

### 3. India's fighter jet conundrum

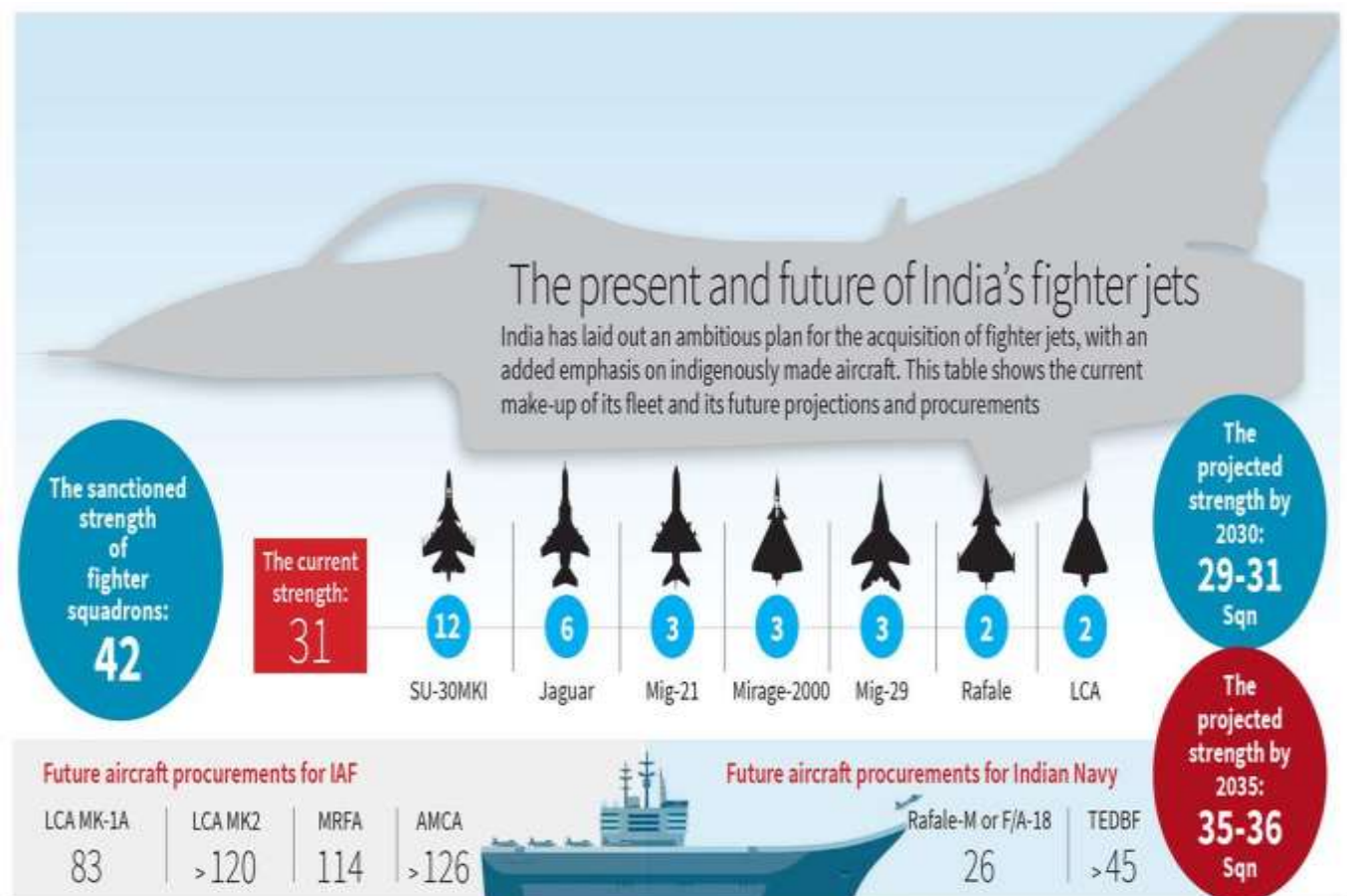
**Prelims Syllabus:** Governance

**Mains Syllabus:** GS-III Internal Security; Various Security forces and agencies and their mandate

#### Why in News?

- A representative of the Indian Air Force (IAF) informed the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence that the IAF at present has 31 fighter squadrons against the sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons and the numbers are not expected to increase in the next 10 years.

#### Phase-outs and orders:



- Various existing squadrons out of the 31 squadrons present also are expected to be phased out in the coming years, which include three Mig-21 squadrons (to be phased by 2025) and also the Jaguars, Mirage-2000s and MIG-29s (phase-out will be started by the end of the decade).
- By the early 2040s, when most of the above-mentioned squadrons would be phased out, a few of the earlier batches of SU-30s will also start their phase-out exercise.

- An agreement to procure 12 additional SU-30MKIs in order to replace the ones lost in accidents and a deal to procure 21 additional MIG-29s from Russia have been delayed due to the Russia-Ukraine war.
- India has an ambitious plan for the acquisition of over 500 fighter jets which majorly consists of indigenously designed and manufactured aircraft.
- However, these are still at various stages of development and their timely progress and delivery are crucial for IAF.
- Further, the progress and timely delivery of 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) and 83 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA)-MK1A and LCA-MK2 will ensure that the IAF would have 35 to 36 squadrons by the middle of the next decade and arrest the fall in the number of squadrons on account of various phase-out exercises.

#### **The status of IAF's indigenous fighter ecosystem:**

- Highlighting the importance of indigenisation, the IAF has stated that if we keep procuring from the open market in the world, we will never become self-reliant and thus there exists a need to provide impetus to our domestic industry which requires support and the IAF is committed towards that.
- The progress and deliveries of LCA, which was seen as a replacement for Mig-21s, have been witnessing a series of delays.
- The LCA got its Initial Operation Clearance (IOC) in December 2013 whereas the Final Operational Clearance (FOC) was given only in February 2019.
- In February 2020, the Defence Ministry finalised a ₹48,000 crore agreement with HAL for the procurement of 83 LCA-MK1A, 20 years after their first flight. According to HAL officials, these aircraft will be delivered starting in February 2024.
- HAL has also set up a third LCA assembly line in order to increase the production rate.
- Additionally, LCA-MK2 which is a larger aircraft with better capabilities also was ordered by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in September 2022 at a total cost of ₹9000 crores.
- The LCA-MK2 is similar to the Mirage-2000 with respect to its capabilities and is expected to be ready for production by 2027.
- Another key procurement programme is that of the Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA), which is a reincarnation of the older Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA).

- The Request for Information (RFI) was provided in 2007. However, the emergency procurement of 36 Rafale jets under a €7.87 billion deal with France, sidelined the procurement plans of MRFA.
- The RFI for 114 MRFA was finally issued in April 2019 to global aircraft manufacturers but there has been no progress and the project is yet to receive the Acceptance of Necessity (AoN).
- Further, the fifth generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) is wasting the sanctions of the CSS.
- The estimated project cost of the development of AMCA would be around ₹15,000 crores and would take 10 years for the development post sanction.
- There are also discussions over the inclusion of the Twin Engine Deck Based Fighter (TEDBF) for the Indian Navy's aircraft carriers.
- The TEDBF is expected to take its first flight by 2026 and be ready for production by 2031.

