

Tejas to replace MiG as key fighter

Majority of the 250 planes will be phased out in 15 years, says Parrikar.

Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar said the indigenously developed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas would be the mainstay of the Indian Air Force and would likely replace the entire MiG-21 fleet of almost 250 fighters.

The Minister's statement is significant given the recent noises emanating from the Ministry, hinting at the possibility of another single-engine fighter being considered to make up for the shortfall of fighters. In the past, the IAF had been reluctant to fully back the domestic Tejas programme.

"LCA is mainstay. There will be seven squadrons of it. It is 3-4 times better than MiG-21s," he told *The Hindu* on Thursday giving an overview of the IAF modernisation plans.

About 250 MiG-21s were in service, most of which would be phased out in the next 10-15 years, Mr. Parrikar said, adding that they would be "replaced by the LCA and another single-engine fighter."

Asked if another single-engine fighter was under consideration, he declined to confirm.

"We may consider. I have not said we are looking. Tomorrow we may decide to have everything from Tejas. The second version of Tejas, which is an improved version, is coming into production after the first two squadrons," he said.

Mirage and Jaguar upgrade programmes were currently under way which, Mr. Parrikar said, would add 10-30 years to their life.

"In five to six years, we should start getting new double-engine fighters, not Rafales only," he stated.

The improved version of LCA referred to as Mk-1A with four major improvements over the Mk-1 variant has been offered by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) as an interim measure in view of the delay in LCA-MK2.

Mr. Parrikar said the third squadron with 1A would be a highly improved version, which was under trials. "Those special additives are under trial like firing a Beyond Visual Range (BVR) missile etc," he said.

'LCA has limitations'

However, the LCA being a single-engine, light-weight fighter, it has its limitations, which is why another twin-engine fighter would be needed other than the Rafale, Mr. Parrikar stated.

"Functionally, the LCA is better than many other foreign fighters. It reacts very smoothly, fly-by-wire, its turn radius is very good, manoeuvrability is very good but it has limitation in the sense that it is a light combatant... It cannot go into deep penetration... It is mostly good for dogfights in your own sky or to degrade the opponent Army's command posts," Mr. Parrikar observed and added that "we need more twin-engine fighters for deep penetration."

BrahMos missile test-fired

The Indian Air Force on Friday successfully test fired an advanced version of BrahMos land-attack supersonic cruise missile system in the western sector of Rajasthan, PTI reports from Jaipur.

The flight conducted on Friday from one of the firing ranges in the western sector met its mission parameters. The weapon successfully hit and annihilated the designated target, officials said.

"BrahMos has proved its mettle once again as the best supersonic cruise missile system in the world," said Sudhir Mishra, CEO and MD of BrahMos Aerospace, while congratulating IAF.

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IAF test-fires land-attack version of BrahMos

The missile destroyed a designated target.

The Indian Air Force on Friday successfully test-fired a land-attack version of the supersonic cruise missile, BrahMos, in the western sector.

The flight-trial which took place in a firing range in the western sector, met its mission parameters, a BrahMos press release said. The missile destroyed a designated target. Its accuracy in mountain warfare mode was re-established during a campaign by the Army in the eastern sector last year and repeated last month.

The missile system "has empowered all the three wings of the armed forces with anti-ship and land-attack capability," the release said. It quoted Sudhir Mishra, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of BrahMos Aerospace, as saying, "BrahMos has proved its mettle once again as the best supersonic cruise missile system in the world."

This brings to light that the IAF too has been equipped with the land-attack version of BrahMos, which flies at a supersonic speed of Mach 3 (that is, three times the speed of sound). The Navy and the Army have already deployed the two-stage missile, which has a range of 290 km.

Asked why the IAF should fire a land-attack version of BrahMos, informed sources said two squadrons had already been equipped with the version. (One squadron has about 70 to 80 missiles) The IAF had deployed the missile in the border areas to take out the enemy's communication towers, runways, and radar in case of a conflict, the sources said.

The IAF is preparing to fire the air version of BrahMos from its Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter aircraft in the coming weeks, the sources said. "All ground tests have been completed," they added. A flight of Sukhoi-30 MKI with the launcher took place a few weeks ago and more such tests would follow.