India faces a crucial choice in modernising its air force - but is a cutting-edge American fighter jet the answer



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India's fighter jet battle: US v Russia in the skiesIndia faces a crucial choice in modernising its air force - but is a cutting-edge American fighter jet the answerMany believe that with its fighter squadrons dwindling and China's military growing, India faces a high-stakes choice: splurge on the state-of-the-art but costly F-35 from the US or strengthen defence ties with Russia through local production of its most advanced stealth fighter jet Sukhoi Su-57.

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Integrating a "fifth generation" aircraft into the India air force (IAF) plans - centred on the homegrown Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) and more Rafales - would be challenging, especially without co-production rights. Being developed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the AMCA is India's own stealth fighter.It is unlikely that the F-35 will be offered for co-production to India - any acquisition will likely be a straightforward sale. This is unlikely, among other things, to sit well with Modi's emphasis on making in India and the significant end-user monitoring in the event of an F-35 sale will likely not be welcomed by India either," Mr Tellis told me.

India's challenges with the F-35 are its steep cost, heavy maintenance and operational issues - the jet's availability is around 51% for the US Air Force, according to security expert Stephen Bryen, author of a But many dismiss the Su-57 as a real contender, noting that India exited the decade-long programme to co-produce the jet with Russia in 2018 over disputes on technology transfer, cost-sharing and specifications.

To be sure, India's air force is ageing and short on fighter jet, It operates 31 fighter and combat squadrons - mostly Russian and Soviet-era aircraft - far below the sanctioned 42. A key challenge is finding a long-term replacement for the Sukhoi-30, the IAF's versatile workhorse from Russia. Christopher Clary, a political scientist at thea.s.Stalled since 2019, the Indian government is looking at a transparent and non-controversial procurement process after it faced criticism over the acquisition of 36 Rafales in a government-to-government deal. Five jets are in contention, with Rafale leading as it is already in service with the IAF.