

SSPC Issue Brief

RECALIBRATING INDIA'S **AIRPOWER** STRATEGY *Managing Fighter Squadron Deficits in a Two-Front War Scenario*

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The Issue Brief critically analyzes whether the IAF can realistically replenish or sustain its required squadron strength against its adversaries, Pakistan and China, and how this numerical shortfall impacts operational readiness in a two-front war scenario. It also evaluates the evolving role of force multipliers, technological integration, and strategic doctrine in offsetting quantitative disadvantages. Finally, it considers whether, in the context of modern airpower dynamics, squadron numerical parity remains the decisive factor in any air-combat or if any other alternative evolving strategy and capabilities could effectively bridge the gap.



INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Air Chief Marshal Birender Singh Dhanoa sounded a warning about the Indian Air Force's (IAF) steadily depleting fighter squadron strength. The IAF has long maintained that a minimum of 42 fighter squadrons is essential to effectively engage both of India's primary adversaries, China and Pakistan, simultaneously.¹ Interestingly, the following year, Dhanoa reassured that the IAF had formulated a "Plan B" to counter both fronts even with reduced operational strength.² His successor, Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria, reiterated this confidence in 2020, declaring the IAF's readiness for a two-front war in the immediate aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash.³ A year later, Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing preparedness despite numerical constraints.⁴ Yet, the issue of squadron strength and the feasibility of a credible two-front response continues to loom large over India's air power calculus. Several defence affairs experts argue that the IAF requires at least 50 squadrons, eight more than the sanctioned strength, to maintain a robust deterrent posture. Current projections, however, indicate that at the prevailing rate of attrition, the IAF may be reduced to merely 26 squadrons in the coming years.⁵

The issue brief examines whether the IAF can sustain its required squadron strength against Pakistan and China and how this shortfall affects its readiness for a two-front war. It also assesses how force multipliers, technology, and evolving doctrines can offset numerical disadvantages and redefine India's airpower strategy.

The IAF Fighter Squadron Conundrum

The IAF continues to rely heavily on its fleet of Sukhoi-30MKI multirole air-dominance fighters, formidable 4th-generation aircraft that remain the backbone of India's aerial combat capability. Yet, concerns persist regarding both the quantitative and qualitative adequacy of this fleet. As of 2014, China possessed nearly 400 Su-30 variants compared to India's 272, already tilting the

¹ "IAF: Don't Have the Numbers to Fully Fight Two-Front War," *Indian Express*, March 11, 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/do-not-have-the-numbers-to-fully-fight-two-front-war-iaf/>.

² Kalyan Ray, "IAF Has Plan-B for a Two Front War Scenario Involving Pak and China," *Deccan Herald*, October 5, 2017. <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/iaf-has-plan-b-two-2027744>.

³ "Air Force Is Ready for a Two-Front War: IAF Chief," *ANI News*, October 5, 2020. <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/air-force-is-ready-for-a-two-front-war-iaf-chief20201005152505/>.

⁴ "India Ready to Deal with Any Two-Front Threat Scenario: IAF Chief," *The Times of India*, October 5, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-ready-to-deal-with-any-two-front-threat-scenario-iaf-chief/articleshow/86776731.cms>.

⁵ Anil Chopra, "Showdown in Ladakh – the IAF in a Two Front War," *Air Power Asia*, June 18, 2020. <https://airpowerasia.com/2020/06/18/showdown-in-ladakh-the-iaf-in-a-two-front-war/>.

balance of air superiority.⁶ In 2016, the IAF fielded 14 squadrons of ageing MiG-21 and MiG-27 aircraft, all slated for phase-out by 2024. The remaining nine squadrons consisted of Mirage 2000s, Jaguars, and MiG-29s, primarily belonging to the 3.5- to 4th-generation category.⁷ Although the induction of 36 French-built Rafale fighters marked a significant qualitative boost, experts, including Air Vice Marshal (Retd.) Kapil Kak has underscored the urgent requirement for at least 90 additional Rafale-class aircraft to restore credible deterrence.⁸

Comparative fleet data underscores the magnitude of the challenge. In 2015, the total number of combat-capable aircraft for the Indian Air Force (IAF), the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) stood at approximately 881, 450, and 2,306, respectively. By 2016, these numbers shifted to 803, 451, and 2,307, revealing a loss of nearly 78 aircraft for the IAF during peacetime, a troubling indicator of attrition and delayed replacement. In contrast, both the PAF and PLAAF managed to sustain or nominally increase their operational inventories during the same period, thereby widening the regional airpower gap.⁹ While the reasons for IAF's squadron decline remain outside the public domain, analysts attribute it mainly to aircraft crashes and the gradual retirement of MiG-21/27 variants.¹⁰

As of 2024, the IAF's adequate squadron strength has dropped to around 30 squadrons, a figure expected to decline further as Jaguars and MiG-21/29s are progressively retired before the end of this decade.¹¹ Despite government orders for 180 indigenous Tejas Mk1A fighters, the slow pace of manufacturing and induction has meant that operational gaps will persist well into the 2030s.¹² Forecasts suggest that the IAF will continue to face budgetary, capability, and force-structure constraints, particularly in view of delays plaguing the 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA)

⁶ Ankit Panda, "The Sukhoi-30 MKI: India's Two-Front War Ace?" *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/the-sukhoi-30-mki-indias-two-front-war-ace/>

⁷ Rahul Singh, "Indian Air Force Admits Can't Fight China, Pak at the Same Time," *Hindustan Times*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/indian-air-force-admits-can-t-fight-china-pak-at-the-same-time/story-6iKxf5XUWqkIIwLTwNO0I.html>.

⁸ Rahul Singh, "Army Chief Warns of Two-Front War with China, Pakistan: Is IAF Fighting Fit?" *Hindustan Times*, September 7, 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/army-chief-gen-bipin-rawat-s-warning-of-two-front-war-with-china-pakistan-is-indian-air-force-fighting-fit/story-qVzpCiHhNm6oDHfFlilCoN.html>.

⁹ Abhijnan Rej, "The Sobering Arithmetic of a Two-Front War," *Observer Research Foundation*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-sobering-arithmetic-of-a-two-front-war>

¹⁰ "Flying Coffins": Here's a List of Previous MiG Aircraft Crashes," *The Indian Express*, June 13, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/mig-27-jodhpur-crash-heres-a-list-of-previous-mig-aircraft-crashes-2850234/>

¹¹ Amrita Nayak Dutta, "All about India's Indigenous Fifth-Gen Fighter Jet Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), and Why It Is Important," *The Indian Express*, March 10, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-indigenous-fifth-gen-fighter-jet-amca-9204814/>

¹² Suchet Vir Singh, "India's Fighter Squadron and Helicopter Fleet Conundrum," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-s-fighter-squadron-and-helicopter-fleet-conundrum>.

program. The original objective of reaching 42 squadrons by 2032 now appears increasingly uncertain.¹³

Compounding these challenges, India's planned 5th-generation stealth fighter, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), is unlikely to enter service before 2034.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the PLAAF has been expanding its 4th-generation fleet at an estimated rate of 70 aircraft per year since 2017, suggesting a current inventory of around 850 jets (40 squadrons), potentially reaching 900 aircraft (50 squadrons) by 2025. The induction of roughly 200 J-20 stealth fighters by the end of this decade will further consolidate China's technological and numerical edge. Under such circumstances, the qualitative advantage of India's Su-30MKIs and Rafales will progressively erode.¹⁵

On the western front, the PAF remains dependent mainly on its F-16s, JF-17s, and Mirage variants. Although Pakistan's economic limitations are likely to cap its fleet at 25–26 squadrons in the near term, the combined PAF–PLAAF strength, potentially exceeding 60 squadrons of 4th- and 5th-generation aircraft, poses a formidable challenge. Given present depletion rates, acquisition delays, and funding constraints, the IAF is unlikely to achieve numerical parity with its combined adversaries in the foreseeable future.

Expected Air-Stress in a Two-Front War

The significance of fighter squadron numbers becomes particularly acute in the context of a potential two-front war scenario arising from a possible China–Pakistan collusive threat. The IAF has consistently maintained that it is fully capable of neutralizing the Pakistan Air Force in a single-front engagement while simultaneously deterring the PLAAF along the northern borders.¹⁶ However, strategic analysts and military planners have long debated the sequence and likelihood of escalation in a synchronized two-front conflict.

Most assessments suggest that China is unlikely to intervene in a conflict initiated by Pakistan. Conversely, Pakistan, aware of its inability to defeat India in a one-on-one confrontation, may only

¹³ Arjun Subramaniam, "Pushing Boundaries: Can the Indian Military Transform?" *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, p.88 June 14, 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jun/14/2003241440/-1/-1/1/01%20SUBRAMANIAM_FEATURE.PDF/01%20SUBRAMANIAM_FEATURE.PDF.

¹⁴ Sakshi Tiwari, "AMCA: India's 5th-Gen Fighter May Get Private Sector Boost to Catch-up with China Which Plans 1000 J-20s, 6th-Gen Jets by 2034." *Eurasian Times*, July 14, 2024. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/chinas-6th-gen-fighter-to-be-operational/>.

¹⁵ Arjun Subramaniam, "Airpower: A Game Changer in an India- China Limited Conflict," *ETHER: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* Vol. 2, No. 4, p.56, 2023 [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AEtherJournal/Journals/Volume-2 Number-4/Subramaniam.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AEtherJournal/Journals/Volume-2%20Number-4/Subramaniam.pdf).

¹⁶ Dan Blumenthal, "India Prepares for a Two-Front War," *American Enterprise Institute*, March 1, 2010. <https://www.aei.org/articles/india-prepares-for-a-two-front-war/>.

enter the fray if China initiates hostilities first.¹⁷ In such a China-led conflict, Pakistan is expected to provide logistical and limited operational support, notably through the Gilgit–Baltistan and Skardu airfields, located at elevations of approximately 5,000 and 7,000 feet, respectively. The PLAAF's demonstrated ability to operate from high-altitude bases in Tibet and Xinjiang enhances the strategic utility of these airfields, allowing for coordinated but theatre-specific operations.¹⁸

Former Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane has assessed that the maximum operational collusion between Pakistan and China would likely manifest around the Siachen Glacier. A conflict of this nature would likely unfold across three principal theatres: the western sector (dominated by the PAF), the northern and northeastern sectors (led by the PLAAF), and the Siachen–Ladakh corridor, where joint operations could occur.¹⁹ It is improbable that the PAF would project air power deep into the Tibetan plateau to support the PLAAF; however, the PLAAF could extend limited operations toward Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) or western Ladakh, should its campaign objectives demand so. From a maritime perspective, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) presents fewer challenges. The Pakistan Navy lacks carrier-borne aviation capabilities, significantly restricting PAF operations along India's western coastline. Meanwhile, Chinese carrier groups, although expanding, would face operational chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait, keeping their carrier-borne aircraft far from India's mainland during the initial stages of a conflict.

In the event of a coordinated two-front war, it is estimated that China and Pakistan could collectively deploy around 45–50 fighter squadrons, with approximately 21 from the PLAAF and 24–25 from the PAF directed toward Indian fronts.²⁰ By 2025, the PLAAF is projected to field nearly 1,000 fourth-generation aircraft, equivalent to approximately 55 squadrons, capable of engaging India across multiple sectors.²¹ Such an alignment of air assets would pose immense stress on IAF resources, compelling a strategic shift toward mountain warfare air operations, rapid dispersal tactics, and enhanced air defence and surveillance integration along the Himalayan frontiers and particularly the Arunachal–LAC axis.

¹⁷ Deepak Kapoor, "Challenge of a Two Front Threat," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* Vol.146, No. 603, 2016, pp. 32–33, <https://usiofindia.org/pdf/Jan%20-Mar%202016-43-49.pdf>.

¹⁸ VK Singh and Jagatbir Singh, "The China-Pakistan Collusive Threat," *United Service Institution of India*, Vol. 3, 2021. Available at <https://www.usiofindia.org/publications.php?category=3>

¹⁹ "India Should Be Prepared for a Two-Front War with China & Pakistan - Army Chief," *Eurasian Times*, June 29, 2020. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/two-front-war-with-china-pakistan-india/>

²⁰ Ankit Panda, "The Sukhoi-30 MKI: India's Two-Front War Ace?" *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/the-sukhoi-30-mki-indias-two-front-war-ace/>

²¹ P.K. Mehra, "Future Shape, Size and Role of Indian Air Force," *AIR POWER Journal* 4, No.1, p.28, 2009, <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PK-Mehra.pdf>.

Limitations of the Current Strategy

Despite the encouraging assessments of the IAF's operational readiness, demonstrated most prominently during Exercise Gagan Shakti (April 2018), and the increasing reliance on force multipliers, severe structural and capability limitations persist. As in the case of the PLAAF, altitude and distance remain persistent challenges for the IAF in high-mountain warfare environments. The 1999 Kargil War illustrated how such geographic constraints can restrict aircraft performance, payload, and sortie rates.²² While conditions in the Arunachal sector are somewhat more favourable than the western Himalayas, the PLAAF can exert significant pressure in this theatre, particularly as the capture or control of Arunachal Pradesh remains a declared military objective for China.

Although it is unlikely that China would commit its entire air fleet to an India-specific conflict, the key dilemma for Indian planners lies in determining the proportion of forces PLAAF would actually deploy. The rapid pace of PLAAF modernization, primarily driven by competition with the United States, Japan, and to a lesser extent Russia, nonetheless translates into an expanding pool of advanced 4th- and 5th-generation aircraft available for regional contingencies.²³ Even a limited diversion of these assets could decisively shift the local air balance.

In a wartime scenario, the PLAAF is expected to field a superior package of 4th-plus and 5th-generation fighters, armed with long-range air-to-air missiles and advanced radar systems. Furthermore, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), estimated to possess over 2,500 surface-to-surface missiles of varying ranges and circular error probability (CEP), could unleash devastating first-wave strikes on IAF forward air bases, command-and-control (C2) hubs, and logistical nodes.²⁴ While Exercise Gagan Shakti showcased IAF's readiness and large-scale sortie generation, it was a peacetime exercise conducted with a two-year preparation window. A real-time conflict would offer no such luxury, and in such a scenario, the numerical advantage and pre-emption potential would overwhelmingly favour China.²⁵

²² Amit Ranjan Giri, "India's Two-Front War: Myths and IAFs' Capability to Fight," *Financial Express*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-indias-two-front-war-myths-and-iafs-capability-to-fight-1983816/>

²³ Vasabjit Banerjee and Prashant Hosur Suhas, "Indian Air Strategy after Balakot: The China Factor," *The Diplomat*, March 2, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/indian-air-strategy-after-balakot-the-china-factor/>

²⁴ Amit Ranjan Giri, "India's Two-Front War: Myths and IAFs' Capability to Fight," *Financial Express*, June 7, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-indias-two-front-war-myths-and-iafs-capability-to-fight-1983816/>

²⁵ Sushant Singh, "The Challenge of a Two-Front War: India's China-Pakistan Dilemma," *Stimson Center*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.stimson.org/2021/the-challenge-of-a-two-front-war-indias-china-pakistan-dilemma/>

India presently lacks an effective countermeasure to blunt an opening PLARF strike. During Operation Gagan Shakti, the IAF successfully executed over 9,000 combat sorties, yet in an actual war, that figure could double or even triple, stretching both manpower and equipment to their absolute limits. The IAF also faces the challenge of countering the J-20 stealth fighters, equipped with PL-series air-to-air missiles boasting ranges of 180 kilometres and beyond. The anticipated PL-21 missile, expected to reach 400 kilometres, will further expand the PLAAF's engagement envelope. Although aircraft such as the Tejas and Su-30MKI performed commendably during exercises, they are yet to be tested under dense, high-altitude air-defence environments akin to those expected in Tibet and the LAC sectors.

While the IAF continues to bank on force multipliers, including Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) platforms, aerial refuellers, and strategic transport aircraft, their acquisition and availability remain limited and delayed. Moreover, these high-value assets are themselves vulnerable to long-range beyond-visual-range (BVR) and within-visual-range (WVR) missile strikes, raising serious concerns about their survivability. Modern airpower theory emphasizes the interdependence of air mobility, air control, precision attack, and situational awareness; the degradation of any one of these components can critically undermine the others.

Defence experts have also questioned the IAF's long-standing reluctance to induct strategic bombers, such as the Tupolev Tu-22M3 or Tu-160, which Russia reportedly offered during the 1990s.²⁶ In contrast, the PLAAF currently operates five to six squadrons of H-6 bombers, each capable of conducting standoff strikes at about 250–300 kilometres.²⁷ These missiles pose a direct threat to key Indian military targets such as Tawang, Tezpur, Guwahati, and Bagdogra airbases.²⁸ Modern conflicts, as demonstrated in the Russia–Ukraine war, increasingly favour long-range kinetic and precision strike operations, where bomber fleets play a decisive role. Other force-multiplier technologies, including electronic warfare (EW) systems, electronic and communications intelligence (ELINT/COMINT) platforms, directed-energy weapons (DEWs), stealth systems, network-centric operations, unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), and manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) frameworks, remain in the conceptual or

²⁶ Bharat Karnad, "Two-Front War: A Convenient Fiction," *Security Wise* blog, January 26, 2020. <https://bharatkarnad.com/2020/01/26/two-front-war-a-convenient-fiction/>

²⁷ Arjun Subramaniam, "Pushing Boundaries: Can the Indian Military Transform?," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, p.88 June 14, 2023. https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jun/14/2003241440/-1/-1/1/01%20SUBRAMANIAM_FEATURE.PDF/01%20SUBRAMANIAM_FEATURE.PDF

²⁸ Vivek Kapur, "IAF Equipment and Force Structure Requirements to Meet External Threats 2032." *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 65-94, 2014, https://idsa.in/system/files/8_1_2014_IAFEquipmentandForceStructureRequirementst.pdf.

developmental stages in India.²⁹ Given this evolving battlespace, the two-front war doctrine requires urgent modification, extending beyond conventional kinetic combat to encompass the space, cyber, electromagnetic, information, and artificial intelligence (AI) domains, where future air warfare will increasingly be decided.³⁰

Potential Recalibrated Strategy with Limited Squadrons

Given current constraints on squadron strength, the IAF should devise a strategy that prioritises unit-level firepower rather than pure platform counts. The fundamental combat unit of a squadron is the fighter aircraft itself: its combat value is determined not only by airframe attributes (radar, stealth, comms, EW suites) but, critically, by the quality and quantity of payloads and sensors it can carry. A highly lethal individual aircraft significantly enhances the combat effectiveness of its entire squadron; this principle of “quality over quantity” is gaining traction in modern airpower thinking.

IAF doctrine identifies aerospace power characteristics as reach, flexibility, mobility, responsiveness, offensive lethality, and trans-domain capability, most of which map directly onto fighter capabilities.³¹ Wartime missions (suppression and destruction of enemy air defences (SEAD/DEAD), airfield attacks, fighter sweeps, interception, combat air patrol (CAP), air interdiction, and battlefield air strikes (BAS) all depend on payload mix and employment of precision guided munitions (PGMs), anti-radiation weapons, long-range AAMs, and standoff munitions. Thus, the basic unit requirement for meeting these objectives is clear: robust payloads and advanced sensors per aircraft.³²

Accordingly, the IAF must look beyond raw aircraft numbers and accelerate force-multiplying investments: UCAVs, long-range missiles, resilient C2 nodes, and integrated networking.³³ Equally important is sortie generation rate, which refers to the number of sorties flown per aircraft per unit of time. High serviceability, rapid turnarounds, distributed basing, and resilient logistics are essential to sustain tempo. Where the IAF can impose a higher attrition rate on the adversary,

²⁹ PK Mehra, “Future Shape, Size and Role of Indian Air Force.” *Air Power Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2009, pp. 31-36, <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PK-Mehra.pdf>

³⁰ Rakesh Sharma, “Redefining Two-Front War.” *Vivekanand International Foundation*, November 3, 2020. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2020/november/03/redefining-two-front-war>.

³¹ “Doctrine of the Indian Air Force,” *Indian Air Force*, p.5, February 2022. <https://indianairforce.nic.in/Resources/pdf/header/latest-Doctrine-22-Feb.pdf>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Swaim P. Singh, “India’s Response to China-Pakistan Collusivity.” *Air Power Journal* Vol. 18, No. 3, p.65, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Ch-3-Swaim-Prakash-Singh.pdf>.

fewer platforms can still achieve strategic effect.³⁴ In a single-front conflict, the IAF can typically generate three to five sorties per day against the PAF (exceeding PAF capacity);³⁵ this rate may fall to 1.5 to 2.5 sorties in a two-front scenario. By contrast, PLAAF concentrations (e.g., Chengdu MR) are estimated to support sortie generation on the order of 2,000 sorties, underscoring the scale of the challenge.³⁶ To match such pressure, the IAF should plan to generate ~2,000 effective sorties against the PLAAF. An effective sortie must involve the capability to shoot down adversary fighters, AWACS/AEW&C platforms, and C4ISR aircraft; consequently, platform payload configurations should emphasize PGMs, anti-radiation munitions, and long-range (including passive-homing/hypersonic) air-to-air missiles to attrit enemy sensors and support assets.

Recent operational claims highlight the transformative impact of very-long-range AAMs. Reported engagements, such as a Su-35S employing an R-37M to down a MiG-29 at an extraordinary range, demonstrate how missiles with ranges of up to ~300 km can alter tactics and engagement geometry.³⁷ Increasing warhead mass (e.g., to 80–100 kg) and extending seeker and propulsion performance would magnify lethality. To carry more and heavier payloads, future fighters require additional hardpoints and higher-thrust engines; the planned LCA-Mk2 must therefore be paired with an engine capable of sustaining higher payload and performance margins. Fighters should also be able to field advanced BVR missiles that combine hypersonic speed, maneuverability, jamming resistance, stealth, sophisticated seekers, and air-breathing propulsion.

Air-to-air missiles have long reduced the role of classic dogfighting. Historical examples, such as the 1981 F-14 Phoenix engagements, demonstrate that the employment of long-range missiles, combined with high-quality sensors and effective tactics, can yield significant results.³⁸ Achieving this, however, requires intensive, mission-realistic training so that pilots can secure high kill probabilities with fewer missiles and sorties. Doctrine should therefore shift from area-wide mass strikes toward selective, high-value targeting and localized dominance.³⁹

³⁴ Vivek Kapur, "IAF Equipment and Force Structure Requirements to Meet External Threats, 2032," *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 67, 2014, https://idsa.in/system/files/8_1_2014_IAFEquipmentandForceStructureRequirementst.pdf.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 69

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 71-72

³⁷ "New Record: A Su-35S Aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces Shot down a Ukrainian MiG-29 Fighter at a Distance of More than 200 Km" *Top War*, July 29, 2024. <https://en.topwar.ru/247186-novyy-rekord-samolet-su-35s-vks-rossii-sbil-ukrainskij-istrebitel-mig-29-na-distancii-bolee-200-km.html>.

³⁸ Kaveh Farrokh. "How an Iranian F-14 Tomcat Destroyed 3 MiG Fighters with a Single Missile." *Kaveh Farrokh* (blog), 2018. <https://www.kavehfarrokh.com/news/how-an-iranian-f-14-tomcat-destroyed-3-mig-fighters-with-a-single-missile/>

³⁹ Arjun Subramaniam, "Airpower: A Game Changer in an India- China Limited Conflict." *ETHER: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower*, Vol. 2, No. 4, p.56, 2023, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AEtherJournal/Journals/Volume-2_Number-4/Subramaniam.pdf

The PLAAF will continue to refine ground-based air-defence, network-centric operations, and BVR tactics, often in collaboration with partners such as Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the IAF must prioritise the protection of its force multipliers (AWACS, tankers, AEW&C, and C2 nodes) through active protection measures, including signature emission control, deception and spoofing, layered EW suites, and distributed employment. Building organic EW/ELINT/COMINT capabilities, investing in directed-energy weapons and cyber-resilience as they mature, and integrating manned–unmanned teaming will be central to preserving situational awareness and command integrity in high-intensity combat.

CONCLUSION

Given the current limitations in squadron strength and resource shortages, the IAF needs to reorient its strategic priorities. Instead of focusing solely on matching the PLAAF and PAF in fleet size or squadron counts, the emphasis should shift to enhancing qualitative advantages through more lethal payloads, advanced sensors, and integrated countermeasures. In any potential two-front conflict, the outcome will depend not just on the number of aircraft in the air, but on the precision, survivability, and technological sophistication of each platform.

The future of air warfare will depend on the quality and effectiveness of payloads, sensors, counter-payloads, and counter-sensor systems, as well as resilient command, control, and communication networks. A smaller yet technologically advanced and operationally agile IAF can achieve air dominance, as long as its platforms, munitions, and networks feature cutting-edge lethality and adaptability.



⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 59

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The views expressed in this article are personal.

*Image Source: Indian Air Force Web portal:
<https://indianairforce.nic.in/>*

Image 1: Tejas LCA

Image 2: Rafale and Su-30-MKI

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