

India's Stealth Imperative: F-35s Considered as AMCA Development Progresses



Facing a persistent need to bolster its aerial combat capabilities, the Indian Air Force (IAF) is reportedly considering the acquisition of two squadrons of advanced F-35 stealth fighter jets from the United States. This deliberation comes as India's indigenous Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) program continues its development, with initial prototypes not expected to be fully operational for over a decade. The potential move underscores the urgency to address squadron strength and maintain a technological edge in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

The discussions, which reportedly include a detailed presentation by the IAF to the government, highlight the critical requirement for fifth-generation fighters in the interim. With the phase-out of aging MiG-21s, the IAF's current fighter squadron strength of approximately 29 is significantly below the sanctioned 42 needed for full operational readiness, particularly amidst rising regional challenges. The F-35, known for its stealth characteristics, sensor fusion, and advanced avionics, presents a compelling option to bridge this immediate capability gap.

While the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) project, managed by the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), is a flagship initiative for India's self-reliance in defense, its projected timeline for induction remains a long-term goal. The first structural test specimen of the AMCA is anticipated by 2027, with the first flying prototype expected around 2028-2029 and service introduction by 2034-2035. This extended development period necessitates an interim solution for advanced aerial dominance.

Sources indicate that while Russia has also proposed its Su-57 jets, the F-35 offers unmatched stealth capabilities, crucial for penetrating sophisticated air defense systems, such as those operated by potential adversaries. According to a defense analyst, "The F-35's all-aspect stealth means ground-based radars struggle to detect it in time for effective engagement, making it highly relevant for missions requiring undetected penetration of contested airspace." The decision on foreign acquisitions would also factor into India's broader strategic partnerships and industrial offset considerations.

As India navigates this complex choice, the imperative remains to ensure the IAF possesses cutting-edge capabilities to safeguard national security. The potential F-35 acquisition, even in limited numbers, could serve as a vital measure to equip the IAF with modern stealth technology while the nation's ambitious indigenous AMCA program advances towards its long-term objectives.