

India's Naval Fighter Program Stalls as Rafale Jets Arrive

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India's indigenous naval fighter program is facing significant delays, highlighting challenges in the development of carrier-based combat aircraft. The Twin Engine Deck-Based Fighter (TEDBF), intended to operate from India's aircraft carriers, has encountered technical difficulties and schedule slippages, creating a gap in the Indian Navy's air combat readiness.

The TEDBF program, developed by the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) in collaboration with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), is a key component of India's goal of achieving self-reliance, or "Atmanirbharta," in defense manufacturing. Progress has been slower than expected due to technological challenges, resource constraints, and delays in meeting development milestones. This has raised concerns over the Navy's ability to deploy an indigenously produced carrier fighter promptly.

Currently, the Indian Navy relies on MiG-29K jets acquired from Russia to operate from its carriers, including INS Vikramaditya and the new INS Vikrant. With the MiG-29Ks aging and approaching the end of their operational life, the TEDBF delays leave the Navy dependent on foreign aircraft for carrier-based operations.

To address immediate operational requirements, India has procured 26 Rafale-Marine fighter jets from France at a cost of approximately ₹63,000 crore (around \$7.5 billion). These jets will operate from aircraft carriers and provide short-term reinforcement to India's naval air capabilities. While the acquisition mitigates immediate gaps, it underscores the ongoing challenges of developing indigenous carrier-based fighters.

Observers note that the TEDBF delays reflect broader structural and logistical challenges in India's defense procurement and development framework. Complex projects often face technological hurdles, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and resource limitations, which can hinder timely progress.

Maintaining momentum in the TEDBF program is critical for the Navy's long-term operational flexibility and strategic autonomy. Continued

reliance on imported platforms may limit India's indigenous capabilities and affect its maritime defense strategy.

The government faces the dual task of accelerating the TEDBF program while ensuring the Navy's immediate readiness through the Rafale-Marine acquisition. Success in the indigenous program will be essential for strengthening India's carrier-based air power, achieving self-reliance, and safeguarding maritime defense interests in the region.