new single-engine fighter aircraft as “priority,” Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa noted that the case was being processed under the Strategic Partnership model (Chapter VII of the Defence Procurement Procedure 2016). “The case is with MoD, RFI for single-engine fighters is likely to be issued very soon,” he said on eve of Air Force Day.

The Air Chief also pointed out that twin-engine fighters typically cost significantly more than single-engine aircraft, saying, “Right now we are concentrating on the single-engine [fighters] so as to make up the numbers with lower cost.” He did, however, stress that the IAF would continue to require twin-engine fighters in the future. “Is there a requirement for twin-engine [fighters] in the future? The answer to that is yes,” he concluded.

Carrying forward the twin-engine theme, the Air Chief also made a few cryptic statements on the IAF’s plans for fifth-generation combat aircraft. On the proposed Indo-Russian Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) programme, the CAS acknowledged the slow pace of progress, saying “it has been on for the last ten years” before commenting that the issue is now with the MoD, which has classified inputs directly from the IAF as well as from

the Air Marshal S Varthman committee set up to look specifically into the FGFA project. He did not specifically say whether the programme would proceed beyond the present preliminary design stage or not, implying that the decision would now be taken by the MoD.

Addressing growing concerns about the IAF’s dwindling air combat strength, the Air Chief outlined plans for force accretion even as he admitted the IAF would not reach its sanctioned strength of 42 fighter squadrons before 2032 (the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> five-year plan). The IAF is set to take delivery of the last 36 Su-30MKIs of a total order of 272, 36 Rafales have been contracted for, and a total of 123 Tejas LCAs (20 Mk.I IOC-spec, 20 Mk.I FOC-spec and 83 Mk.IA) will be in service within the next 5-8 years. This, said Air Chief Dhanoa, would ensure that “the numbers will not go down below what we are right now,” as these inductions would more or less offset the planned retirement of some 10-12 squadrons of MiG-21s and MiG-27s. “But they [the squadron numbers] will start going up only when the single-engine fighter comes in under the strategic partnership programme, and we will reach the number [of sanctioned squadrons] by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Plan period : 2032.” While the Air Chief did state that the IAF needs 42 fighter

squadrons “for full-spectrum operations in a two-front scenario,” he also pointed out that mitigating strategies are in place for the current force structure.

On training and simulation, the Air Chief noted that the IAF today makes much greater use of simulators for technical and flying training than ever before. Depending on the fleet type, the kinds of missions being trained for and so on, the simulation to flying ratio can go as high as “about twenty per cent” said the Air Chief, which means that some IAF pilots could spend up to one hour in simulators for every 5 hours of actual flying. He noted that the Su-30MKI fleet still did not have simulators, indicating that force-wide exposure to simulation would increase as new technology was inducted.

The Air Chief also revealed that the first batch of three women fighter pilots commissioned in June last year (*see Vayu IV/2016*) have been assessed “at par” with their male counterparts, and that a second batch of female fighter pilots is currently undergoing Stage 2 training and will be commissioned in December this year. At a later press interaction on Air Force Day at Hindon AFS, ACM Dhanoa stated that the IAF planned to place these pioneering female fighter pilots in MiG-21 Bison units, subject to vacancies at those squadrons. The Air Chief emphasised that there was no bar to the induction of female fighter pilots, and that the IAF would “accept whoever volunteers” but without a dilution in standards. Female pilots would “have to make the cut,” observed ACM Dhanoa.

The Air Chief summed up the future trajectory of the IAF, saying, “The Indian Air Force today stands at the threshold of acquiring multi-spectrum strategic capabilities, synonymous with India’s growing regional stature and is progressively nearing its goal of transforming into a true Network Centric Aerospace Force. The IAF is also focussing on indigenous acquisition of aircraft, radars, missiles and other aviation equipment in consonance with the ‘Make in India’ initiative.”