



EDITOR'S NOTE

Indian naval air power is heading toward a potential crisis: the former Soviet aircraft carrier *Gorshkov* being refurbished in Russia (future INS *Vikramaditya*) is likely to be delayed by 4-5 years, creating a serious situation since the solitary carrier INS *Viraat* would have come up for retirement after an extended service. This was quite a blow on the eve of the Navy Week. On top of this development, the Russians have sought to increase the price to nearly double the original figure. The figures being cited would reflect amounts far beyond the contracted escalation provisions inevitable in such contracts. For a country that had built up an enormous military industrial complex and was always seen in India as a reliable partner in the sale of weapons and equipment, this has undoubtedly come as a major shock. In view of the extensive Russian experience in the military industry, especially in managing a programme on one of their own designed products, it would be naïve to believe that Russian shipyards and industry had failed to calculate the cost and time required for refurbishment correctly.

What appears to have been the reality is that the Russians diverted manpower, material and effort from the *Gorshkov* refurbishment to other projects. Either way, the development reflects very poorly on Russian reliability in arms supplies. Unfortunately, the *Gorshkov* episode seems to be part of a new trend in the Russian arms industry and supplies, even to India, its preferred customer for decades. We have been witness to the MiG-21 upgrade programme being delayed enormously, with major weaknesses in performance and reliability of the systems (especially the engine). There have also been reports of the Russians demanding a much higher price for the additional two squadrons of the Su-30 that New Delhi has ordered. This stands out in stark contrast to the way two squadrons of the MiG-23MF were supplied at short notice in the early 1980s. Our problem of spares for Soviet origin equipment after 1991 also stands out, espe-

cially during the years when the Russian defence industry was in serious difficulties due to the economic crisis, and needed infusion of funds which the supply of spares would have provided. There is also the issue of the recent failure to sign a bilateral agreement for nuclear reactors where the Russians are believed to have balked on the irrevocability clause.

The major lesson from the recent developments is that we must strengthen our self-reliance in weapons and military equipment. No country can expect to play any significant role in international affairs if it remains dependent on — and more crucially, vulnerable to — the processes of arms acquisition from abroad. Strengthening self-reliance would call for much more than speeding up our indigenisation processes. There are two fundamental policy issues that South Block must seriously consider. One is the issue of increasing diversification of sources of weapons and military technology; and the second is the issue of leveraging opportunities to build interdependence with countries from which we expect to acquire arms and military technology.

With 75-80 per cent of our weapons and military equipment of Soviet/Russian origin, this dependency would always leave us with an intrinsic vulnerability for a long time to come. Given that modern weapon systems have a design life of 30-40 years, any further acquisition from Russia would only extend this vulnerability into the future decades. And what we tend to forget is that Russia is not the Soviet Union; and, unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has few (if any) areas of dependence on India. The obvious answer is to diversify the sources of supply. The odds are building up further against us with Russian military technology and state-of-the-art weapon systems being freely transferred to the Chinese, bestowing the latter with the confidence that they plan to win the next war through “command of the sea and command of the air!” In addition to this new strategic “partnership” between the two erstwhile military allies, there is a clear strategic nexus between China and Pakistan which has provided the latter even with nuclear weapons and missile designs, technology and materials.

This is also linked to the issue of leveraging our own strengths to energise our aerospace industry. The new procurement procedure lays down minimum

offsets to the extent of 30 per cent of the value of contract for acquisition from abroad. Boeing has already taken the lead in planning and investing \$1 billion over the next ten years in production of sub-systems for aircraft not in service in India. The offsets parameter must, of course, be applicable to acquisitions from Russia. But the offsets route holds out the opportunity to infuse our aerospace industry with modern technology and the ability to meet the bulk of the needs of spares and future product support. In fact, we need to adopt a policy that offsets should provide the capability to design, develop and incorporate most of the upgrades that every new weapon system would require 10-15 years after induction. The OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) would obviously be partners in this process. But this should help us move more firmly toward the capacity to design and develop future weapon systems with greater self-reliance since this approach would necessitate setting up research and development (R&D) facilities in systems and sub-system design and development.

At the same time, regardless of how the *Gorshkov* issue is resolved, we must expedite the construction and commissioning of the indigenous aircraft carrier already under construction while planning for follow-on carriers. The advent of anti-ship sea-skimming missiles now constitutes the major threat to surface fleets. Defence of (surface) fleets against such threats requires the platform (aerial, surface ship and/or submarines) to be engaged before weapon launch. And this makes integral air power a vital requirement for the defence of a surface fleet, not to talk of its strike roles against hostile vessels and many other contingencies. The challenge multiplies when faced with supersonic cruise missiles that China possesses (believed to be of Russian designs) and which Pakistan claims to have acquired. As it is, Pakistan is acquiring what would be the region's largest aerial maritime strike force supported by AWACS/AEW&C (airborne warning and control aircraft/ airborne early warning and control aircraft).

The assets of the Indian Air Force, especially the Su-30 MKI would obviously be available for naval tasks out at sea. But in order to meet long-term needs, we would have to bring up infrastructure south of the Vindhyas. As it is, the changes taking place in the air force, expanding its reach, demand a shift in the strategic deployment posture of the air force deeper into the country; and this

would help to complement the needs of the navy for air power cover, especially during the next 15 years or so when naval air power may find itself tied to land rather than be out at sea.