

Vucic Meets Macron in Paris: ‘Rafale’ Jets for Serbia - Wise Geopolitical Move or Disastrous Waste of Money?

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Back in late October 2017, [Russia donated six MiG-29 fighter jets to Serbia](#).

Less than a year and a half later, [Belarus did the same, donating four aircraft of the same type](#).

This was a major boost for Belgrade, as it previously had only four (three of which were airworthy) MiG-29 fighter jets that survived NATO aggression in 1999.

[Moscow’s and Minsk’s military aid was instrumental](#) in preserving the Serbian Air Force and Air Defense (RViPVO), as it brought the number of operational fighter jets to 14, an increase of 250%. Serbia paid for and conducted the modernization, bringing all jets to the MiG-29SM+ standard. The cost of the upgrade was reportedly less than \$400 million altogether, an excellent deal given the circumstances and the general state of RViPVO back then. By early 2022, the modernization was completed and the refurbished MiG-29s now form the backbone of Belgrade’s aerial fleet.

However, this was always an interim solution and was supposed to ensure the safety of Serbian airspace before a more up-to-date successor was found.

Naturally, newer Russian jets were the first in consideration, as Moscow’s and Minsk’s donations were a major geopolitical move that only true allies would make. The political West was determined to torpedo a potential deal in any way it could, but Belgrade stood its ground for the most part. In the meantime, an orchestrated effort to smear and downplay the donation of “Fulcrums” (MiG-29’s NATO reporting name) was launched by the mainstream propaganda machine. These jets were being actively presented as [“Russian](#)

[junk” in an attempt to insult the donors](#), as well as to discourage potential acquisitions of new Russian-made aircraft. Still, Moscow’s world-class aviation was the natural and logical solution for Belgrade.

Several types came into play, particularly the Kremlin’s export superstar, the Su-30. In addition, when MiG-35 was officially introduced back in 2019, many wanted to acquire this jet, as it was by far the most advanced “Fulcrum” derivative. It would’ve been quite easy and cheap to integrate this aircraft due to its similarities with the MiG-29. Serbia was also planning to acquire advanced Russian air defenses and electronic warfare (EW) systems, [with a strong possibility of getting even the unrivaled S-400](#). However, all this caught the attention of the United States and NATO, which threatened to not only enforce the infamous (and essentially illegal) Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), but also suggested they would block the transport of Russian weapons to Serbia (as the country is surrounded by NATO members), blackmailing Belgrade to “reconsider”.

Its options were now more limited than ever, as Russian weapons that were already paid for and awaiting delivery to Serbia couldn’t reach the country. By the time the special military operation (SMO) started, [the situation became unbearable for Belgrade](#). What’s more, its decision not to impose sanctions on Moscow was seen as “heresy” in Washington DC and Brussels, so Serbia’s desire to acquire Russian weapons was now out of the question, as the possibility of NATO agreeing to this moved from theoretical (albeit already extremely unlikely) to simply impossible. The political West would’ve never allowed any of the Russian weapons to ever reach Serbia. [Belgrade was able to acquire some Russian-made weapons from Cyprus](#), but even this was criticized as “too pro-Russian”. Worse yet, [NATO only kept escalating its pressure and crawling aggression on Serbia](#).

As an alternative, Belgrade tried switching to Chinese weapons. It acquired air defenses from Beijing, [specifically the FK-3 \(export variant of HQ-22\)](#), with military sources [suggesting it might even acquire Chinese fighter jets](#).

However, NATO once again threatened the country, barely allowing it to transport even the FK-3 from China.

Thus, Serbia was left with no choice except to acquire the [exorbitantly expensive and overhyped Western weapons](#). Getting US-made jets was not an option, leaving only several other European candidates, of which France seemed the most logical choice. After years of speculation, recent weeks and months showed that the deal with Paris was closer than ever.

On April 9, during the official state visit in Paris, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that Belgrade “reached concrete agreements” on the purchase of “Rafale” jets.

After talks with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron, [Vucic stated that the contract is expected to be signed in the next two months](#). The details of the potential deal are yet to be revealed, but military sources suggest that 12 “Rafales” that Belgrade seeks to acquire [will cost around €3 billion \(\\$3.2 billion\)](#). This massive price tag is equivalent to nearly three annual Serbian military budgets.

The geopolitical aspect of the deal is understandable.

However, the staggering cost could hardly ever be justified. The price of [the latest F4.1 jet](#) is upwards of €160 million (over \$170 million) apiece, meaning that nearly €2 billion will be

paid for the airframes alone, with another billion for missiles, bombs and other weapons, as well as pilot and ground crews training, etc. This is without taking into account any additional costs due to possible delays or any other issues.

What's more, there are even more expenses such as building adequate infrastructure and making other mandatory changes to the existing one. Western jets such as the "Rafale" are [far less robust than Russian equivalents](#). All of this will only push the price tag even further. Does this mean that "Rafale" is a bad jet? Certainly not. It's one of the most advanced Western aircraft with excellent multirole capabilities. On paper, it can carry up to 9.5 tons of payload, but in reality, this is much closer to around 6 tons, which is still quite good for such a light aircraft. As for speed, its Mach 1.8 is anything but impressive, although it somewhat makes up for it with a limited Mach 1.4 supercruise ability (supersonic flight without afterburners). And while "Rafale" has more advanced avionics than the older MiG-29, the latter is far more affordable, with a flight hour price tag of €5,000.

In comparison, [the French jet costs €20,000 per flight hour](#) or four times as much. It's also slower than the MiG-29 which can fly at Mach 2.3 or even faster. All this makes the "Fulcrum" a better option for air policing, as it's far more affordable and easier to maintain and operate. However, in terms of multirole capabilities, "Rafale" certainly has an advantage, although this is expected as it was built for this purpose, while the "Fulcrum" was envisaged as a frontline air superiority fighter. However, this is where problems might arise for Serbia, as the French jet's armament comes into play, but there's no guarantee that Paris would deliver the necessary assets (particularly the Damocles and TALIOS targeting pods and relevant air-to-ground weapons such as the AASM-HAMMER bombs and various types of missiles). France may omit those immediately or in any future deals.

As for the more advanced air-to-air missiles, Paris will certainly refuse to export the new "Meteor" (range up to 200 km). Worse yet, it may deny [the latest MICA NG variant](#) (range reportedly up to 150 km) and instead provide the older iteration (range 60-80 km). Serbia already has missiles with superior range for its MiG-29SM+ (specifically the R-77-1 with a range of over 110 km). Thus, in purely military terms, this acquisition is extremely risky and unreasonably costly. If Belgrade wasn't surrounded by NATO, [it would've easily gotten at least two Su-30SM jets for the price of a single "Rafale"](#). Better yet, it could've gotten at least one Su-35 and saved dozens of millions per airframe. And last but not least, [the Su-57E](#) would've been more affordable while being at least a generation ahead of the "Rafale". This is without taking weapons into account.

Namely, Russian air-to-air missiles aren't just cheaper, but are also far more advanced and stand in a league of their own. Modernized versions of the R-77 (particularly the RVV-AE-PD) have a range of up to 200 km, while the larger R-37M's maximum range stands at a staggering 400 km. In addition, both missiles are hypersonic (Mach 5-6 and Mach 6-7, respectively). This leaves both the "Meteor" and MICA NG in the dust (both inferior in range and speed). What's more, Serbia will most likely be waiting until the early 2030s to get the first jet. By then, [aircraft such as the MiG-41](#) will already be operational, making the "Rafale" not only outclassed in every sense of the word, but simply obsolete. Worse yet, even older (but heavier, much faster and higher-flying) jets [such as the MiG-31BM](#) and comparable era ones such as the [Su-35S are far deadlier in air-to-air combat](#).

Once again, it's quite clear that the acquisition from France is a move born out of geopolitical necessity, as getting such extremely expensive aircraft for air policing is tantamount to using sports cars for traffic stops.

However, even the geopolitical aspect is very risky, as [Paris has a long history of backstabbing its customers for the sake of NATO allies](#) such as the US and UK. There are multiple accounts of [France installing kill switches on its aircraft and air-launched missiles](#) to prevent them from being used against NATO interests.

In addition, many (if not most) weapons used by the “Rafale” rely on US-made components and guidance systems, meaning that these could be turned off or sabotaged in some other way in case of [yet another direct NATO aggression against Serbia](#), while France has [repeatedly demonstrated coordination with US/NATO geopolitical interests](#).

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