

F-16 Fighter Made in India?



India is in the market for a new fighter plane—actually, about 200 new fighter planes. The country's fleet of MiG 21s is aging and increasingly prone to accidents, so it is seeking a replacement capable of air superiority and ground-attack missions. Initial reports suggested that the indigenously produced Tejas light combat aircraft (LCA) might play this role.

The Tejas, however, has been plagued with problems; a government investigation identified 53 design flaws, including underpowered engines, excess weight, poor maneuverability, lack of fuel capacity, underperforming radar, and maintenance shortcomings. Thus, despite a development process spanning more than 30 years, the Tejas remains unfit for combat duty. A Tejas Mark II will supposedly address many of the first edition's shortcomings, but flight testing is not expected to commence until late 2018.

Indian leaders are therefore looking to foreign manufacturers to produce a single-engine fighter in India, in accordance with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's so-called Make in India initiative. It appears that New Delhi will choose between Lockheed Martin's F-16 Fighting Falcon and Saab's JAS 39 Gripen. The F-16 and the Gripen are highly capable and technically well matched, and both have their advocates in the Indian strategic community. The Falcon is particularly attractive, however, because of its ubiquity; it is one of the most widely used fighter aircraft in the world. By taking over production, India would be tapping into a large market for the plane and related products and services.

Lockheed Martin is offering to move its entire production line for the iconic fighter plane from Texas to India. That would be a second-best option for all involved. From a U.S. perspective, the optimal outcome would be to acquire India as an F-16 customer while continuing to produce the plane in Texas and keeping the associated jobs at home. From an Indian perspective, the best outcome would be the development of an indigenous fighter aircraft to avoid reliance on anyone else's technology. Such independence has always been an important Indian strategic goal.



But neither side has any real alternative. For all of India's recent economic and technical achievements, it lacks the ability to develop a world-class fighter on its own, as the LCA project painfully and repeatedly demonstrated. Insisting on an indigenous solution would result in endless delays and a sub-standard product, seriously compromising Indian security.

Further, the Tejas is already built largely from imported parts, including U.S. engines. Thus, by buying a foreign aircraft, India is actually forgoing less autonomy than it initially might appear.



The United States, for its part, needs partnership with India to ensure that F-16 production continues. The United States acquired its first operational F-16s in 1979 and received its last plane in 2005. With no new F-16 orders scheduled beyond this year, the Texas assembly line could soon shut down.

A deal with India would not keep the U.S. plant open, but it would at least ensure that the aircraft remains in production, generating employment and revenue from such sources as parts orders and licensing fees. These benefits would grow as India sells planes to new or returning third-party customers, which could include Bahrain, Colombia, and Indonesia, among others.



Perhaps most important, the Lockheed deal would give India and the United States an opportunity to work together on a significant, technically sophisticated defense project. That would build trust and bind the two countries closer as China's rise creates uncertainty in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region.

Indo-Swedish cooperation on the Gripen would undoubtedly be a good thing as well. It is not, however, as strategically valuable to India or the United States as a closer Indo-American partnership.



It is true that the F-16's capabilities are well known to potential adversaries, particularly the Pakistanis, who have flown the aircraft since the 1980s. But this is a tradeoff inherent in getting one of the world's most proven combat aircraft. More important, the Block-70 version of the F-16 that India would produce features upgrades in avionics

and operational capabilities that far outstrip the older Pakistani planes. And India would likely be able to veto future F-16 sales to sensitive states such as Pakistan. Pakistani familiarity with the F-16, then, is not a reason to avoid it.

An agreement to produce F-16s in India might not be what either the United States or India would want in a perfect world. But in the real world, insistence on the ideal will lead to something worse than the compromises inherent in an F-16 agreement. In far too many cases, India's quest for the ideal in defense acquisitions has resulted in sub-optimal outcomes. In India's search for a new fighter plane, second best is best.



This will be a great **Make in India Initiative** will take India into a very big technological advantage and will improve various technological abilities of India.

Contents compiled from various websites and newspapers

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