

# India's Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft Decision

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CLAWS RESEARCH TEAM

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is entering the final stages of selecting a new medium multi-role combat aircraft (MMRCA). At a cost of about \$10 billion for 126 aircraft, the MMRCA competition is the largest Indian fighter tender in years. The six planes in the fray are (read company and aircraft name) Dassault Rafale, BAE/Saab JAS-39 Gripen, EADS/BAE Eurofighter Typhoon, Lockheed F-16 Block 60/70, Boeing F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet, and Russia's Rosonboronexport MiG-35. The selected aircraft will replace the obsolescent MiG fleet and also provide the IAF with a state-of-the-art versatile strategic and tactical fighter. This aircraft will also perform the roles which do not require the aircraft of the class of Su-30MKI, which is currently IAF's premier strategic aircraft.

India's force levels have reached an all-time low of 29 squadrons, and the IAF is not expected to reach the currently authorized force levels of 39.5 squadrons before 2017. This growing and dangerous hole in the IAF's capabilities comes as India's neighbors are aggressively modernizing their own air forces, making India's need to expand its combat aircraft inventories all the more urgent.

The competition has garnered high-profile attention for its sheer size and its international political implications. In choosing an aircraft, India will take into account both technical and political considerations. The IAF has already evaluated the six technically and has paid special attention to the fighters' sensors and avionics, weapons, aerodynamic effectiveness, and mission performance. In fact, the winning aircraft for the IAF ought to be chosen on the triangular criteria of technical merit, relative cost, and optimal fit within the IAF's evolving force architecture.

Political considerations, however, will be the key in the selection process. In choosing the winning platform, Indian policy makers will seek to: minimize the country's vulnerability to supply cutoffs in wartime, improve its larger military capacity through a substantial technology infusion through the transfer

of technology clause, and forge new geopolitical partnerships that promise to accelerate the growth of Indian power globally. Because of the dramatic transformations in combat aviation technology currently underway, the Indian government should select the least expensive, mature, combat-proven fourth-generation fighter for the IAF as a bridge toward procuring more advanced stealth aircraft in the future.