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President's Rafale Sortie: Symbolism in the Skies

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“Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.”

Leonardo Da Vinci

Introduction

The Rafale sortie by President Droupadi Murmu, the Supreme Commander of the Indian Armed Forces on 29 October, 2025 at Ambala AF Station was not just a ceremonial event but a highly symbolic event showcasing the pride, prestige and power of the Indian Air Force. It was another significant milestone in President Droupadi Murmu’s journey, showcasing her indomitable courage and confidence in IAF’s prowess. It was a testimony to the decisive role played by the Indian Air Force (IAF) in Operation *Sindoor* and a befitting occasion to declare the commencement of Ex Trishul, India’s tri-services training military exercise, on the Gujrat border.

The flight was symbolic because it represented India’s coming of age in its defence capabilities, displays faith in India’s quest for strategic autonomy and, more importantly, reflected the confidence that the Supreme Commander had placed in the nation’s armed forces in general and the IAF in particular. Incidentally, she is the only President to have flown in a fighter aircraft on two occasions, including a Su-30 MKI in 2023.

Ceremony and Substance

While such flights by Heads of State are not unprecedented, for India, it was a full-fledged ceremonial event, keeping with the finest traditions of the armed forces. The Supreme Commander would have experienced what very few heads of state in the world ever do: the immense exhilaration, agility and awe of modern aerial combat— the tip of the spear and the pure joy of fighter flying. There is also a tremendous amount of substance associated with this flight. The flight reflects civilian leadership deeply engaged with the military’s operational arm, bridging the gap between symbolism and substance.

Wide-spread anarchy in the world, narcissistic leadership, sycophancy across Governments and a rapidly changing world order are largely a reflection of the instability prevailing in the world order today. Casting aside all concerns of a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, the President got a unique opportunity to strap up in a fighter and take to the skies to experience the pure and exhilarating joys of flying. The event was not only about optics, it was also a statement highlighting the intricate integration of air power in India’s strategic milieu, reaffirming the nation’s faith in the IAF personnel, who operate these complex machines and ensure the safety

of the Indian airspace. It was also a firm and thumping acknowledgement of the IAF's 'First Responder' role in India's Neighbourhood during both natural and man-made disasters and other contingencies. It was also a reaffirmation of the confidence in IAF's readiness posture across the entire battle space, transcending all domains.

Symbolism from the Cockpit

For a President to take control of a fighter aircraft, albeit even for a brief period, is a symbolic reaffirmation of civil-military fusion and mutual respect. In a democratic set-up like India, the armed forces operate under civilian control. Yet, such authority gains its moral legitimacy from understanding and empathising with the lives and missions of the men and women in uniform. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, Mrs Pratibha Devisingh Patil and President Murmu have all flown in a Su-30 MKI earlier, and this sortie marks a first for the Rafale fleet. Dr Zakir Husain (HT-2 basic trainer) and Dr APJ Abdul Kalam (HJT-16 Kiran) have flown in trainer aircraft earlier. This sortie is different because the Rafale represents something more contemporary, reflecting India's rise as a confident regional power capable of holding its own amongst the comity of nations. It shows the world that India's leadership is not distant from those responsible for its defence and it also reassures Indians that India's safety and sovereignty is in safe hands.

Operational Readiness and Strategic Messaging

Presently, India faces an ever-increasing complex security environment; from its contested borders, on-going tariff issues and turbulence in the Indo-Pacific region to a volatile and highly polarised world. The President flying in a fighter aircraft drives home a message of reassurance for all Indians and emphasizes India's credible deterrence capability to the entire world. India needs to be prepared for all contingencies, spanning from short and swift wars to long drawn-out wars. These high-profile ceremonial and symbolic events serve as a huge source of inspiration, not only for all the armed forces personnel but the nation's ordinary citizens as well. These events also help in reposing faith in the national leadership. The President would have experienced first-hand the professionalism, the extraordinary skills and the courage of the IAF personnel. She would have also witnessed the highly efficient and impeccably maintained Indian Air Force machinery at work, highlighting the professionalism and determination of the IAF personnel.

Air Power and National Prestige

The armed forces of a nation are symbolic of its military prowess and prestige. In recent times, the IAF has been chosen as the preferred 'instrument for application of force' during various contingencies on account of its speed, responsiveness, reach, precision and lethality. The President's sortie is symbolic of IAF's technological prowess and power projection. IAF has the

capabilities and the capacities to deliver a strong and unambiguous statement of India's resolve for maintaining its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The sortie also highlighted the sterling role played by IAF in nation-building and serving as the first responder in various global crises, over the years. From Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions and peace keeping operations with the United Nations to providing timely aid and succour for victims of natural disasters across the world, IAF has always delivered, on time and on target.

Indian leadership has regularly been flying fighter aircraft, sailing on aircraft carriers and visiting forward areas in the highest battlefields of the world. The same is however not true with India's adversaries. One has never seen Pakistani leadership taking to the skies, probably due to a lack of confidence and trust in their own armed forces. President Murmu has done it not once but twice!

The Indian armed forces are a symbol of modernity, sovereignty and autonomy, reflecting India's ability to absorb as well as indigenise advanced technologies. The sortie would also give an impetus to India's 'Make in India' programme, wherein the acquisition of foreign technologies serves as a conduit for future indigenous design, development and manufacturing, not just a mere substitute for it.

The sortie comes at a time when the political rhetoric has been heating up. Encouraged by America's new found friendship with them, Pakistan has unfortunately once again started nuclear sabre-rattling with renewed vigour. Pakistan has also reportedly started upping the ante in the Sir Creek area, probably emboldened by Chinese support. During such tense and volatile situations, the conduct of military training exercises not only convey the determination but the intent of a nation as well. Ex Trishul- 2025, a tri services exercise is aimed at enhancing the operational readiness of the three services through joint planning and integrated application of combat power. The Exercise was scheduled to commence along the International Border, in the Gujrat area from October 30, 2025. It is not just a military training exercise, it is also a statement of India's resolve, innovation and force-integration.

Conclusion

The Supreme Commander's sortie in the Rafale aircraft was a reassertion of the President's confidence in the professionalism and the might of the IAF. The event would be forever enshrined in IAF's glorious history. The Rafale aircraft is symbolic not just for its technological advancement and fire power, but it is also a metaphor in India's long and arduous journey for strategic autonomy. The President's sortie in Ambala also sends the unambiguous message that Indian airspace and sovereignty are inviolable and secure. The IAF air warriors are always ready and willing to take on the adversary.