

Chasing a Chimera ?

Dr Manoj Joshi on the IAF's latest RFI for fighters



Not representative ! Image of a futuristic (tenth-generation?) fighter with which the IAF could well be equipped with at turn of the century !

So now, two decades after the Indian Air Force (IAF) projected a requirement for 126 medium-role combat aircraft (MRCA), we are back to the starting point. That journey had ended in 2012 when the government, after a laboured process, selected the Dassault Rafale and began negotiations for its procurement—only to have the succeeding Narendra Modi administration scrap the deal and decide in 2015 to purchase only 36 Rafales off the shelf.

On 6 April 2018, the IAF issued a request for information (RFI) for the purchase of 110 fighters. Three-fourth of these will be single-seaters and the balance twin-seat aircraft. Eighteen or so of the aircraft would be bought off the shelf. The rest would be 'Made in India' through a partnership between the manufacturer and a strategic partner. The fighters would thus add six squadrons to the IAF and the order could be worth between \$9 billion and 15 billion.

It is no secret that the IAF is in dire straits, both because of its declining fighter aircraft numbers and the government's refusal to raise the defence budget. The numbers are telling. The IAF has 31 combat squadrons today as against a desired 42. It will lose nine in the next five years when the remaining 7 MiG-21 and 2 MiG-27 squadrons retire. And presuming it gets the two Rafale, two LCA and one more Su-30MKI squadrons, it still will be at an uncomfortable 27 by 2022. If it repeats the fiasco of the first MMRCA deal, taking more than a decade to select an aircraft, it could well end up in a disaster where it is down to just 15 squadrons in 2032, when its remaining six Jaguar, three MiG-29 and as many Mirage 2000 squadrons also retire.

The budgetary part is vital because the IAF, at the insistence of the government, wants the bulk of the aircraft to be 'Made in India'. Setting up an assembly line for just 80 or so fighters will actually require

the exchequer to pay double or even triple the sum that would be needed if one simply imported the aircraft off the shelf. When India purchased the Su-30MKI from Russia directly, its average cost was Rs 270.28 crore, but some years later when its manufacture from raw material was begun by the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd it cost Rs 417.85 crore.

But the Air Force certainly is to blame as well. In crafting an RFI that mixes single- and twin-engine aircraft, it makes selection that much more difficult. Actually, the IAF knows what it wants and has tacitly been saying so loudly for decades: a lighter fighter, cheap to operate, one that would be the work-horse of its fighter fleet. After the forced rejigging of the Rafale purchase in 2015, the IAF had issued another RFI for buying and building 100-200 single engine fighters in 2016. This had in effect become a competition between Lockheed Martin's F-16 and Saab's Gripen. By