Decoding India’s MMRCA Decision

The IAF gave primacy to technical aspects over everything else.

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

INDIA’S REJECTION OF THE F-16 IN
Super Hornet and the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet in its hotly contested medium multirole combat aircraft (MMRCA) competition has disappointed many in the United States. Because there were great expectations that New Delhi would leverage this fly-off to cement its strategic partnership with Washington — particularly in the aftermath of the herculean American efforts to consummate the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement — India’s selection of two European platforms, the Eurofighter and the Rafale, as the finalists for the multirole component of its air force led many American observers to conclude that the country had settled for an air-plane, not a relationship. Several analysts have attempted to explain why the Indian decision turned out the way it did. Bruce Riedel, a former official in the Clinton administration, has been reported by the Washington Post as concluding that India rejected the American contenders because of the ‘perception’ that the United States was ‘unreliable as arms supplier because of past embargoes imposed after various wars and nuclear tests.’ Arguing that ‘there is a belief that in a crisis situation, particularly if it was an India-Pakistan crisis, the US could pull the plug on parts, munitions, aircraft — precisely at the moment you need them most,’ he inferred that India’s rejection of the F-16IN and the F/A-18E/F was a product of bad ‘memories,’ which run deep in this part of the world. Other commentators offered alternative explanations. Richard Aboulafia, an internationally respected aviation analyst at the Teal Group speculated that India’s exclusion of the American platforms was evidence of the continuing tensions in the US-India strategic partnership and a subtle protest against the current US policy of continuing to arm Pakistan. More substantively, however, he argued that the Indian decision was linked fundamentally to issues of technology transfer. The Europeans, he contended, were willing to bend over backwards in terms of technology transfer, in terms of industrial work share and in terms of other regulatory issues, and they really needed this (sale).… For the US contractors, it would have been gravy, but for the Europeans, it’s survival through the end of the decade.”

Other analysts echoed this reasoning. Some conjectured that India’s decision was driven by the presumed American reluctance ‘to see key AESA (active electronically scanned array) radar and other avionics and electronic warfare technology made available at the level India wanted; whereas others wondered whether the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), which restrict exports of sensitive US technology and are enforced by the US State Department, were to blame. Another hypothesis offered for the Indian decision was straightforwardly political. As Trefor Moss argued in a widely read analysis, ‘Why India Chose to Disappoint the US,’ by opting for a European aircraft, India is not seeking to avoid aligning itself with the United States. India clearly is aligning itself with the United States, but as a partner rather than a client; it also sees the United States as one of several key strategic partners, rather than the only ally that counts.’ Carrying this logic to its conclusion, Moss concluded that the MMRCA decision epitomised ‘India’s strategy, which ‘above all, is to spread the risk.’ While all these explanations sound credible, they are mistaken. The Indian Air Force’s (IAF) decision regarding the final shortlist — the ‘down-select’ in Indian procurement parlance — was made entirely on technical grounds. No political, strategic, or financial considerations intervened in any way: in retrospect, this may have been exactly the problem, but the exclusion of these factors was a necessary consequence of the ‘two-step’ procurement procedure adopted in the MMRCA competition. This procedure led to the rejection of the American contenders but it also demonstrates that the acquisition process worked largely as intended, at least at a bureaucratic level. Whether it serves India’s larger national security interests, however, still remains an open question, one that Indians should debate in the months and years ahead.
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the Pakistan Air Force, the IAF did put the aircraft through its paces. At the end of the day, however, it was found ‘non- compliant’ — a term indicating that the aircraft did not meet certain technical criteria in the IAF’s Air Staff Quality Requirements (ASQRs) — in five of the eight areas, some of which were of critical importance to the service: growth potential; carefree handling (and automatic sense of orientation of external stores); sustained turn rate; engine change time; and assurance against obsolescence over a 15-year period.

The F-16IN Super Viper is already a mature aircraft and while it is likely to evolve further where its sensors and weapons are concerned — especially for foreign markets — it is unlikely to remain the premier dogfighter it was when first introduced into the United States Air Force. Since the IAF was looking to acquire an aircraft that would remain competitive over the next 30 years, the F-16IN appeared like a poorer choice relative to the competition in both growth potential and assurance against obsolescence. Although the IAF’s assessment on both these counts can be debated by airpower specialists, even the most ardent supporters of the F-16IN would agree that this legendary airplane would remain the world’s most nimble close-in combat aircraft among the multipurpose combat aircraft in say, 2030. The F-16IN’s failure to meet the IAF’s standard where engine change time was concerned was due largely to an idiosyncratic mishap during the field trials. It is certain that the IAF was forced to involve multiple stochastic demonstrations of engine change, the F-16IN would have excelled. Unfortunately, second chances are sometimes forgone. On their own terms, close to not being able to perform as Lock- heed Martin’s subsequent evidence of being technically on track, the F-16IN met the change standards laid down in the ASQR.

The more serious weaknesses identified in the F-16IN pertain to its handling and turn rates. (The deficiency in automatic sensing of external stores is an odd finding — most modern aircraft routinely provide such information in the cockpit — but, in any case, it is an indication that the IAF, perhaps due to some other priorities, thus cannot be considered as a problem of consequence.) The concerns about handling and turn rates, thrust-to-weight ratios, handling, and in general, aerodynamic performance, propulsion, visibility, and range, were matters of concern. Not to mention, the IAF wanted most clearly in its MMRCA was a ‘super hot rod of the skies’ — an aircraft that would be the best in close-in air combat manoeuvring. That is the reason why the IAF awarded Lockheed Martin F-16IN Super Viper that Lockheed Martin offered in the MMRCA competition. The IAF sited the F-16IN in the region, the latest of the available choices, and one with the greatest growth potential in the case of the F-16 Block 60 developed for the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE partially funded its development in order to secure an aircraft capable of carrying a useful ordnance load to the extended distances necessary to target Tehran. Lockheed Martin responded to this requirement by equipping the F-16 with conformal fuel tanks (CFTs). These CFTs, which can be removed between missions but not jettisoned in flight, extended the F-16’s already impressive range, but at the cost of robbing it of its renowned sprightliness.

With its CFTs, the F-16IN’s handling and turn rate standards turn out which otherwise rank among the worst — now, to the bottom relative to the other MMRCA competitors and thus failed the final strike against its inclusion in the shortlist. The fact that the F/A-18E/F’s EPE, the F-414-GE-400 engine.

The IAF, however, has laid its bets on the hope that the Eurofighter and the Rafale will eventually be able to close-in air combat capabilities as well as effective BVR performance, in contrast to their American rivals which appear arguable weaker where close-in air combat manoeuvring is concerned. However, the F-16IN’s shortcomings are not devoid of their own strengths. The F/A-18E/F Super Hornet’s speed, acceleration, and nimbleness is felt to outweigh it shortfalls, and issues related to special preventative maintenance. Unlike the case with the F-16IN, these efforts are easier to assess, the case against the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet is mitigated by the Rafale’s mature engine design, the growth potential that it offers for Pakistan, and China which will make long-range manoeuvres increasingly the norm in south Asia.

In the FRAY | Eurofighter

The F/A-18E/F Super Hornet is a six-stage high-pressure compressor, and a new high-pressure turbine design — mitigated many of the flight envelope deficiencies that had hampered the airplane when compared to the older F/A-18C/D Hornet. Thanks to the EPE, the F/A-18E/F’s climb performance, its transonic acceleration, its maximum sustained G, its maximum sustained turn rates, and its top-end speed all improve considerably. The F/A-18E/F’s AESA radar and the F-16IN’s W-7300E allows it to eventually deliver on the IAF’s specifications for the F/A-18E/F's engine start-up problem during the high-altitude trials because the demonstration aircraft was still equipped with passive radar, or ‘passive sensors, excellent information fusion and displays, good-to-outstanding propulsion systems, potentially effective weapons (if cleared for sale to New Delhi), and outstanding manoeuvrability.

These issues will nonetheless be debated endlessly by airpower specialists. The point of note, however, is that the American contestants exemplified war-fighting proficiency — the end result of possessing superior sensors, avionics and weapons in a highly integrated fashion. The IAF was simply unprepared to accept the Eurofighter, and the Gripen.

The IAF’s judgment about the limited growth potential of the F/A-18E/F may also have been premature, given the significant increases in thrust that have been gained already by new technology insertions — but on this score at least, the IAF’s assessment is easier to concede in contrast to its judgments about the viability of the engine’s design. The F/A-18E/F’s engine start-up problem during the high-altitude trials because the demonstration aircraft was still equipped with passive radar, or ‘passive sensors, excellent information fusion and displays, good-to-outstanding propulsion systems, potentially effective weapons (if cleared for sale to New Delhi), and outstanding manoeuvrability. These limitations can place the F/A-18E/F in severe difficulties in the middle of a modern adversary — though the IAF’s assessment is easier to concede in contrast to its judgments about the viability of the engine’s design. These issues will nonetheless be debated endlessly by airpower specialists. The point of note, however, is that the American contestants exemplified war-fighting proficiency — the end result of possessing superior sensors, avionics and weapons in a highly integrated fashion. The IAF was simply unprepared to accept the Eurofighter, and the Gripen.

Most significantly, the F/A-18E/F was expected to have a higher short in aerodynamic performance, especially with respect to those parameters that distinguish the nimblest of fighters from the rest. These assessments are not surprising. Although the Super Hornet remains one of the most capable aircraft in the world where handling is concerned, with a high alpha performance to boot, it has traditionally been hampered by weaker energy addition compared to its contemporaries. Further, it still relies only fortified only for manoeuvres up to 7.5G. In contrast to the IAF’s ASQRs which specified a criterion of 9G. These limitations can place the F/A-18E/F at a disadvantage in turning fights with modern adversaries. While the new engine will mitigate these deficiencies.
ALSO A CONTENDER Rafale

ies somewhat—which is exactly why its pilots exploit the aircraft’s superb sensors and weapons to destroy its opponents long before close-in engagements become necessary. Should the latter become unavoidable, the aircraft’s sensors and its high off-boresight VVR air-to-airmissileery preserve its edge even in what might otherwise be an unfavourable tactical environment. Unfortunately for Boeing and the US, however, the IAF, while respectful of these capabilities, nevertheless sought a platform without compromised manoeuvrability and acceleration, thus resulting in the F/A-18E/F being excluded from the final shortlist. It is within this context that the Super Hornet’s true multicore proficiency, unlike many of its competitors, did not suffice to compensate for its assessed weaknesses in air combat manoeuvring — again, a consequence of the IAF’s preference for superior flying machines rather than simply an effective air-warfighting package. This partiality could come back to haunt the IAF in time because neither the Eurofighter nor the Rafale can match the Super Hornet in the strike mission, which given modern warfare is fundamental to success even in a close-in combat air-warfighting design.

In any event, the IAF’s choices in the MMRCA down-select highlight three important points that should be recognised in any evaluation of why the two American fighters ended up out in the cold.

To begin with, the IAF is at heart—in its ethos and organisational culture—a fighter force. Not surprisingly, then, it sought the ultimate fighter for fighter pilots. Obviously, it wanted a successful weapon system as well, but not at the cost of a superior flying machine. The two Eurocanards turned out to be better on this account, however marginally, in comparison to their American competitors—a fact that a detailed study, Dogfight India’s Medium Multiple-Role Combat Aircraft Decision (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011) had earlier pointed out. By the standards of the Indian Request for Proposals, the Eurofighter came first, followed by the Rafale, an assessment now corroborated by the decision regarding the down-select. This does not imply that the two European finalists were flawless, only that they had the highest number of fulfilled requirements and thus met a baseline that satisfied the IAF.

Further, the IAF sought the newest airplane that money could buy. Again, this requirement should not be unexpected because Indian planners, contending the three-dimensional environment over a 30-year horizon, wanted an aircraft that would remain at the cutting edge for the longest possible time. The Eurocanards had an advantage here because their more recent designs arguably promised a longer period of usefulness in comparison to their American rivals. Supporters of the Super Hornet would challenge this conclusion pointing out to the timelines when the airplane is likely to remain in US Navy service, but obviously this argument was not persuasive enough to the IAF.

Finally, when all is said and done, the United States simply was not well positioned to win the MMRCA competition because, odd as it may seem, its best current combat aviation technology was either simply unavailable or inconsistent with Indian needs as defined in the IAF’s Request for Proposals. US fifth-generation fighters like the F-22 Raptor and the F-35 Lightning are without peer anywhere in the world, but they were not available to India in the MMRCA RFI:

The Rafale remains the finest air dominance fighter ever built, but it is predominantly a single-mission aircraft that, despite now acquiring limited secondary mission taskings, would still be inappropriate as a multirole fighter for the IAF. Current US policy, however, would prohibit the export of the Rafale to any country, including to Washington’s closest allies.

The F-35 Lightning, in contrast, is a true multirole fighter that, although not optimised for all aspects equally, is uniquely capable of undertaking both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. Promised for the longest possible time, the program in development, has not yet entered US military service, could never be integrated into the IAF's existing structures and schedule, and was never considered for export to, or co-development with, India because New Delhi until very recently had not demonstrated any formal interest in the programme. While the Obama administration has now indicated that India would be offered the off-the-shelf F-35, the policy initiative would have been of no help to the IAF in its MMRCA acquisition for all the reasons discussed above.

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The current Indian procedure of attempting to first select technology purely on the grounds of any other constraints leads inexorably, using an infamous American example, to purchasing the US$60 million aircraft. By pristine time standards alone, it is certain that the more expensive toilet seat outperforms its US$664 counterpart under the widest range of conditions, but the critical question is whether the differential in marginal price is worth the commensurate difference in performance.

In the case of the MMRCA, the comparisons are necessarily more compli- cated and less direct, and the expectations are any other constraint should have a sustained turn rate of at least 16 degrees per second. As Admiral Arun Prakash (retd) has perceptively asked a recent analysis, ‘... if numbers are indeed so critical for the IAF, then why have the cheaper MMRCA options been discarded?’ ... The IAF could have, for example, added 400 Super Hornets to its inventory for the price of 200 Ty- phoons, and solved many of its problems.’

Parenthetically, it is also worth noting that if the IAF was thinking strategically about its inventory of combat aviation technology in the MMRCA competition, it would have been worthwhile to include the F/A-18E/F Super Hornets in its hands-on evaluation. If the service had no intention whatsoever of finally purchasing the aircraft, because it would be significantly hazarding its combat effectiveness while leveraging tremendously. Without a cheaper option in the mix, the IAF is now forced with the choice of two expensive fighters — the Eurofighter at some USD65 million — both of which have much smaller production runs, are equipped with similar weapons, and have a more limited capacity to transform India’s technology base, given the high per-unit domestic viability, combat efficiency, and future market shares.

This problem assumes added significance because of the fact that the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Company (EADS), one of the main piers of the Eurofighter consortium, aims to launch new jet fighters as an export. Even worse, India's decision in deference to the Eurofighter is worthwhile because it is possible that factors like cost, technology transfer, offsets, production efficiency, and strategic partnership were factored into the first step of the selection procedure itself. American air- craft like the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet would have made the short-list because they were asked and answered no questions (or comparable) to the India’s strategic business plan. While Dassault will likely persist in fighter manu- facturers’ desire to sell the more lucrative business to India and has its money's worth should be the objective of further adjustments to the defence budget, and Indian security managers are already ex- amining the reforms required to further improve the procurement process provides some reasons for hope.

The mechanistic application of the two-step procedure and the Indian political leadership's intention to the MMRCA evaluation process in fact created the crisis in US-Indian relations when the facts about the IAF's down-select became known.

As far as the MMRCA competition itself is concerned, the ministry of de- fence at this juncture should only look forward: whatever the inadequacies of the current acquisition system in India's defence procurement — an outcome that allows technology to be potentially negotiated away from the Indian state — it does not permit the decision-maker to price without of interfering leverage altogether in favour of supposedly objective scoring intended to prevent a placid acquisition of new weapons and technologies. While the zeal for probity in defence is indeed commendable, it is not clear that such rectitude actu- ally advances Indian national security if it comes at the cost of the inefficient apportionment of scarce defence re- sources.

These issues are those that ought to preoccu- py Indian policy-makers as they think about defence procurement reform in the years ahead. This is actually a matter of some urgency because India is slated to spend about USD100 billion on for- eign military acquisitions over the next decade. Given the intense debate about its own interests in the MMRCA process in fact created the crisis in US-Indian relations when the facts about the IAF's down-select became known.

Whatever the disappointment caused by the MMRCA shortlist, the good news is that this decision does not portend any significant setback to America's advantage in this competition over the long term. The geopolitical imperatives that dictated the increased US-India cooperation and partnership may not always be smooth because of the differences in relative pow- er between the two states, the pressures of domestic politics in two feisty demo- cratic nations, and the asymmetries in expectations that will arise from time to time. But the analysis here underscores what is at stake in these ongoing negotiations and is relevant to the future of US-Indian de- fense cooperation.

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ity between the US fighters and their European rivals. Again, the merits of these assessments can be disputed, but the fact that such a judgment obtained made it virtually impossible for Indian political leaders to contest the IAF’s conclusions, which flowed inexorably from the methodology underlying the two-step selection process.

Second, the myriad public claims about why the IAF finally decided to settle for an all-European shortlist are highly suspect. There is simply no evidence to suggest that the decision to exclude the F-16IN and F/A-18E/F from the down-select was motivated by Indian suspicions about the reliability of the United States as a supplier. While such concerns dominated Indian calculations in the past, they have abated dramatically in recent years. The evidence of increasing Indian purchases of major weapon systems from the United States only proves the point: since the Bush years, India has purchased its entire long-range maritime patrol aircraft, very heavy lift transport aircraft, and advanced special operations tactical transport aircraft fleets from American vendors at an outlay of over USD Eight billion thus far — a figure that is certain to increase as additional platforms are procured beyond that committed to in the original order.

US companies are also favoured to win the attack helicopter, the ultra-light howitzer, and the anti-tank guided missile competitions that are now nearing completion, all of which only prove the point that Indian perceptions of the reliability of the United States as a supplier have changed dramatically in the new political environment and when the superiority of specific US defence technologies is deemed uncontestable. Similarly, the questions about technology transfer too were not an issue in the case of the MMB RCA down-select; technology transfer, offsets, and costs will be critical considerations when the Indian government has to choose between the Eurofighter and the Rafale, but they were of no relevance in the processes leading up to the rejection of the American fighters. In fact, the ministry of defence’s Technical Oversight Committee and its Technical Offsets Evaluation Committee are only just now completing their assessments of some of these issues.

Third, the decision in the MMB RCA down-select was fundamentally a product of a particular acquisition procedure, which by privileging technological considerations at the expense of cost and other relevant constraints produces distortions that lead to the misallocation of defence resources. But it was not a repudiation of the US-Indian strategic partnership or a hedge against overdependence on the United States as a geopolitical partner. It is likely that many IAF officers had strong admiration for the Eurofighter and the Rafale based on their encounters with each aircraft during past bilateral exercises with the United Kingdom and France respectively. If these preferences finally proved determinative, it was only because the two Eurocanards came closer than their American competitors to the IAF’s vision of what constituted a desirable multirole fighter that was expected to remain in Indian service until at least the year 2040. The IAF’s yearning for an airplane that was nimble, sophisticated, and longer-lived — rather than any political considerations about hedging — produced a decision that favoured the Europeans, an outcome that was only reinforced by an acquisition procedure that permitted the user to disregard costs, technology transfer, offsets, and production line management when selecting the competitors that made it past the crucial first post. While India ought to review the merits of this procurement process for the future, the United States should at least take some solace from the fact that the exclusion of its airplanes from this race does not portend anything injurious for the long-term health of its strategic partnership with India.

To be sure, defence cooperation between the United States and India presently is challenged by a variety of factors in both countries. Some of these are transient, while some of these are structural, with the weightier impediments lying, on balance, in New Delhi rather than in Washington.

It is to these hindrances that Indian and American leaders ought to focus their attention. This is important because the current threats to the burgeoning defence partnership derive less from abortive military sales and more from the lack of vision, focus and determination to create the strategic affiliation that serves common interests. As both sides work toward remedying these lacunae, at least they need not worry that the one unconsummated defence deal involving the MMB RCA means anything more than what any open competition inevitably entails — you win some, you lose some, but the game goes on. It (The writer, a well-known analyst is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C.)

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