Shortage of Fighter Aircrafts

What is the issue?

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- At the end of the current financial year, two squadrons of old aircraft will be decommissioned.
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- Complete replacements for these crafts haven’t been mapped as yet, which leaves the airforce severely short of fire power.
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What is the current situation?

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- In four months, the number of its fighter squadrons will fall to 31 while, the Air Force is authorised 42 squadrons of fighter aircraft.
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- This is a serious challenge as a full strength is needed to dominate a two-front conflict from both China and Pakistan.
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- Notably, each squadron of the IAF has 18 aircraft or slightly higher this depending on the number of trainers in that squadron.
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What is the status of Tejas Aircrafts?

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- After long delays, India has developed its indigenous single-engine Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas.
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- Starting last year, 5 Tejas crafts were inducted into the IAF and the count was expected to increase over the years.
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- This initial supply of 5 crafts by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) is part of a total contract for 40 aircraft.
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- The Air Force has also committed to buying another 83 Mark-1A version of Tejas which is in design stage.
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- Also, the production capacity of HAL is low and the entire delivery of even the first 40 will at least take till 2023.
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What is the status of current foreign craft purchases?

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- As the currently planned rate of induction of foreign-made aircraft is also slow, this might not help.
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- The IAF will get 36 French Rafale fighters (double-engine) besides the balance Russian Sukhoi Su30 MKI fighters.
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- Even if the induction of the Sukhoi, Tejas and Rafale aircraft are on schedule, the number of fighter squadrons will continue to fall.
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- By 2032 then, the IAF will only have 27 squadrons, which will come down further to 21 in 2037, and 19 in 2042.
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What are the options, then?

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- IAF would love to order more Rafales but it is an expensive aircraft that can’t be afforded.
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- The other option is to buy some other foreign single-engine fighter, and this is the route the IAF is currently exploring.
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- American F-16 and Swedish Gripen are in contention for the supply of 114 fighters, most of which will be made in India.
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- If evaluating of the two aircraft start by 2019 and the government takes a decision by 2020, the first 18 could be in service by 2023.

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- If things go as per plan, then the IAF can have six squadrons of the foreign single-engine fighter by 2032.
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Is the call for indigenisation sustainable?

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- There is a view that the IAF could do with more LCA Tejas (the only indigenous craft) instead of foreign single-engine fighters.
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- That would mean significantly augmenting HAL's production capacity and ensure timely delivery, which is not easy.
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- Also, the aircraft itself has design limitations — and the IAF needs a better fighter.
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- The LCA Tejas Mark-1A can carry an external load of 3 tonnes compared to 5-8 tonnes of Gripen and 6.7 tonnes of F-16.
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- While Gripen and F-16 have escort ranges of 520 km and 645 km respectively, for the Tejas it is only 300 km.
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- It takes more than 60 minutes to prepare Tejas for the next mission; for Gripen it is 23 minutes; for F-16, 21 minutes.
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What is the way forward?

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- While India must develop and promote its indigenous defence industry, the nation's security is paramount.
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- A right balance needs to be found by a mix indigenous and foreign fighter aircraft.
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- Decision on purchases needs to be made soon as IAF's fleet is depleting fast to critical levels.
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- If everything goes as per plan, then the IAF will have 37 fighter squadrons in

service by 2032.
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- But IAF had its full complement of 42 squadrons in 2002 and it is not going to reach those numbers again anytime soon.
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Source: Indian Express

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