

## IAF SORTIE INTO PLATINUM JUBILEE YEAR

## INDIA LOOKS TO A BRIGHTER AVIATION FUTURE

The Indian Air Force has commenced celebrations as it prepares to commemorate its 75 years of selfless service to the nation on 8th October 2007. It is therefore appropriate to quote the message the Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal S P Tyagi sent to all the Air Warriors on New Year's day "The year gone by has been remarkable in many respects where we have enhanced our operational capabilities within the ambit of a safe flying environ. As the Nation grows and marches ahead, we in the Indian Air Force should endeavour to measure up to the very high expectations placed on us by our countrymen. Our fleet will see unprecedented modernization in the coming years. We are on the threshold of becoming a truly international lethal fighting Force. It is for us now to believe in ourselves and attain similar competency levels across the board. In our endeavour to becoming a formidable team, we need to ensure that we continuously enhance our operational efficiency within the available resources".

India's civil aviation sector has also taken skyward leaps with increased air travel and swift induction of modern planes, despite a over burdened infrastructure and shortage of domestic pilots. The Indian Armed Forces have opened their closed doors to receive and exercise with foreign militaries and India's leaders have inked strategic pacts and defence MOUs with most neighbouring countries and, as far and wide as France UK, Mongolia, Chile and Brazil and moved close to USA, with a nuclear deal, on the anvil.. The current line up of requests for countries to exercise with India is larger than India can handle. The Air Force has restricted them to two a year in India and one abroad for operational reasons. Western countries have interests to display their wares to potential Indian buyers of \$20 bill weaponry and systems in the coming few years. It is with this background that the Indian Air Force looks to a bright future as the IAF is set to achieve greater punch and world class strategic capabilities commencing 2007, along with the sister services. The Government has been dragging its feet in appointing a Chief of Defence Staff for coordination but an Integrated Defence Staff IDS is in place, and a Strategic Force to harness India's military nuclear systems is operational.

ACM S P Tyagi who demits office on 31st March 2007 has also articulated a long term vision statement 2020 for the IAF



*Air Chief Marshal S P Tyagi*

which includes a Space Command. All this calls for a large modern and ready to go Air Force with ability to deploy at distances. The IAF is therefore rightly looking at India's strategic reach and has perfected mid air refueling with IL-78Ds for powerful Su-30MKI, MiG-29s and Mirages.

#### Sister services aviation status

India's large 1 million strong Army and its special forces which are gaining importance in this era of terrorism are dependant on the IAF for close air support, fire power, transport and aerial drops. The Army has initiated a modernization plan but advocates a 'More Boots-On-Ground' approach as it is heavily engaged in large scale anti terror and insurgency operations. IAF UAVs are also assisting to stem the tide of insurgency in Kashmir, North East and in Naxalite infested areas. The Army is also set to acquire 60 Helicopters for high altitude operations and the Bell-407 and Eurocopter and AS 350B3 are in final lap for the order. The IAF is set to acquire six of the latest C-130J multi role transport aircraft which will give India's Special Forces additional mobility as the aircraft can take off from short runways. There are more offers from USA and the Defence Minister AK Antony has vouched that he will support more joint ventures, on the lines of the Indio- Russian BrahMos Aerospace which has been a success, which will soon provide the IAF with a Su-30MKI air launched supersonic missile.

The 60,000 strong Navy has plans for a large aviation wing and its plate is full with over 36 ships on order including two aircraft carriers with powerful MiG-29Ks and Ka28/31 helicopters, 9 missile destroyers with integral helicopters and 6 Scorpene Type 75 submarines while its nuclear submarine ambitions are also being fulfilled. The IAF is training Navy's MiG-29 pilots at Adampur for the INS Vikramaditya (Gorshkov) due in 2008, in addition to the 32 being progressively trained by the US Navy. A large 17,500 LPD USS Trenton will join early 2007 with six 14 ton SH-3 SeaKings from Sirkosky. The Navy received two IL-38SD MR aircraft in 2006 and three more will arrive in 2007/8. The Navy will also place orders for future generation MR platforms in 2007, and the Boeing PMA-8 is under serious consideration for the 737 frame, the



EW equipment is mounted on.. The aviation template in India's Armed Forces looks promising.

### IAF fighter strength

Yet it is the Indian Air Force's punch that is at crossroads as its fighter squadron strength has depleted from 39 fighter squadrons to 29 and has been cause for concern. The IAF has rush ordered 40 Su-30MKI from Russia which could start arriving in second half of 2007. The lone aerospace company that services the Air Force, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, has monopoly for the supply of home built 140 SU-30MKIs, LCA and all upgrades and last of the MiG 21 Bisons. The HAL line appears to be strained and behind schedule as even its ALH Druv encountered rear rotor problems. Fortunately the MiG-21 accident rate has come down and India's Air Force pilots are rated high for their individual flying skills and they can make up for any deficiencies as the Pakistan Air Force stands dwarfed by India's numbers. However PAF's acquisition of modern F-16Bs from USA, FP-7 and FP-10 from China and two ERIEYE AEW&C SAAB 2000 from Sweden are on the cards, but from all reports the Su-30 MKI is proving to be a formidable platform and gives the IAF an edge.

A look at the futuristic fighter ORBAT of the IAF is interesting. In the near future most of the older MiG-21FL/M variants, including the air defence- cum- tactical fighter non upgraded MiG-21bis, will come to the end of their technical lives as also the four MiG-23 UM and MF squadrons to be later followed by seven MiG-27 squadrons. The planned 10 Su-30 MKI squadrons whose initial deliveries were begun as second hand Su-27s in 1997 mandates that 10 aircraft per year are to come off the HAL assembly lines until 2018. These twin pilot man power intensive excellent fighters will form the backbone of the IAF.

For the future the IAF has pitched for 126 MRCAs and the final selection process RFPs for the \$ 6 billion purchase is awaited to USA (F-16/18), French (Mirage 2000-V), Swedish (Gripen JAS-39) and Russian (MiG-29OVK and Su-35) which are on offer, and the Eurofighter Typhoon too, making overtures. There are hitches as the 30% mandatory off set clauses are to be included. Unless

steps are taken to move the acquisition process swiftly which could take a decade to complete, the IAF will have to look at acquiring the Mirages 2000-V on offer by France or such measure as the LCA looks like an uncertain starter, till well after 2010. The IAF cannot bank on it.

### The future helicopter and transport scenario

The futuristic Helicopter scene both transport and attack in the Armed Forces is in a state of flux with conflicting interests. HAL is promoting its Dhruv family of advanced light helicopters led by its Chairman Ashok Baweja even though the current Turbomecca engine is under powered for combat and Naval ASW operations. Hence Navy is looking at the foreign offers for its 9 Type 17/15 and Krivacks platforms under construction. Rs 340 crores have been allotted for the Light Combat Helicopter LCH, and HAL has firm orders from the Armed Forces and the Para Military forces to keep their ALH line occupied for the next few years and the IAF has ordered 60 pieces. Thus far the tie up with IAI for the export of Dhruvs is yet to show results though the machine has been showcased at Paris, Farnborough, Singapore during Asian Aerospace, and in Chile. Concurrently the HAL has re-engined the Cheetak (Alouttee) series to Cheetan/Cheetah for the IAF with the TM 333-M2 engine and landed it at 23, 220 feet on a glacier. The IAF claims it can be fitted with an advanced glass cockpit and engine management display and the unveiling of the Light Combat Helicopter with the 20mm Giat guns and rocket pods is likely to be done at the Aero India show due in Bangalore from 7th February, 2007. The IAF is operating the 5 Embraer 135 for VIP transport but the large retinues of India's Prime Minister and President still prefer the Boeing 737 and the IAF awaits the 3 Boeing BBJs with 737 configuration and 6000 mile range in 2008.. An evaluation for the helicopters from Agusta Westland EH-101, SikorskyS-92 and EADS/Eurocopter EC-721 Cougar and Russian MI 171 for VIP travel is ongoing and orders for additional MI-17IV have been placed as this work horse with armament has proved very successful, and more than a dozen are being spared for UN peace keeping roles, especially in Congo. The evaluation of the heavy lift transport helicopters to replace the Mi-26 has also begun. The transport fleet of some 100 AN 32s that has provided the IAF long service and the upgrade with modern avionics and sensors stands approved.

In conclusion no one can fault the objectives of the Air Chief and his Air Warriors as the IAF celebrates and looks back at its most memorable 75 years of excellent and sacrificing services to the nation. Yet with galloping technology and costs of aviation rising there is no room for duplication of air power, nor can India afford it, and the time has come to define the 'Core Competencies' of each service and then to concentrate on them with focus. •

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