Shortfalls in Fighter Jets – IAF

What is the issue?

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The Indian Air Force (IAF) does not have enough fighter jets and hence there is an immediate requirement to address the shortfall.

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What is the background?

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- The IAF is now left with only 30 fighter squadrons and in a couple of years, it will be down to 26 squadrons.
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- The reason for this include –
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1. Gradual decommissioning of obsolete aircraft over time
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2. The loss of aircraft in crashes
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3. Massive delays in purchases of new aircraft
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- In comparison, the Pakistan Air Force will have 25 squadrons of fighter aircraft, while China will be able to unleash as many as 42 squadrons upon India in case of a conflict.
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- The government's mandate for the IAF is to be prepared for a two-front collusive threat from China and Pakistan.
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- For this, the IAF is authorised 42 squadrons of fighter aircraft, which is the bare minimum it needs to dominate a two-front conflict.
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- But the last time the IAF had the full complement of 42 squadrons was nearly 17 years ago, and the numbers have only fallen since.
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What should be done?

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- **Tejas** is the first advance Fly-by-wire (FBW) fighter aircraft designed and developed indigenouslyby Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) and produced by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).
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- Tejas is a 4th Plus generation aircraft with a glass cockpit and is equipped with state of the art Satellite aided Inertial Navigation System.
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- It has a digital computer based attack system and an autopilot.
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- It can fire Air to Air Missiles, Bombs as well as Precision Guided Munitions.
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- The IAF is committed to get six squadrons from HAL, four of them of the Tejas Mark1A version.
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- While HAL hopes to provide 18 aircraft per year, it has not been able to ramp up capacity to even half that number so far.
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- This situation can impinge on the availability of fighter squadrons in the near future.
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- The other option is to import more fighter aircraft.
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- IAF will get two squadrons of Rafale by 2023, and it has plans for six squadrons of another foreign fighter within a decade.
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- But the latter is still a proposal on the planning board, and a long way away from getting implemented.
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- Thus, the IAF is looking at a scenario where it will have to undertake emergency imports, perhaps at an exorbitant cost, to make up the demand for fighter jets.
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How do other major powers tackle situations like these?

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- Among the global military powers, India is perhaps the only country which doesn’t produce top quality fighter jets indigenously.
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- The US, Russia and the Europe, all have highly developed defence industries that can design, develop, produce and supply fighter jets to their air forces.
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- Countries like Pakistan and Israel can depend upon their allies, wherein Pakistan Air Force earlier got F16s from the US and now it gets the JF17 from China.
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- Since India has no such option, the long-term answer is to promote indigenous manufacturing in a major way.
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- But in the immediate term, there is a need to take steps to ensure that this shortfall is made up quickly as a national security imperative.
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Source: The Indian Express

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