

Managing the “fighter gap”



MiG-21s still equip seven squadrons of the IAF, over five decades after the first variants were inducted

A further fall in squadron numbers with the Indian Air Force now seems inevitable. The IAF should already have retired the remaining seven squadrons of obsolete MiG-21s and this cannot be put off longer than the next couple of years. To replace them, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) is building the last two squadrons of Sukhoi Su-30MKIs at Nasik and two squadrons of LCA Mk.I fighters in Bengaluru. Then there are the two squadrons of Rafale fighters that must be inducted by mid-2022. That adds up to just six incoming squadrons against the outgoing seven, whittling down the IAF’s combat strength to 29 fighter squadrons, of which the three Mirage 2000 squadrons operate fewer fighters than their authorised

unit establishment. The IAF, therefore, faces a “fighter gap” of 13 squadrons, more than 30 per cent of its authorised strength.

If 42 squadrons are the inescapable minimum needed to defend India, the IAF would be caught seriously short in a two-front war – the worst-case planning contingency in which China and Pakistan target India simultaneously. Some have argued that India’s defence no longer requires 42 squadrons, given that contemporary multi-role fighters carry more weapons and are far more capable than yesterday’s aircraft and those capabilities are further enhanced by force multipliers such as mid-air refuelling aircraft and airborne warning and control systems (AWACS). The previous NDA defence minister,

Manohar Parrikar, had indicated that the IAF could get by with fewer squadrons. In January 2015, he had said that “if 35 (fighter) squadrons can be brought to a proper shape, that would give us more time to increase the strength.” And on 13 April, 2015, three days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in Paris that he had asked French President Francois Hollande to sell the IAF 36 Rafale fighters, Mr Parrikar stated on *Doordarshan*: “Forty-two squadrons is the strength approved. We should have at least 37-38 very active squadrons.” Yet, even with these scaled-down numbers, there will be a “fighter gap” of eight to nine squadrons after 2022. For enemy planners, this provides a predictable window of opportunity.



Seen together at an Aero India Show are a pair of French Rafales with a trio of Swedish Gripens