

Doors opened to pvt sector to develop 5th gen fighters

Rajat.Pandit@timesofindia.com

New Delhi: India has finalised a new 'programme execution model' for the indigenous fifth-generation stealth fighter called the advanced medium combat aircraft (AMCA), under which private firms can also bid for the project along with defence PSU Hindustan Aeronautics (HAL).

The new model approved by defence minister **Rajnath Singh**, which aims to accelerate prototype development and induction of the AMCA through a 'robust' domestic aerospace industrial ecosystem, marks a radical departure from the country's long-standing policy of fighter production being solely the preserve of HAL.



The defence ministry expects HAL, which has been facing major flak for the huge delay in production of the fourth-generation Tejas Mark-1A jets, to bid for the AMCA project in partnership with one or more private players, officials told **TOI**.

The defence PSU, after all, "already has its hands full" with the planned production of 180 Tejas Mark-1A jets for around Rs1.2 lakh crore, which is slated to be followed by another 108 4.5-generation Tejas Mark-2 jets, apart from several other aircraft and helicopter projects.

"Private companies can also bid for the AMCA project independently, or in a joint venture with a foreign OEM (original equipment manufacturer), or as a consortium. It provides

equal opportunities to both private and public sectors on a competitive basis. The bidder, of course, should be an Indian company compliant with domestic laws and regulations," an official said.

"It's an important step towards harnessing indigenous expertise, capability and capacity to produce the twin-engine AMCA prototype. There will be a competition. It will not be handed over to HAL on a nomination basis," he added.

Towards this end, the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) of DRDO, which is entrusted with designing and developing the 25-tonne AMCA, will soon issue an expression of interest (EoI) for its development phase through industry partnership. The move to accelerate the



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AMCA project comes at a time when Pakistan is on course to acquire at least 40 J-35A fifth-generation jets from China, which is now even flaunting sixth-generation prototypes with tailless airframes like

Chengdu J-36 and Shenyang J-50. The IAF meanwhile, is grappling with just 30 fighter squadrons (each has 16-18 jets) when 42.5 are authorised. At least eight more squadrons are slated for retirement over the

next 10 years.

The PM-led cabinet committee on security in March last year had cleared the full-scale engineering development of five AMCA prototypes, along with a structural test specimen, extensive flight testing and certification, by ADA at an initial cost of over Rs15,000 crore.

As per existing timelines, the AMCA with the requisite thrust-to-weight ratio, advanced sensor fusion and stealth features like an internal weapons bay and 'serpentine air-intake' will be ready for production only by 2035.

The IAF plans to induct seven squadrons (126 jets) of the expensive AMCA, which will also have AI-powered electronic pilot systems, netcentric warfare systems, integrated vehicle health management and the like.