



India's F-35 Conundrum: Strategic and Economic Implications of a US Offer

During a joint press conference in Washington, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then-US President Donald Trump discussed a significant development in defence relations. Trump offered India the latest version of the stealth fighter aircraft, the F-35. This aircraft is widely considered the most advanced and technologically sophisticated fighter in the US arsenal, with no other fifth-generation combat aircraft matching its capabilities. Given the sensitivity surrounding the F-35 program, Trump's public offer suggests that India had already expressed some level of interest in acquiring these aircraft.

The US decision to extend this offer is particularly intriguing, as the F-35 has been sold only to Washington's closest allies, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, and South Korea. Several other countries, such as Canada, Greece, Poland, Germany, and Finland, are also expected to operate the aircraft in the future. However, the US had previously blocked Türkiye from acquiring 100 F-35 aircraft due to its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defence system. At the time, the American defence establishment was concerned that the S-400's radar capabilities could compromise the stealth technology of the F-35, potentially allowing Russia to gain access to its classified data.

Interestingly, India also possesses the S-400 air defence system, yet the US has not imposed the same restrictions on India as it did on Türkiye. This apparent inconsistency led to criticism from the Turkish press, with many accusing the US of hypocrisy. However, the US defence establishment likely

conducted a thorough strategic and economic assessment before Trump publicly extended the F-35 offer to India.

From a strategic perspective, Türkiye, as a NATO member, is subject to strict alliance rules, and its pivot toward Russia for a major defence acquisition was viewed with suspicion by both the US and other NATO allies. ***The fundamental question was why Türkiye would purchase an air defence system from Russia, a country considered a primary adversary to NATO.*** Apparently the new air defence system was supposed to be providing protection from the very country that was selling the system. While Türkiye could have acquired the US-made Patriot missile system, its decision to opt for the S-400 remains somewhat unclear.

In 2014 Russian forces in an audacious move under the orders of its President Vladimir Putin had occupied Crimea from Ukraine. A general sense of insecurity had spread in the European capitals and Türkiye was no exception. Did the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan feel that getting a Russian missile system was like buying insurance against any future Russian aggression?

We will never know for sure the real reasons for the Turkish choice.

India, on the other hand, is not a NATO member but plays a crucial role as a strategic counterbalance to China, the United States' primary geopolitical rival. The US views India as a key ally in curbing China's expansionist ambitions, both militarily and economically. Given the deepening defence ties between the two nations, offering India the F-35 is a logical step in strengthening this partnership.

From an economic standpoint, Türkiye has developed a robust domestic defence industry over the past few decades, reducing its reliance on foreign defence equipment. In contrast, India still depends significantly on military imports for high-tech defence platforms. This reliance presents a major opportunity for the US defence industry. According to the Global Firepower Index, India ranks as the fourth most powerful military in the world and maintains the largest standing army. A US Congressional Research Service report estimates that India will require nearly \$200 billion worth of new defence acquisitions over the next decade.

Although India has traditionally sourced most of its military equipment from Russia, it has also begun diversifying its suppliers, incorporating French, Israeli, and American defence systems. Since 2008, the US has sold over \$20 billion worth of military hardware to India. ***The open declaration of a potential F-35 sale aligns with Washington's broader economic and strategic objectives.***

There's another dimension to this issue. While India is exploring options to fill critical gaps in the Indian Air Force's arsenal—particularly the absence of a fifth-generation combat aircraft—most Indian think tanks advise against purchasing the F-35. Their primary concern is its exorbitant cost, which would be difficult to sustain given India's constrained defence budget. Even Elon Musk has echoed these concerns, expressing strong criticism of the entire F-35 program for the US Air Force.

But that's a different discussion altogether.