

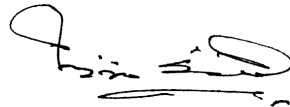


EDITOR'S NOTE

Time is certainly flying; but if key decisions are not taken urgently, the Indian Air Force (IAF) would land up curtailing its flying even more. Already it is experiencing over 24 per cent unplanned reduction in its combat force level, down from the interim authorisation of 39 squadrons. The contract for an MMRCa (Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft), even after it has been selected, is yet to be finalised, leave alone signed. Meanwhile, combat aircraft like the MiG-21/27 are finishing their life and more squadrons would get “number-plated” in the near future, reducing the combat force level further. On the other hand, it is reported that the LCA (Light Combat Aircraft as well as Low Cost Aircraft), which was expected to finally reach its IOC (Initial Operational Capability) by the end of this year, would be available only next year onward — 35 years after the IAF decided on the concept of an LCA. If the first lot of LCAs finally do get operational status, it will still be at a performance level lower than what was laid down decades ago, while aircraft performance across the world has been going up dramatically.

One can only hope that the French, not particularly known for their patience, will hold on, unlike their pull-out on the Alpha jet trainer competition leaving a single vendor in the play which factor itself delayed the BAE Hawk deal. In the most optimistic scenario, therefore, it will still take 5-6 years before we can expect the decline in the combat force level to start (leave alone achieve) returning to the authorised level of 39 combat squadrons. Meanwhile, a significant number of Mirage 2000, MiG-29, and even the earlier models of the Sukhoi SU-30MKI would have to be on the ground while undergoing planned upgrades. Look at the Chinese incursion

in Ladakh some weeks ago which was finally resolved through diplomatic processes — talking softly, but without the big stick as Roosevelt used to advise in the conduct of inter-state relations. It appears that with the decline in the IAF combat force, our stick has now become weaker.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ravi Singh', with a horizontal line underneath.