

Is South Korea's KF-21 Fighter a Viable Option for the Indian Air Force?



South Korea's KF-21 "Boramae" fighter jet is emerging as a compelling candidate for the Indian Air Force (IAF), which is actively seeking to modernize its fleet and address a critical shortage of combat squadrons. With the retirement of older aircraft like the MiG-21 and Jaguar, India is evaluating several international platforms, and the KF-21's combination of advanced technology, cost-effectiveness, and potential for domestic co-production makes it a serious contender.

The KF-21, a twin-engine 4.5-generation multi-role fighter developed by Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI), is designed for air superiority and ground attack missions. Its key advantage for the IAF is engine commonality: the KF-21 is powered by two General Electric F414 engines. This is the same engine model already selected for India's indigenous Tejas Mk II and AMCA programs, which would greatly simplify logistics, maintenance, and training for the IAF. The aircraft is slated to enter production soon, with the first deliveries to the Republic of Korea Air Force expected in 2026, offering a quicker solution to India's urgent squadron needs than some other platforms.

Beyond technical compatibility, the KF-21 aligns with India's "Make in India" defense initiative. South Korea has shown a willingness to engage in co-production, and the KF-21's open architecture and modular design would allow for the integration of Indian-developed systems. For instance, the IAF could potentially incorporate its Uttam Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar and Astra missiles, provided software integration agreements are reached.

While the KF-21 is not a full-fledged fifth-generation stealth fighter, it incorporates a number of stealth features and is designed with a roadmap for future upgrades, including internal weapons bays and advanced stealth coatings. Its estimated unit price, between \$87 million and \$110 million, is competitive when compared to other high-end Western fighters. The potential for a naval variant also offers a strategic advantage for the Indian Navy, which is seeking to modernize its carrier-based air wing.

Ultimately, the KF-21 presents a feasible and strategic option for India, balancing the immediate need to replenish squadron numbers with a long-term vision of technological self-reliance and interoperability with friendly nations. Its timely production, engine commonality, and potential for indigenous integration make it a strong candidate to fill the IAF's capability gap.