



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Lately there have been a great deal of assertive noises from China, including from official quarters. And yet it is very clear that it is neither prepared nor able to launch military action, leave alone war against India in spite of the fact that modernisation of the Indian armed forces is way behind schedule. This is not to imply that we can be complacent, as some are prone to be. But only to emphasise that we need to watch the evolving situation carefully and pay more attention to modernisation and filling the shortages of officers in the lower ranks in all three Services who would actually provide the cutting edge in war. And the real problem—as we saw in 1962, 1965 and in 1999—is that perceived weaknesses in the India's military capability by an adversary mostly become an invitation to aggression.

In fact, the unplanned decline of over 25 per cent of the combat force of the Indian Air Force (IAF) within a matter of five-odd years, which could be seen a decade earlier, should have received the urgent attention of the government and the people. And even a simple calculation would indicate that the shortfalls in authorised combat force levels in the Air Force and the Navy are due to lack of attention to modernisation. In the Air Force at least, it is clear that even a premature induction of the underpowered LCA and the acquisition of the 126 MRCA would not help to fill up the gaps in less than 10-15 years. And this is the reality while the air power balance is tilting

against us both in the north as well as in the west, not to talk of the strategic nexus between the two sides.

Here we run into a problem of understanding historically validated truths. We are largely weighed down by decision-making that gives priority to the lowest cost rather than quality. But this may in actual conditions prove more costly. For example, it has been reported in the media that the Finance Ministry has turned down the Defence Ministry's proposal to buy more tankers from Europe at a higher price than continuing with the purchase of the IL-78s from Uzbekistan which itself is highly dependent on Russia and some of the other former Soviet states. The European Airbus platform is a well tried and tested aircraft and no doubt more expensive than the IL-78s. But if the serviceability of the Airbus tanker is four times higher than that of the IL-78, then the decision should be made on the basis of the force available for use and not merely a notion of going for the least cost option. In war, serviceability and availability of operationally available aircraft make a big difference between victory and defeat. We may save money today, but may lose a lot in war tomorrow.