

## End of an Era: MiG-21 Retirement Paves Way for Private Sector in Indian Defense



The Indian Air Force (IAF) is set to retire its iconic MiG-21 fighter jets by September 2025, marking the end of over six decades of service for an aircraft that has been both a workhorse and, at times, a tragic symbol for India's military aviation. This pivotal moment highlights a broader strategic shift within India's defense landscape, as the nation increasingly relies on its burgeoning private defense industry to meet modernization goals, amid ongoing challenges faced by state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).

Inducted in 1963, the Soviet-era MiG-21 was India's first supersonic fighter and became the backbone of the IAF fleet, with nearly 600 assembled domestically by HAL. It played crucial roles in every major conflict, from the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars to the 1999 Kargil conflict and even the 2019 Balakot airstrikes. However, its prolonged service, well beyond its intended lifespan, led to a grim safety record, earning it the moniker "flying coffin" due to numerous crashes and fatalities.

The intended replacement for the MiG-21 is the indigenously developed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk-1A. A significant contract for 83 Tejas jets was signed with HAL in early 2021, with initial deliveries promised by March 2024. However, not a single jet has been delivered by the deadline, primarily due to supply chain issues, most notably delays in engine deliveries from GE Aerospace. The first F404-IN20 engine arrived only in March 2025, nearly two years behind schedule, leaving several completed aircraft awaiting powerplants.

This consistent delay from HAL has prompted the Ministry of Defence to integrate private companies into the defense manufacturing ecosystem actively. The recently established Defence Empowerment Committee has proposed involving private suppliers in Tejas production, and for the first time, private firms have been invited to bid independently or form consortia for ambitious projects like the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) program, India's first indigenous fifth-generation stealth fighter. Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh recently stated, "We will provide visibility to the domestic industry regarding upcoming contracts and ensure a level playing field for the private sector by mandating competitive bidding for all our projects." This signals a clear move away from the historical reliance on Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) like HAL, fostering greater competition and efficiency.

The private sector's role in India's defense production is expanding, with its contribution to total defense production reaching over ₹32,000 crore in fiscal year 2024-25, representing approximately 22% of the total. This shift is expected to accelerate, as India aims to become a global defense manufacturing hub, reducing import dependency and boosting its self-reliance in critical defense technologies. The coming years will reveal the full impact of this evolving partnership between the state and private industry in shaping India's defense capabilities.