

Rafale's Great Amount of Orders Might Put Jakarta on Alert

By

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Introduction

In 2022, Indonesia made a huge amount of acquisition from French aerospace company, Dassault Aviation, by ordering 42 Rafale fighter jets to strengthen its air power.¹ The Rafale is expected to replace the Hawk 100/200 aircraft stationed at Squadron 12 of Roesmin Nurjadin Air Force Base, Pekanbaru, Riau.²

Despite the fact that Hawk aircraft are still in relatively safe condition to operate—according to research in relation to the Fatigue Index (FI)³—Hawk 100/200 specifications will certainly be inferior compared to the latest generation of fighter jets. In addition to the development of advanced combat specifications, engine parts for these British-made aircraft have become quite hard to find, which makes maintenance and repair costs more expensive.

Table 1. List of Indonesia's Fighter Jet

No.	Fighter Jet Type	Quantity	Stationed
1.	F-16 Fighting Falcon	33	Roesmin Nurjadin Air Force Base and Iswahjudi Air Force Base
2.	Su-27SKM Flanker B	16	Sultan Hassanudin Air Force Base and Iswahjudi Air Force Base
3.	Su-30MK2 Flanker		
4.	EMB-314 Super Tucano	13	Abdul Rahman Saleh Air Force Base
5.	Hawk Mk109*	7	Supadio Air Force Base and Roesmin Nurjadin Air Force Base
6.	Hawk Mk209*	22	
7.	T-50i Golden Eagle	19, 6 planned	Iswahjudi Air Force Base



8.	Dassault Rafale	42	<i>Projected to be stationed at Roesmin Nurjadin Air Force Base</i>
9.	F-15EX Eagle II**	24	Not yet decided
10.	KF-X Boramae***	-	

*Will be replaced by Dassault Rafale

**Pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Ministry of Defense and The Boeing Company

***Currently in research and development process between Indonesia and the Republic of Korea

Sources: compiled by author from various sources

Why French Manufacturer?

The procurement of fighter jets by sealing the deal with France is considered suitable, considering France's strategic position by standing between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This position is favorable for Indonesia in avoiding rising tension in the Indo-Pacific. The prospect of bilateral cooperation between the two countries is also a motivating factor, especially since Indonesia and France already signed a Letter of Intent on cooperation on strategic defense equipment, specifically mentioning Dassault Rafale as one of Indonesia's interests in the main weaponry system.⁴

Including the Rafale, Indonesia will operate fighter jets from five different countries, the United States, Russia, Brazil, the Republic of Korea and France. This diversification measure will certainly minimize Indonesia's dependence on one country for all matters related to aircraft operations. On the other hand, it will also increase the complexity for the user—in this case the Air Force—to carry out maintenance and treatment of fighter aircraft.

Earlier this year, Indonesia officially completed the three stages of the purchasing contract. The Air Force will receive six Rafale fighter jets, scheduled to be delivered in 2026 as the first batch and 18 each in the second and third batches, respectively.⁵ If we look at the trend, Rafale is quite popular because other than Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt are also acquiring the 4.5 generation fighter jet. Apart from UAE and Egypt, whose purchases are currently at the ordering stage, India and Qatar are also still awaiting the arrival of their orders.





While the specifications are considered quite competitive as they are better than the fourth generation fighter jet, there are concerns over the procurement of Rafale. As of 31 December 2023, Dassault received a spike of 211 Rafale orders, compared to 164 in the previous year.⁶ The French manufacturer seemed to be overwhelmed as last year they aimed to complete 15 aircraft; however, in the end, they only managed to complete 13 units. Although the company promised to increase its production capacity,⁷ moving forward, this issue should still be an alert for Indonesia.

Strengthening Air Power is a Pressing Need for Indonesia

Indonesia cannot afford any delays in the procurement of the Rafale since Indonesia's air combat readiness urgently needs to be strengthened. Besides the aging fighter jet, the escalation in the South China Sea requires Indonesia to be on guard even though Indonesia itself is not acting as a claimant country. The government's decision to postpone the acquisition plan of 12 units of Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets from Qatar due to budget constraints also makes it more complicated.⁸

Furthermore, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) also need to be aware that their Sukhoi fighter jets stationed in Squadron 11 (Sultan Hasanuddin Air Force Base, Makassar) and Squadron 14 (Iswahjudi Air Force Base, Magetan) are feared to have issues in the maintenance and repair process due to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

Along with the Navy and Army, the Air Force also faced a typical problem, which is limited defence budget. Indonesia's defence budget accounts for only 0.7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With a vast area to protect, this is considered not ideal as Indonesia's defence budget should account for at least 2 per cent of GDP.⁹ Thus, with a very tight budget, it is "forbidden" for Indonesia to make wrong decisions. Based on several issues previously mentioned, the TNI and MoD need to prepare a backup plan to anticipate the unexpected.

Besides the Rafale, Indonesia is currently collaborating with the Republic of Korea in the development of the KF-X Boramae, although the procurement process until now has raised eyebrows due to the lack of commitment from Indonesia to the development costs shared between the two countries.¹⁰ Indonesia has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the commitment to acquire 24 units of F-15EX fighter jet by the MoD delegation during their visit to the United States back in August 2023.¹¹ Of course, both of these procurements require plenty of time and cannot be executed soon.





In addition to the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia also needs to respond to neighboring Singapore, which arguably has the strongest air power in Southeast Asia by constantly upgrading it. The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) is reportedly going to acquire eight fifth generational fighter jets, namely F-35A jets.¹²

The Contract is Now Effective, What's Next?

Complying with the obligations stated in the contract and ensuring timely payment are a must. On top of that, with the incumbent Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto taking over as President of Indonesia to succeed Joko Widodo, his successor as the Minister of Defense is expected to monitor the timeline of the Rafale procurement closely for Indonesia. Subsequently, Prabowo, in his capacity as the president, can also later participate in the process with certainly higher bargaining leverage.

During the procurement process, the Indonesian Air Force must utilize as much time as possible in preparing for the arrival of Rafale, starting from the construction of hangars, ammunition warehouses, and parallel taxiways. Moreover, support for maintenance and operational activities such as pilot training and technicians is also important to ensure that when the aircraft arrives, its infrastructure and human resources are immediately combat-capable.

To realize the vision set by the 24th Air Force Chief of Staff, Air Marshal (Ret) Fadjar Prasetyo, "*Towards a Respected Air Force in the Region*", strengthening Indonesia's air sovereignty is an obligation and an urgent matter for Indonesia due to repeated violations of Indonesian airspace borders by both military and civilian aircraft¹³ and responding to the dynamics in the region. Acquiring Rafale is a step forward taken by the government in upholding Indonesia's sovereignty despite the challenges and opportunities that arise. However, the most important thing from the Rafale acquisition is the safety of the operator or pilot of the aircraft so that the duty in protecting Indonesia's air sovereignty can be performed optimally.





Endnotes

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