

Looking for a Fighter for India's future



Dassault Rafale

Going back to the beginning

In April 2018, the Indian Air Force released an RFI (request for information) for 114 fighters, not very much after the present government scrapped the MMRCA deal for 126 fighters to buy 18 ready for combat Rafale fighters and 108 to be built in India. The French Rafale (*picture above*) was chosen as the fighter for the future after an almost decade-long process of contemplation, examination, evaluation and a competition that came to be called the “shoot-out”. We still haven’t got to know why it was really scrapped?

The IAF was hoping for a minimum of four squadrons of Rafale fighters, but this government has kept the initial order down to 36 fighters in a flyaway condition.

Commenting on this, the Air Officer who was part of the intensive selection process that led to the choice of the Rafale, Air Marshal (retd.) M Matheswaran observed that “the original MMRCA tender was cleared for \$10.5 billion for 126 aircraft,” suggesting that delay in deciding is also a factor that is costing the country dear.

The Rafale is a twin engine, canard delta wing, multi-role fighter designed and built by Dassault Avions to replace a multitude of specialised platforms such as the Jaguar, Mirage F.1, Mirage 2000 and Super Etendard in French service. To that extent it is truly a multi-role aircraft, but is still very different from what it was initially intended to originally replace : the Mirage 2000.

The single engine Mirage 2000 was designed as a competitor to the USA’s F-16 and made an impressive debut at the Farnborough air show in 1978. In 1985, in response to Pakistan’s acquisition of F-16 fighters, the Rajiv Gandhi government decided to induct over 100 Mirage 2000 fighters into the IAF. The first 49 aircraft had been imported from France and the rest were to be manufactured by HAL. But the second part of the programme was not implemented despite HAL having intensively prepared for the production of Mirage 2000s at its Bangalore Complex.

But there is another mystery implicit in how a bid by the IAF to buy more single-engine Mirage 2000 fighters became a bid for the heavy MMRCA. The MoD turned