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India Buys French Fighter Jets—With a Whopping Pricetag

Rafale fighters are not cheap. At all.

By Kyle Mizokami
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India has agreed to buy a slew of advanced fighter jets from France. The deal, worth \$8.8 billion, will provide India with 36 Rafale multi-role fighters for a staggering average cost of \$244 million each.

The Dassault Rafale was conceived in the early 1980s to be one multi-role fighter that could replace six different fighter and attack aircraft. The plane is almost completely French, with fuselage, avionics, engines and weapons all made in that country. Rafales have flown in combat in Afghanistan, Libya, Mali and Iraq. France operates 140 Rafales including the Rafale M, a navy version of the fighter featuring strengthened landing gear and a tail hook for use on aircraft carriers.

Although relatively small compared to planes like the Eurofighter Typhoon and F-22 Raptor, Rafale packs a powerful punch. Twelve wing-mounted hard points can carry a combination of air-to-air missiles, air-to-ground missiles, sensors, and drop tanks. Despite the fact that the Rafale is now a 30-year-old design, upgrades such as the RBE2 AA active electronic scanning array (AESA) radar, Damocles targeting pod, Meteor air-to-air missiles, and SCALP cruise missiles have kept the design competitive with other so-called "4+ generation" fighters.

Still, \$244 million per aircraft is a lot of money. Why does Rafale cost so much? Exchange rates almost certainly play a role. And in addition to the plane itself, there's also a need for support and maintenance equipment and munitions. Part of the problem with Rafale is that aside from Paveway laser-guided bombs, it uses mostly French weapons that are incompatible with the rest of India's stockpile.

India is only the third international customer for Rafale. While the fighter has been on the market for decades, Rafale's first overseas sale happened just recently when Qatar bought 24 planes and Egypt followed shortly thereafter. Rafale will be a strong candidate to replace Canada's aging F/A-18 Hornet fighters when those need to retire.