

(Air) Defence of the Realm (Rafale)



Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa during a break at the Seminar

Vayu Aerospace & Defence Review was invited to attend a special seminar on ‘IAF Force Structure 2035’ hosted by the Centre for Air Power Studies at New Delhi on 12 September 2018. The CAS Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa gave a special address on the rationale behind the Rafale acquisition programme as also on the IAF’s modernisation roadmap.

Detailed briefings were thereafter given by Air Marshal SBP Sinha, AOC-in-C Central Air Command (and former Deputy Chief of the Air Staff during the MMRCA negotiations) and he was followed by the present DCAS, Air Marshal Raghu Nambiar, who gave an overview on the IAF’s envisaged force structure.

As reported in various media, with controversy swirling around the procurement of 36 Rafale fighters from France, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa referred to the “two front threat” from China and Pakistan to emphasise that the Rafale is urgently needed. “Pakistan has over 20 fighter squadrons, with upgraded F-16s and is inducting JF-17s from China in quantity. Meanwhile, China has 1,700 fighters, including 800 4th generation fighters...but we do not have the numbers, with fighter squadrons down to 31 from the sanctioned 42”. The Indian Air Chief flagged the situation “across India’s northern and western

frontiers” stating that Pakistan and China “are not sitting idle”.

The Air Chief dwelled on the cancellation of the original MMRCA requirement for 126 aircraft, stating that the plan to build 108 of them in India had “reached an impasse owing to irresolvable differences between Dassault Aviation and HAL.” Senior IAF officers at the Seminar clarified that the price paid for the Rafale included “most modern sensors, best in class weapons, state-of-the-art EW (electronic warfare) and enhanced survivability, India-specific

enhancements, better price terms, better overall delivery terms and timeline, better maintenance terms, longer industrial support commitment, additional warranty and longer PBL (performance based logistics) commitment.”

References were repeatedly made to such historical “emergency purchases” of fighters for the IAF, including procurement of two MiG-23MF squadrons in 1983 to counter Pakistan’s new F-16s, two squadrons of Mirage 2000s in 1985 and then two squadrons of MiG-29s.

The Air Marshals also stressed on the plan to procure large numbers of the Tejas light combat aircraft, 40 of the present Mk.Is on order to be followed by 83 Mk.IAs and thereafter by the considerably developed Mk.II which in fact will be a substantially different aircraft, “with twice the payload of the Mk.I, and powered by the GE F.414 engine.” Air Marshal Nambiar indicated that the IAF envisages inducting about 200 LCA Mk.IIs from the 2030s to replace the present legacy Jaguars, Mirage 2000s and MiG-29s. The 5th generation AMCA will meanwhile be developed to supplement the force in the decades that follow.



Air Marshals SBP Sinha and R Nambiar