

IAF Restructures Fighter Fleet After MiG-21 Retirement

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IAF Fighter Fleet Restructuring Latest News

- On September 26, the Indian Air Force formally retired its iconic MiG-21 fighter jets, with the last two squadrons — No. 23 (Panthers) and No. 3 (Cobras), operating 36 jets — decommissioned in Chandigarh.
- The move marks the end of a Soviet-era legacy but also highlights the IAF's shrinking squadron strength, underscoring the challenges it faces in modernising its fleet.

MiG-21: India's Trusted but Controversial Fighter

- Inducted in 1963 as cutting-edge interceptors, MiG-21s became the backbone of the Indian Air Force, fighting in the 1965, 1971, and Kargil wars.
- Over 700 jets of various variants were procured, with the latest Bison upgrades adding advanced avionics, radar, and missiles.
- However, engine flaws plagued the single-engine aircraft, contributing to over 500 crashes and 170 pilot deaths in six decades, including more than 20 since 2010.

- Despite this record, many IAF veterans argue the MiG-21's performance and longevity make its safety record better than often perceived.

IAF's Fighter Shortfall and Growing Reliance on Air Defence

- The retirement of the MiG-21s has reduced the **Indian Air Force's strength to 29 fighter squadrons**, well below the sanctioned 42 — a target that has never been met.
- This decline poses serious concerns, especially in the event of a simultaneous conflict with Pakistan and China.
- While Pakistan maintains an estimated 20–25 squadrons, China's strength exceeds 60, giving both adversaries a numerical edge.
 - Each squadron comprises 16–18 jets, making the shortfall significant.
- The challenge will deepen in the coming decade, as several older aircraft — including the MiG-29s, Jaguars, and Mirage 2000s — are slated for phase-out by 2035.
- Unless new fighters are inducted soon, India risks falling further behind its regional rivals in air power.

Focus on Air Defence

- Given this reality, military planners are currently focused on bolstering India's air defence capabilities to offset the shortage of fighters.
- Advanced systems like the **Russian S-400** mobile surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, despite U.S. opposition, have been inducted into service.
- Additionally, India's indigenous Akashteer air-defence system has been deployed.
- Both systems demonstrated their effectiveness during Operation Sindoor, underscoring their role as critical stopgaps in safeguarding India's skies until new fighter jets can fill the squadron gap.

Rebuilding IAF's Fighter Fleet: Indigenous and Global Plans

- To address its shrinking fighter fleet, the IAF is banking heavily on **indigenous aircraft**.
- Currently operating two squadrons of **Tejas Mk1**, the IAF is set to induct 180 upgraded Tejas Mk1A jets from HAL.
 - The Mk1A brings advanced features such as AESA radar, an electronic warfare suite with jammers, and enhanced beyond-visual-range (BVR) capabilities through Derby and ASTRA missile integration.
- In addition, HAL is working on Tejas Mk2 and the **fifth-generation stealth Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA)**, expected to join the IAF in the next decade.

Global Fighter Procurement Plans

- Alongside indigenous projects, the IAF is also pursuing the acquisition of 114 fighters from global manufacturers.
- The **Dassault Rafale** is reportedly the frontrunner, with plans to procure some jets in flyaway condition for immediate reinforcement.

- The majority, however, will likely be manufactured in India under a partnership between Dassault and Indian firms, strengthening the domestic defence ecosystem.

Su-30MKI Upgrades

- India also intends to modernise its existing fleet of 84 Su-30MKI aircraft under the “Super-30” program.
- This upgrade aims to extend their service life and enhance combat effectiveness, ensuring they remain a backbone of the IAF until newer platforms are fully inducted.

Persistent Delays in Aircraft Induction

- The Indian Air Force continues to grapple with delays in aircraft development and delivery, forcing the MiG-21 to remain operational well beyond its planned phase-out due to the lack of replacements.

The LCA and Tejas Mk1A Delays

- The LCA program, conceived in the 1980s, has seen repeated setbacks.
- Out of 40 Tejas Mk1 jets ordered in 2006 and 2010, only 38 have been delivered so far.
- The Tejas Mk1A, expected earlier, will see its first two deliveries in October after a two-year delay caused by late procurement of F404 engines from GE Aerospace and issues in weapons and radar integration.
- HAL now plans to manufacture 16 aircraft annually, but even then, deliveries may extend into the mid-2030s, beyond the original 2030 target.

Engine and Technology Transfer Challenges

- Negotiations between HAL and GE over co-production of F414 engines for the Tejas Mk2 remain slow, despite a deal signed two years ago that promised 80% technology transfer. This delay hampers progress on the Mk2 program.

AMCA and Foreign Fighter Procurement Uncertainty

- The AMCA, India’s ambitious fifth-generation fighter project, is still in its development phase, with even a prototype several years away.
- At the same time, the deal to acquire 114 foreign fighters remains unsigned, further delaying critical reinforcements to the IAF’s dwindling squadrons.

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