



INDUCTION OF C-17 GLOBEMASTER III

Towards Transformation in India's Airlift Capability

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The C-17 Globemaster III aircraft was formally inducted in the IAF on September 2, 2013. Of the ten aircraft on order, three have already been delivered; two are expected by the end of this year; and the remaining five will arrive in India by the end of the next year. With the arrival of C-17s, India will have the largest fleet of C-17s second only to that of the U.S. The existing transport fleet comprising mainly AN-32s and the IL-76s (inducted in the '80s) is likely to meet the airlift requirements for another decade with diminishing returns due to aging. Induction of the C-17s and C-130Js at this juncture is a well-timed action to maintain the airlift capability, nay elevate it to a desirable higher level. According to Air Chief Marshal NAK Browne, the Chief of Air Staff, the C-17 is a major component of the modernisation drive of the IAF.

C-17 was subjected to field evaluation trials in India in June 2010 and met the laid down criteria. A tactical and strategic airlifter, the C-17 can land combat-ready troops in remote locations or airdrop them directly where needed. The C-17's ability to back up allows it to operate on narrow taxiways and congested ramps.ⁱ With a maximum payload of 74,795 kgs, it can take off and land on short runways (3,000 feet)ⁱⁱ including advanced landing grounds (ALGs) along the India-China border. It will operate from the ALGs in the northeastern states as well as from high altitude bases in north and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to Air Chief Marshal NAK Browne, "The C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft will change the way we deploy forces in the North and North East." It is also expected to augment the strategic reach for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).ⁱⁱⁱ

Airlift capability is a powerful tool for pursuing foreign policy objectives through the employment of resources and capabilities. It has the power to change attitudes and build perceptions. A timely airlift of troops by the IAF's IL-76 aircraft to the Maldives had frustrated the designs of a band of terrorists and averted a coup d'état in November 1988. Operation Cactus was a shot in the arm of Indian diplomacy. With the induction of the C-17, India's capability to undertake such operations has been re-emphasised. The C-17 has already undertaken airlifts to Tajikistan and Rwanda, displaying the enhanced capability. First the landing of C-130J on the ALG at Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) in August 2013 and now, the induction of the C-17, is seen as a meaningful signal from India at a time when China has been building up its military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control.

All over the world, C-17s are known for daunting and spectacular airlifts. They have been involved in numerous operations (in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq) and have supported humanitarian causes all over the world. Many pages in the airlift saga have been devoted to this multirole airlifter. In March 2003, American ground forces were held up in Turkish ports waiting to establish a northern front in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Turkish government had denied them passage through Turkey. On the night of March 26, 2003, fifteen C-17 aircraft delivered 20 heavy-duty platforms and 959 paratroopers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade onto Bashur Drop Zone in Iraq and established the Coalition's northern front. A formidable airlift capability got the American forces past the imbroglio.^{iv}

The C-17 is a versatile aircraft; it will give phenomenal range and the ability to operate globally but it is the innovative use of the aircraft that will deliver the punch. The endeavour now must be to exploit the asset to the limits of its stated capabilities, and beyond, if possible. One big concern is that ideal operating conditions to load/ unload the aircraft will not be available on all airfields. Also, it shall not be physically possible and economically viable to replicate infrastructure and position the specialist ground equipment and the material handling equipment on airbases all over the country. Absence of ideal operating conditions will be felt with greater intensity if and when the aircraft operate from remote landing grounds. Besides, especially qualified personnel will not be available everywhere to load/ offload the aircraft. Yet time will always be at a premium. Lower turnaround times will contribute immensely to the success of operations. Towards this end, education and training of personnel (read, "minds") across all trades and branches will be of great significance.

In conclusion, today's environment demands literal omnipresence of the forces to deal with situations. Intelligent and judicious use of the C-17s can enable the Indian Armed forces to respond swiftly in times of crises. The Government of India having realised the importance of possessing a formidable airlift capability, had approved the acquisition. The expectations of the stakeholders based on the proven capabilities of the aircraft in operations are natural. The effectiveness of the fleet will depend on how well the potential of these machines is harnessed. Innovativeness, education and training of all agencies, and an integrated open-minded approach shall accrue proportionate returns from the investment made in the capability. A clear vision and a conscientious approach shall enable us to look beyond the reach and range of these aircraft.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://boeing.mediaroom.com/index.php?s=20295&item=1832>

ⁱⁱ Jane's All the World's Aircraft 2011012, pp. 655-659.

ⁱⁱⁱ "C-17 heavy-lift transport plane inducted into Indian Air Force", *The Indian Express (Online Edition)*, Monday, September 2, 2013.

^{iv} 'Moving the Herd' available at <http://www.jamesdietz.com/gallery/merchant.ihtml?pid=126&step=4> accessed July 30, 2011.