

Exercise Garuda: From Tactical Interoperability to Strategic Convergence



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Introduction

A bilateral Exercise Garuda-VIII (2025) is ongoing from November 16 to 27, pitting the Indian Air Force (IAF) against France's Air and Space Force (FASF) in a simulated combat. This exercise features the IAF's Su-30MKI aircraft manoeuvring alongside French multirole fighters in complex air combat situations. The primary focus will be on air-to-air combat, air defence, and joint strike operations. In addition, 'Garuda-VIII' provides a platform for the two forces to interact professionally, exchange knowledge, and share best practices, reinforcing the strong Indo-French strategic partnership.¹

The exercise is a building block on previous versions, as it lays stress on interoperability and sharing of tactics, which will strengthen India-France defence relations in the context of joint ventures such as Rafale procurement and co-development of military hardware. It will provide a platform for IAF Rafale pilots to enhance their general employability and the exploitation of aircraft in peculiar conditions.

Exercise Garuda is a tactical bilateral air exercise aimed at enhancing interoperability, sharing of best practices and strengthening defence cooperation between the IAF and the FASF. The exercise is usually complex, incorporating complex air defence and ground attack missions with often sophisticated fighter aircraft, aerial refuelling and joint tactical operations. The locations have slipped back and forth between India and France, with the memorable First edition held at Gwalior Air Force Station (India) and Mont-de-Marsan Air Base (France).

Brief History (from 2003-2024): The 'Garuda' Legacy of 22 years

The exercise "Garuda" has a 22-year history and offers forward-looking strategic and doctrinal advantages to the IAF. The Garuda exercise series, which was inaugurated in 2003, has been carried out in phases. It was initially focused on the basics of interoperability (2003-2010); later moved on to critically pre-inducting the Dassault Rafale and its operational systems (Garuda VI, 2019); and finally became a top-notch platform for demonstrating the validity of India's indigenous combat systems, like the LCA Tejas and LCH Prachand (Garuda VII, 2022).

The genesis of Exercise Garuda is explicitly linked to the Indo-French strategic partnership, which started on January 26, 1998. This partnership made defence and security principal pillars of the bilateral relationship. To make this cooperation dynamic, the two countries introduced a set of regular triennial training exercises for the collaborating Armed forces of both countries. These exercises are:

- (a) Ex Varuna, for both Navies,
- (b) Ex Shakti, for both Armies, and
- (c) Ex Garuda, for both Air Forces.

The first five editions focused on creating basic-level interoperability. During the exercise, the IAF and the FAF flew various air combat missions both by day and by night. These missions included 1 vs 1 and 2 vs 1 visual air combats. Large Force Engagement (LFE) in a near-realistic environment were the attraction of air combat training missions. Both Air forces exchanged best practices to enhance their operational capabilities. The objective of the exercise was to enhance professional engagements and interoperability between IAF and FAF through the exchange of operational knowledge and experience, besides the solidification of bilateral relations between the two air forces.² The focus areas of previous versions of exercises were:

- (a) The first edition, Garuda I (February 2003), was held at Air Force Station Gwalior, India, and was attended by the Chief of Staff of the FASF.
- (b) Garuda II (June 2005) was held at Istres Air Base, France. It was the Indian Air Force's first exercise in Europe.³

(c) IAF hosted the FASF for the Garuda III (February 2007) at Air Force Station Kalaikunda,

(d) Garuda IV (June 2010) was organised at Istres Air Base, France and saw the participation of Singapore Air Force with its F-16s and some of the impressive paratrooper jumps of Indian Garud and French Special Forces from Indian IL-76s. It was an opportunity for IAF IL-78 MKI tankers and FASF KC-135 Stratotankers to practise and validate cross-refuelling procedures.

(e) The IAF hosted exercise, Garuda-V (June 2014), at its air base in Jodhpur. It was to solve the complicated "East-West" doctrinal and technical equation. Historically, a major user of Russian-origin platforms, the IAF used the exercises to operate the Su-30MKI heavy fighter alongside FASF's Mirage 2000 and Rafale fighters. This integration involved the standardisation of communication procedures, air combat tactics, and the acquisition of complex technical procedures such as air-to-air refuelling (AAR). The IAF contingent had four Su-30 MKIs, one IL-78 AAR, and two C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft. The C-17, the strategic lift aircraft, flew with 134 air warriors, ground equipment and the logistic support for the IAF contingent during its induction and later de-induction after the exercise. The FAF had deployed Mirage 2000, Rafale, and Alpha Jet fighter aircraft, E-3F Sentry AWACS, C-135 flight refuelling aircraft, and C-130 and CN-235 transport aircraft, with 94 personnel.⁴

(f) Garuda-VI (July 2019) was held at Mont-de-Marsan Airbase 118. The IAF contingent, of seven Indian aircraft – 4 Sukhoi Su-30, 2 C17s and 1 Ilyushin 78, landed at the southwest of France at Mont-de-Marsan Airbase 118 on June 28. This exercise saw the deployment of a great number of French Air Force aircraft: Rafale, Alpha Jet, Mirage 2000, C135, E3F, C130, and Casa.⁵

(g) Ex Garuda VII (November 2022): The LCA Tejas and the LCH Prachand were part of any kind of international exercise for the first time. The exercise incorporated four FASF Rafale fighters and one A-330 Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) aircraft. The IAF contingent was besides the LCA and LCH, Su-30 MKI, Rafale, and Jaguar fighter aircraft and Mi-17 helicopters. Combat Enabling Assets that constituted a part of the IAF contingent were Flight Refuelling Aircraft, AWACS, AEW&C, and Garud Special Forces.⁶ The Exercise witnessed the combined flying of Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) of IAF, in

an IAF Rafale fighter, and the Chief of the Air Staff of FASF, General Stephane Mille, in an IAF Su-30MKI fighter.⁷

Garuda 2025: Doctrine Refinement

The eighth edition, Garuda-VIII (16-27 November 2025), marks a new doctrinal phase. The IAF contingent, which arrived in France on November 10, 2025, consists of six Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jets, supported by an IL-78 mid-air refueller and a C-17 Globemaster-III transport aircraft, for the exercise.⁸ FASF is employing 10 Rafales, six Mirage 2000s; and on an ad hoc basis, one H225M Caracal, one A330 MRTT Phénix and one A400M Atlas.⁹ The focus of this exercise is the optimum level of operational synergy between the IAF's mature and heavyweight Su-30MKI force and the FASF's Rafale-centric force. This objective is accomplished through stress testing of IAF tactics in complex, high-intensity simulated scenarios, including joint strike operations, in an unfamiliar "away game" environment at Mont-de-Marne, France.¹⁰

IAF's Tri-Level Benefit

The strategic benefits granted by the IAF are threefold. From the doctrinal point of view, the exercise was of invaluable value as it resulted in IAF pilots gaining exposure to Western combat methodologies and subsequently incorporating the same into the training and operational syllabus of the IAF. Tactically, it perfects the integrated "potent combination" of its Su-30MKI and Rafale fleets. Strategically, it wants to validate IAF's transcontinental power-projection capability by rigorously testing its IL-78 tanker and C-17 Globemaster III transport assets.

Strategic Cornerstone for Multilateralism

The deep, high-level trust and technical interoperability between the two sides achieved through the bilateral Garuda series has become the foundation for India's larger multilateral air power ambitions. This is proven by the fact that France was part of India's first multinational exercise -Tarang Shakti exercise in 2024 as an anchor participant, a multilateral event with a stated intention of being "broadened from Garuda". Consequently, Garuda has helped IAF transform from a participant in foreign exercises to a global convenor of air power.

Significance of Ex Garuda

These exercises have gone through a prolonged process starting from MiG-21 to Mirage-2000 and more advanced ones such as Su-30 MKI, Rafale, and the indigenous Tejas aircraft, which reflects the upgrade in technology for both air forces. Early editions included basic air defence, while recent ones included SEAD, electronic warfare, night ops and multi-domain integration. Aerial refuelling, AWACS coordination and joint planning have become the norm, increasing operational synergy. Exercises have coincided with India-France defence deals (e.g. the Rafale purchase) and with security issues in the region (e.g. Indo-Pacific security, China).

Conclusion

The IAF participates in 'Garuda-VIII' at Mont-de-Marsan, France, with the FASF until November 27, to ensure better exploitation of tactics and interoperability. This exercise is characterised by complex combat situations, with an emphasis on air-to-air BVR combat, air defence, and joint strike operations, thereby strengthening a long-standing strategic partnership.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies [CAPSS])

Notes:

- ¹ "Indian and French Air Forces Collaborate in 'Garuda 25' Air Exercise," *Devdiscourse*, November 15, 2025, <https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/international/3699884-breakthrough-arrest-in-red-fort-car-bomb-attack-case>. Accessed on November 15, 2025.
- ² S.B.P. Sinha, "Exercise Garuda-VI: Sukhoi 30 MKI & Rafale, A Formidable Combination," *SP Aviation*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.sps-aviation.com/experts-speak/?id=410&h=Exercise-Garuda-VI-Sukhoi-30-MKI-and-Rafale-A-Formidable-Combination>. Accessed on November 15, 2025.
- ³ French Embassy in India, "Indo-French Air Exercise Garuda V," April 21, 2022, <https://in.ambafrance.org/Indo-French-Air-Exercise-Garuda-V>. Accessed on November 15, 2025.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ French Embassy in India, "Indo-French Air Exercise Garuda VI," July 2019, <https://in.ambafrance.org/Indo-French-Air-Exercise-Garuda-VI>. Accessed on November 18, 2025.
- ⁶ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "IAF and FASF Chiefs fly as part of Ex Garuda VII," November 8, 2022, <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1874508>. Accessed on November 16, 2025.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Press Information Bureau, n. 6.
- ⁹ French Embassy in India, "Indo-French Air Exercise Garuda VI," November 18, 2025, , <https://in.ambafrance.org/Indo-French-Air-Exercise-Garuda-2025-Exercise-20756>. Accessed on November 18, 2025.
- ¹⁰ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Exercise Garuda 25: Indian Air Force Participates In 8th Edition of Bilateral Air Exercise With French Air And Space Force," November 15, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2190299>. Accessed on November 16, 2025.