

## ***The Air Force is desperately short of aircraft, but Tejas is a good indigenous product and must not be sidelined***

As the deal for the single-engine fighter for the air force heats up—US president Donald Trump probably brought up the F-16 in his meeting with prime minister [Narendra Modi](#) yesterday—it is critical to ensure that India's indigenous single-engine fighter aircraft Tejas doesn't get the short shrift while taking a decision between the F-16 and Sweden's Gripen. With just 33 squadrons as compared to at least 42 that experts say are needed—given that India faces simultaneous threats from both Pakistan and China—the Indian Air Force is desperately short of fighter aircraft. So, it is clear that a decision on the F-16 or the Gripen needs to be taken quickly if the air force is to be able to replenish its run-down fleet of fighters, but it is important not to ignore the claims of the Tejas in this process. The Indian Air Force has already bought two squadrons of the Tejas and has initiated the purchase of another four squadrons of the Mark-1A Tejas aircraft that have some major improvements to add to their combat-readiness—this includes, according to Ajai Shukla in Business Standard, an externally mounted self-protection jammer to blind enemy radars and also air-to-air refuelling capability to increase combat range.

It is true that, in the past, the Tejas had production issues and was not able to meet its production deadlines, a big problem given how starved of aircraft the air force is. But this is now a thing of the past with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) outsourcing a lot of the production to private defence contractors like L&T and [Tata](#) Advanced Materials and focusing instead on putting together the aircraft—with this, Tejas is now capable of building 10 fighters in FY19 and 16 from the year after. While there are sections of the air force that believe the Tejas is not as good as some of its global competitors like the Gripen, given it is an indigenous product—there are therefore less concerns about various types of technology being withheld under certain circumstances—and also costs much less, the government has to ensure the Tejas is not sidelined under any circumstances.

If this happens then, the next time the air force needs more planes, India will once again be scouting for aircraft in global markets, and at large costs. Indeed, given the level of R&D and innovation that has gone into developing the aircraft, and at a fraction of what it costs globally, part of the new aircraft deal could be to involve HAL so that the Tejas can benefit from global

R&D efforts; the fact that Tejas costs a lot less than other aircraft is an added advantage that the air force can scarcely afford not to keep in mind. Given the ageing fleet and the need to partner and co-develop the fifth generation fighter aircraft along with Sukhoi, HAL has, in any case, its work cut out—the role of the air force is critical since, unless it drives the process, it can hardly hope to take off.