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## Rafale game changer in subcontinent: IAF Chief

As controversy rages over the Rs 59,000-crore Rafale deal, IAF Chief BS Dhanoa on Wednesday termed the induction of the fighter jets as a “game changer in the subcontinent and said along with the S-400 Triumf missile defence system, it will act as a “booster dose.” Russia and India are likely to ink the nearly five billion dollar deal for five S-400 systems during President Vladimir Putin’s visit to New Delhi later this week. Dhanoa also said the cost of the aircraft arrived at after negotiation was “reasonable and adequate.”

Defending the Government-to-Government deal with France for 36 Rafale jets, the Air Chief also asserted that the IAF was consulted at the “appropriate level.” This came in the backdrop of allegations that the IAF was not in the loop before the deal was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Paris in 2015. The Air Chief also lamented delays in delivery schedules of some frontline fighter jets by the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).

Fielding a host of questions of over the Rafale deal during the annual news conference ahead of the Air Force Day on October 8, Dhanoa said the IAF had given options to the Government to address the issue of bolstering the dwindling fighter jet squadron strength of the force.

Giving the background, the Air Chief said the earlier proposed deal for buying 126 medium multi-role combat aircraft (MMRCA) had reached an “impasse” in negotiations due to differences between HAL and Dassault, manufacturer of Rafale, over issues like price, man hours and as to who will be responsible for 108 jets to be manufactured by HAL in India.

The IAF had three choices. They included either to wait for the ongoing negotiations and hope for the best or withdraw the Request for Proposal(RFP) or go in for emergency purchase of two squadrons, he said adding the government took the “bold step”by going with the last option. The Air Chief also said issuing fresh tenders would have delayed the acquisition process of modern fighter jets by another five to seven years.

Claiming that the Rafale deal was a “good package” and the aircraft will be a “game-changer” in the subcontinent, he said adding “we got a lot of advantages in Rafale deal.” The jet comes with modern sensors, latest electronic warfare systems and India specific enhancements, he said.

Refraining to put a figure to the cost of each aircraft, he said Minister of State for Defence Subhash Bhamre and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had given the amount and “we stick to same figures.” Bhamre had mentioned in a reply in Parliament in 2016 that the price of each Rafale is Rs 670 crores while Jaitley said recently the NDA deal was nine per cent cheaper than the negotiated price by the previous regime.

Besides charging the present Government with buying Rafales at a very high price than negotiated by it, Congress is also accusing the government of benefitting Anil Ambani’s Reliance Defence Ltd from the Rafale deal. The BJP has dismissed all the allegations as false.

Asked about this issue, Dhanoa said he cannot “comment” on the partnership adding as per offsets clause of Defence Procurement Policy (DPP), the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) chooses his Indian partner. In this case Dassault opted for Reliance and when former French president Francois Hollande’s claims came out the French aerospace conglomerate said it chose Reliance.

Justifying the decision to buy 36 jets, the IAF chief in the past too India had gone in for such a step to meet operational requirements.

On question marks about the capabilities of the HAL to build latest generation aircraft, Dhanoa said he was grateful to HAL for support to the IAF. However, he flagged concern over delay in delivery schedules of ongoing projects including six year time overrun for Jaguars, three years for SU-30, two years for Mirage-2000 and five years in case of indigenously developed Tejas light combat aircraft(LCA).

## Plans to monitor infra development to counter Chinese contingencies

The IAF is monitoring infrastructure development in China and has plans to counter contingencies, Air Chief B S Dhanoa said here on Wednesday against the backdrop of reported presence of more than 50 Chinese fighter jets in Tibet. Asserting they were not a threat, he, however, expressed concern over the depleting strength of fighter jet squadrons of the IAF.

At present, the IAF has 31 squadrons (one squadron has 18 to 20 jets) against the approved 42 squadrons to fight a two-front war with Pakistan and China simultaneously. In this backdrop, Dhanoa said “the depleting fighter jets is an issue.” The induction of 83 indigenously developed and manufactured Tejas light combat aircraft (LCA), 36 Rafale besides Sukhoi-30s will arrest the drop down from the existing 31 squadrons, he said.

As regards China, the Air Chief, while addressing annual news conference ahead of the Air Force Day on October 8, said “we are watching infrastructure development in China. They have been saying airports are coming up there for improved regional connectivity and not offensive.” However, the IAF has plans in place to meet any threat, Dhanoa said.

He made this point when asked about China building airports especially in the border regions at a rapid pace thereby posing a threat to India. Fielding another question about the reported presence of more than 50 fighter jets in Tibet, Dhanoa said “it is not a threat.” The Air Chief also said India is also undertaking infrastructure development hinting at better airports and advanced landing grounds (ALG) in border areas facing China besides strategic roads to maintain logistical support to the armed forces.

A few weeks back Dhanoa had said China was significantly increasing its air power including deploying fighter jets in Tibet and India must modernise its air force to match the capabilities of its “adversaries”.

India was facing a unique situation of having two nuclear armed neighbours — China and Pakistan — on its borders and the intentions of the adversaries could change overnight, he said.

“China has approximately 1,700 fighter aircraft of which 800 are fourth generation jets. A large number of these can be expected to be brought against us in the Tibet Autonomous Region in case of hostilities,” he had observed while addressing a seminar.

The Air Chief also said though India was facing a grave security threat, its combat squadron has come down to 31 from sanctioned strength of 42 which is a matter of concern. Each fighter squadron has 16-18 aircraft.

“Indian armed forces are operating in a unique environment. Presently, there are very few countries which are facing security challenges as grave as ours,” he said, referring to threats from Pakistan and China. “India’s neighbours are not sitting idle... We have a unique situation of having two nuclear armed neighbours on our borders. No other country in the world has this kind of a situation,” Dhanoa said.

China has significantly developed and upgraded infrastructure in Tibet Autonomous Region and that fighter jets and surveillance jets have been permanently stationed in airfields in the area bordering India, he said adding “We have to match the force level of our adversaries so that we can fight simultaneously on two fronts.”

## Ordering 36 jets emergency measures: IAF Chief Dhanoa

Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal B.S. Dhanoa said the Indian Air Force was consulted at the 'appropriate level' by the government before it announced the deal to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets from France. Dhanoa was clarifying the IAF's stand on the opposition's allegations that Air Force was not kept in the loop when the number of aircrafts in the deal was reduced to 36, against the demand of 126 jets.

"At the appropriate level, IAF was consulted. IAF had given some options. It is up to the government to choose," Dhanoa said during a press conference ahead of the 86th Air Force Day on October 8.



Bombarded with questions on the Rafale deal, Dhanoa, towards the end of the customary annual press briefing, made a casual remark that the "presser for the 86th Air Force Day has eventually become a press conference on Rafale. Air Force does other activities also." The principal opposition party, the

Congress, has alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi unilaterally announced the Rafale deal without keeping the IAF and ministry of defence in the loop.

Justifying the number of Rafale jets, IAF chief said that they had no other options.

"Earlier deal on 126 MMRCA reached an impasse during negotiations. We had three options—first was either to wait for something good to happen, second was to withdraw the global tender (RFP) and start over again, and third to do an emergency purchase. We did an emergency purchase," Dhanoa said while adding that "the government took a bold step to buy 36 Rafale jets for IAF". He also said that the cost of 36 Rafale jets was "reasonable and adequate".

The air chief marshal reiterated that the Rafale fighter jets would be a "game changer" once inducted and would be a "booster dose" for the IAF. He said that the Rafale jets come with many capabilities and a very good package along with the aircraft—best weapons, India specific enhancement and longer industrial support commitment. "We have a lot of advantages in the Rafale deal," he asserted.

Raising concerns about the depleting strength of the world's fourth largest air force, Dhanoa said, "The depleting number of fighter jets is an issue. The signing of 83 Tejas, 36 Rafale besides Sukhoi-30 will arrest the drop down from the existing 31 squadrons."

Commenting on the upcoming purchase of the S-400 air defence missile system from Russia, Dhanoa said the Countering Adversaries of America Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) is not going to stand in the way of getting S-400. As the S-400 deal is high on the agenda during 19th India-Russia annual bilateral summit, Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has cut short her foreign visit and will arrive in New Delhi on Wednesday night to take part in the summit on Friday.

"Both Rafale and S-400 deal is a booster deal for the Air Force. Acquisition of Rafale and S-400 would address our depleting squadron strength," he added.

Responding to questions on defence public sector undertaking HAL being left out in the offset obligation contract in 36 Rafale jets, the IAF chief said it is a corporate decision of Dassault. While thanking HAL for providing support during Gaganshakti—IAF's biggest exercise in the decade—Dhanoa mentioned that the defence PSU has been slightly lagging behind the delivery schedule in the recent past.

"There has been delay in delivery schedule in contracts already executed to HAL. There is a three-years delay in the delivery of Sukhoi-30, six-years delay in Jaguar, five-years delay in





