

# France's sale of Rafale jets to India stokes Indo-Pakistani war tensions

Senthooran Ravee  
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France's decision to sell 36 nuclear-capable Rafale fighters to India is a reckless act that is stoking the danger of war in South Asia and globally.

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, signed the contract for the €7.75 billion (US \$ 8.7 billion) Rafale deal in New Delhi on September 23 in the midst of a mounting war crisis between India and its arch-rival Pakistan.

This crisis has since escalated, with India carrying out military strikes inside Pakistan on the night of September 28-29 that it boasts inflicted "heavy casualties." The strikes, the first India has publicly admitted to carrying out inside Pakistan in more than four decades, have pushed South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states to the brink of war.

The Rafale deal is one of India's largest-ever arms purchases and was the subject of protracted and at times testy negotiations between Paris and New Delhi stretching over several years. That said, it is all but certain that India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government decided to accelerate finalizing the deal, or at least its announcement and the formal contract signing, to send a bellicose message to Pakistan.

The Indian government announced the impending signing of the Rafale contracts on September 21 as it was elaborating plans with the military, intelligence services and diplomatic corps over how to "punish" Pakistan for the attack three days before on the military base at Uri, in Indian-held Kashmir.

Without so much as a cursory investigation, the BJP government blamed the Uri attack on Pakistan and vowed that it would avenge the 18 Indian soldiers who died in it.

The significance of the Rafale purchase was underscored by the subhead the *Indian Express* gave to

its article announcing the September 23 contract signing: "India is keen on inducting the Rafale fighter jets in the Indian Air Force for their strategic role to deliver nuclear weapons."

The fighter jet's manufacturer, Dassault Aviation, markets it as being capable of carrying out a wide range of short and long-range missions, including ground and sea attacks, reconnaissance, high-accuracy strikes and—most significantly—nuclear strikes.

For their part, Indian officials are openly boasting about the boost the induction of the Rafale fighters will provide to India's nuclear strike capabilities against both Pakistan and China.

"The French Air Force, *L'Armée de l'Air*, is shifting from Mirages to Rafales for its nuclear strike role this year," said an Indian defence official. "They have already started the process, and although our nuclear delivery systems are different from theirs, it does tell us that the Rafale is suited for that task."

Based on information fed it by the military, the *Indian Express* carried an article Monday titled "India's Rafale deal is leaving China rattled: Here's why." The article noted that the Rafales India is purchasing will come equipped with "Beyond Visual Range Meteor Missiles." This will allow them to shoot missiles at a 150 kilometer distance and without even entering enemy territory.

In addition to meeting with his Indian counterpart, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian spent an hour in discussion with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At the conclusion of their talks, Le Drian hailed the arms deal as "an historic decision that opens a new chapter in our relations," while Modi replied, "The partnership between France and India was advancing at a walking pace. Now it will proceed at the speed of a Rafale."

The agreement calls for India and France to collaborate closely in the construction of the fighter jets, but New Delhi apparently did not succeed in securing large-scale technology transfers.

Half of the deal's value is in contracts for missiles and spare parts to keep the Rafale jets running for the next 40 years without any supply shortages. Safran, Thales, and other major French companies will participate in making key parts for the jets.

The vast sums to be spent on fighter-bombers—that could deliver nuclear destruction to millions, even tens of millions, of people—are all the more obscene given the poverty facing broad masses of workers and rural toilers in India. UN statistics show that 270 million Indians, or roughly 22 percent of the country's 1.2 billion population, lived below the official poverty line of \$1.25 per day in 2012. Child labor involves tens of millions of Indian children, while Indian villages lack proper road and sanitary infrastructure and in some cases even electricity.

The signing of the Rafale deal is the product of mounting geostrategic tensions in Asia in the context of the US "Pivot to Asia," which is aimed at strategically isolating and preparing for war against China.

Under Modi, India has integrated itself ever more deeply into the US military-strategic offensive against China, while seeking to assert itself as South Asia's regional hegemon and a leading Indian Ocean power.

Modi's government has made a series of provocative moves against Beijing. It has increased India's military presence on its border with China, supported the US' provocative campaign against China over the South China Sea, and in late August signed an agreement with Washington that allows the US military to use Indian bases for refueling, resupply, and relaxation.

This is now cutting across India's ties with Russia, one of its most important and longstanding strategic partners and traditionally its principal weapons supplier. India and Russia, or before 1991 the Soviet Union, pursued broad military and commercial ties after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, into rival communal bourgeois states, an explicitly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

During the Cold War, India signed a "treaty of friendship" with the Soviet Union in 1971 and depended on it for most of its planes and other advanced weaponry.

However, as India has aligned itself with US imperialism, Russia has moved into ever closer strategic alignment with China, as both countries are threatened with war by the United States—over Syria, Ukraine, the South China Sea, or other flashpoints. Under these conditions, India has become increasingly wary about relying on Russia as its principal source of high-tech weaponry, fearing it might suddenly become unavailable if a war erupted.

As has often happened in the past, France has sought to profit from such tensions and to sell arms by presenting itself as a more reliable military partner, more closely aligned with Indian interests.

Much of the profits to be made from the Rafale deal will go to the principal shareholder of Dassault Aviation, Serge Dassault, whose fortune of €20 billion makes him France's fifth-richest individual.



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