By Deba R Mohanty

The Chief of the Indian Air Force ACM PV Naik has gone on record recently to admit that half of India's aerospace fighter arsenal is obsolete. The defence minister, AK Antony, subsequently tried to play this down by urging that the Indian defence industry must be encouraged by the state to improve the degree of self-reliance and fight obsolescence. If this was not enough, ACM Naik also warned that the security situation in and around India was like a 'volcano', which necessitated an extremely high level of preparedness by the air force, in particular, and the entire armed forces, in general. If unstable security conditions as well as strategic global aspirations require India to build a formidable military capability, 'obsolescence' is one problem that should not have affected the armed forces as badly as it has today.

Let's see how prepared the Indian armed forces are for any situation. Not only the Indian aerospace but also land and naval arsenals are fast becoming obsolete. Consider this: the IAF has a sanctioned strength of 39.5 combat squadrons, yet is barely 30 squadrons strong now, and aims to have a 45 squadron strength in the near future, if former ACM Fali Major is to be believed. If four to six squadrons of MiGs are to be phased out and the 126 MMRCA and LCAs are not replenished in time, India is likely to manage with about 26 fighter squadrons for the next six to seven years! Even acquisitions of Su-30s would not be able to compensate for some time and the joint development of the fifth generation fighter (with Russia) can only happen by the early 2020s, if everything goes according to plan. Transport, trainers, heavy lifts, medium and heavy choppers, mid-air refuellers and others are also in short supply, if the desirable level of Indian aerospace power is taken into consideration. The situation is worrisome.

The land-based arsenal looks no better. Former Army Chief VP Malik's famous admission—we will fight with whatever we have—is not passé. General VK Singh's immediate predecessor General Deepak Kapoor has gone on record saying that 80% of the land equipment is night-blind. Apart from night-blindness, the land forces are in short supply on practically every front—from infantry and weaponry to larger land systems. Heavy tanks may be an exception; India lacks light and medium tanks, and varieties of artilleries, the latter being a hostage to 'Bofors' syndrome. Artillery and air wing have been worst affected as tender after tender has been cancelled in recent years, thanks primarily to non-military reasons (read, allegations and counter allegations by vendors and so-called technical reasons mentioned by the MoD). The Navy seems a little better off among the services, yet its projected plans to have an aircraft carrier fleet, sufficient numbers of submarines, frigates, destroyers and other smaller warships are also in short supply, although to a lesser degree in comparison to its counterparts. Most worrying is a scenario in which even if the MoD is able to acquire 90% of the systems that it envisages for the planned long-term military modernisation programme, 'obsolescence' could still be more than 40%—10+% larger than any ideal arsenal should possess.

Obsolescence and numeric deficits in the Indian arsenal are a result of a host of factors, spanning from defence planning to procurement processes. The blame game is easy within defence establishments as any stakeholder can accuse the other without much accountability. However, the worst sufferer is the end-user whose modernisation programme is hit badly, which leads to further obsolescence. Speak to any military leader—while they may put on a brave face in public, they are quite worried!

India has been fighting technological obsolescence for several decades as it is not only capital intensive but also involves consistent scientific and industrial endeavours. That's why you have only five-odd aero-engine manufacturers who have held hostage the fighter components of aerospace power in the world. That's why you see only a handful of countries devoting scientific and financial resources towards aerospace and unmanned systems. Where does India stand—its indigenous Kaveri aero-engine programme now looks towards either GE-414 or EJ-200; its aerospace engineering programmes attract less and less talent, its futuristic programmes are not adequately funded (DRDO budget is $2 billion). The private sector is kept at an arm's length since they are branded 'strategic' and hence have no place for private enterprise! This is despite the fact that Godrej & Boyce, Tata Power, Larsen & Toubro, and other companies have supplied critical components to many Indian strategic military programmes. Long planning processes coupled with delays have also contributed significantly to technological obsolescence. As a former IAF officer put it, by the time LCA is ready, it may well become a trainer instead of a fighter! If LCA takes decades, acquisitions do not happen in two or three years either. The 126 MMRCA deal serves as a case in point.

ACM Naik and AK Antony are true to their words—the former lays out the problem and the latter a possible answer. Betwixt the two lies the great Indian tragedy of a lack of strategic vision and political courage, rigid institutional mechanisms, complex procurement procedures and virtually no accountability in the defence sector.

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