

Indian Military Goes French
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The Indian Air Force has opted for Dassault's Rafale fighter jet to fulfill its multi-billion dollar contract. It's a major blow to the Eurofighter.

It's taken nearly a decade to get there, but India this week [confirmed](#) that it has selected the Dassault Rafale to fulfill its medium multirole combat aircraft (MMRCA) requirement. For the beaten finalist, the Eurofighter Typhoon, co-built by Germany, Italy, Spain and the U.K., second is as good as nowhere (although until contracts are formally signed, Eurofighter's cause isn't entirely lost).

India will now acquire 126 Dassault aircraft, though a fleet of around 190 Indian Air Force (IAF) Rafales could eventually be assembled. The ultimate value of the deal could be two to three times higher than the initial \$10 billion to \$11 billion outlay once 30 to 40 years of through-life support, and extra planes, are factored in.

The face-off between the French Rafale and the part-British Typhoon has been an intriguing subplot to the wider saga of European disharmony, with relations between Paris and London becoming increasingly acrimonious against the backdrop of Europe's economic malaise.

Both governments badly needed the Indian fighter deal as a rare piece of economic good news, especially with defense sector jobs already being shed and others still vulnerable. India's decision will give Paris something to trumpet, while severely stinging the British and its Eurofighter partner nations.

The stakes for the companies concerned – Dassault and the Eurofighter consortium, a partnership of BAE Systems (U.K.), EADS (Germany and Spain) and Alenia Aeronautica (Italy) – could hardly have been higher. Momentum is critical for these big defense programs, and both aircraft looked in danger of losing theirs, not just in India but in other markets besides. [The Rafale is chasing orders in Brazil, Kuwait and the U.A.E](#); but the plane's prospects in all three markets appeared to worsen in 2011, and an Indian rebuttal would have only deterred those potential buyers from placing their faith in the French jet. Indeed, it was looking like the Rafale might fail to secure any exports at all, calling into question the standalone future of the French defense aerospace sector. But now, Dassault has scooped the biggest contract of all.

For Eurofighter, the prospects had been looking somewhat brighter. Following export orders from Austria and Saudi Arabia, the Typhoon is also in the running in Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. But the aircraft has now suffered two serious knock-backs within the space of as many months. In December, Japan [rejected the Typhoon](#) in favor of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II. But nobody seriously expected the European company to win the Japanese contest – which is why the loss in India, where Eurofighter had been tipped by many analysts as the favorite, will be so much more demoralizing.

As for the Indian Air Force (IAF), it can now look forward to adding a highly capable aircraft to its ranks. Some critics of the whole MMRCA process have complained that by the time the winning plane enters Indian service (from 2016 onwards) it will already be outdated, with stealthy Chinese, Russian and U.S. jets all coming online by then. But that's a short-sighted argument. When the IAF inducts the Rafale, it will be the best aircraft at its disposal; it will also be a match for anything its two main strategic rivals,

China and Pakistan, are able to field at that time, and therefore an effective deterrent (the likelihood of China's experimental [J-20 stealth fighter](#) being an in-service production aircraft by then seems low, while the jury is still out on whether Russia's T-50/PAK-FA will offer true stealth capability). Crucially, the Rafale offering brings with it the level of technology transfer that India's defense industry so badly needs.

The IAF's history with French aircraft no doubt worked in the Rafale's favor. The service already flies the Mirage – an aircraft IAF officers are known to like – and decided in July to go ahead with a major \$2.4bn upgrade program for its Mirage fleet. Some analysts speculated that the Mirage upgrade deal might have been a consolation prize for the French ahead of failure in the MMRCA deal, but that turned out not to be so.

The IAF can now also devote more energy to the evaluation of three other programs that are also critical to its future capability: [the developmental F-35](#); the Russian T-50/PAK-FA project, in which India is already a junior partner; and the indigenous medium combat aircraft (MCA) program, which remains on the drawing board (designs, due by the end of 2011, have yet to materialize). While the procurement of one, two or perhaps even all three of these aircraft will have a great bearing on the IAF's long-term future, today's announcement marks an important milestone in Indian defense. It is also a new lease on life for the Dassault Rafale, and a hammer blow for Eurofighter.

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