



EDITOR'S NOTE

In one of the most important policy statements by a political leader in the defence establishment, Shri M.M. Pallam Raju, Minister of State for Defence, candidly spelt out the status and future strategy of aerospace power in the country while delivering the "P.C. Lal Memorial Lecture" to an auditorium full of air warriors and strategic community to commemorate the former air chief Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal DFC, on March 19, 2007. In fact, we held up this issue of the journal waiting to see what would be said at the lecture. And we are happy to carry the text of the minister's speech. A professional himself, Shri Raju eloquently made out the case for the development of civil and military aerospace capabilities in the country to strengthen the foundations of the already robust economic growth so that it can move toward double digits.

The air force and the other two Services would require large investments for modernisation and force development to cope with the inevitable challenges associated with expanding trade and economic growth and deepening linkages with the outer world. But we need to emphasise the central issue that energising the aerospace industry in India must be a major priority for us if we are to provide the requisite technological and economic strength for a better tomorrow for our billion-plus people. The aerospace arena not only represents the highest ends of technological capability and, hence, vital for us to build our capabilities in this field, but it is also a high-cost and investment enterprise both in the civil field as well as for military purposes. For example, HAL alone is likely to be touching a turnover of over Rs. 50,000 crore (over \$11 billion) annually. The defence budget carries a tag of nearly Rs. 40,000 crore (nearly \$9 billion) for aerospace systems and spares this year. Rapid changes have been taking place in the last couple of years that require faster decision-making. The aerospace industry worldwide is holding its breath in anticipation of the openings, challenges and opportunities

that India clearly signifies. Aero India 2007 is sufficient proof – if indeed any was needed by now – of the global interest to be a partner in this century's greatest potential in aerospace opportunities.

It is in this milieu that there is a clear need for a catalyst to capture the mood that promises so much for the technological-economic growth of the country. And at this stage, that could best be provided, among other things, by the RFP for 126 multi-role combat aircraft that has been on the cards now for many years, but seems to have hit a glacier. It is time that this is firmly moved forward so that the process of procurement – complex, cumbersome and time consuming at the best of times – can commence its long journey. Combat aircraft are moving out of the air force inventory practically every day due to expiry of their design life. This has already reduced the combat force level, according to the minister of state for defence, by 18 per cent. And this may well hit a figure of around 25 per cent drop in the next couple of years in spite of the special sanction to acquire two squadrons of Su-30s (which would also take time to join the front line).

We have also watched China's military space programme acquire a new and worrisome dimension that does not seem to have hit the consciousness of the strategic community. One land-based missile destroying one satellite at 950-odd km (most of our satellites are below that altitude) also implies less than a dozen such missiles (and China has them in the hundreds) knocking off our total satellite assets. At the minimum, this could knock out the bulk of our communications facilities, however robust they might have been made otherwise. The implications for remote sensing and other uses, leave alone reconnaissance, nuclear strategy, etc. are obvious. But our mandarins continue to be confused about weaponisation and militarisation of space, and ground-based self-defence; and, hence, the tardiness about building space capabilities for our defence within the ambit of international treaty obligations and our aspirations to see space as a common heritage. The new threat to our space assets translating into action may, of course, be a worse case scenario and would remain hypothetical, but only as long as our relations with China are cooperative and friendly. But a country ignores military capability development that can impact on its security and prosperity at the risk of its future security.