

India Eyes Foreign 5th-Gen Fighters to Bridge Capability Gap



The Indian Air Force (IAF) is reportedly considering the interim acquisition of two to three squadrons of foreign fifth-generation fighter jets to bolster its combat capabilities until the indigenously developed Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) is ready for deployment. This strategic move aims to ensure the IAF maintains a technological edge amidst evolving regional air power dynamics, particularly with China's rapid advancements and the potential for its fifth-generation jets to be supplied to Pakistan.

A typical squadron consists of 18 to 20 fighter aircraft, meaning the IAF is looking to purchase approximately 40 to 60 advanced fighters in this interim period. The proposal was recently discussed at a high-level government meeting, underscoring the urgency to address current and future air superiority requirements. Defense sources indicate that an empowered committee, led by Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane, has backed the induction of these advanced fighters to enhance deterrence along India's northern and western borders.

This decision comes as the AMCA project, India's ambitious indigenous fifth-generation stealth fighter is progressing but still years away from full operational readiness. While the first AMCA prototype is expected to fly by late 2029, with production slated to commence around 2035, the IAF faces an immediate need for advanced capabilities to counter contemporary threats. China's induction of J-20 stealth fighters and its progression towards sixth-generation platforms, coupled with the possibility of Pakistan acquiring Chinese fifth-generation jets, necessitates a proactive approach from India.

Currently, the United States has offered its F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter, while Russia has proposed the Su-57 Felon for India's consideration. India had previously withdrawn from a joint Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) project with Russia but retains the option to re-engage. The choice between these advanced platforms would involve careful consideration of factors such as technology transfer, integration with existing systems, cost, and long-term strategic alignment.

Beyond the immediate acquisition, India is simultaneously advancing a separate effort to produce 114 next-generation 4.5+ generation fighters through a partnership with a foreign entity under the "Make in India" initiative. This multi-pronged approach reflects the IAF's comprehensive strategy to modernize its fleet. The drive for these interim fifth-generation fighters underscores the strategic necessity to address capability gaps and maintain a decisive advantage in the region's air combat landscape.