

MILITARY TECHNOLOGY



Mohamad Ahmedullah

Aero India 2009

India's Coming of Age as a Major Defence Equipment Buyer

Aero India 2009 once again highlighted the immense buying potential of India for defence hardware, underscoring its position as the biggest buyer of international arms after Saudi Arabia. With every stall booked in four hangars, the organizers had to put together a new indoor display area to manage the flood of international and Indian companies wanting to be seen at the show. The show continues to grow year on year and the 2009 edition had around 600 exhibitors adding up to 20% more participation than the 2007 edition, according to the organizers of the event.

As is the practice in India, contracts are not announced at defence event but the buzz was out that the Aero India show would be followed by several big ticket purchases by India in the coming months. And sure enough, a few days after Aero India 2009, the government pleased international vendors to no end by announcing a 35% increase in defence budget to \$40 billion for the next fiscal starting April 2009. India's defence minister, Mr. A. K. Anthony has promised further increases by stating that India spends 2% of its GDP on defence while neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and China spend between 3% and 3.5%. All this must be sweet music to the ears of international companies banking on India for sales while defence expenditure is declining the world over in view of the global recession.

Focus on Indian Air Force procurement

"Aero India 2009 mirrored the environment in the air as there are many technology platforms on display compared to the Aero India 2007, This environment will drive the Indian aerospace industry to prosper in the coming years," said Air Chief Marshal Fali H Major, Chief of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The German Air Force brought the EUROFIGHTER to participate at Aero India 2009.

(All Photos via Author unless otherwise noted)

Speaking during a press conference at the event, he said modernisations, technology upgrades and new inductions are taking place more rapidly than ever before in Indian Air Force (IAF). Current plans call for a large-scale modernisation and expansion programme involving not only combat aircraft but also transport, AEW&C and maritime patrol/ASW assets, as well as new families of helicopters.

He said that Air Power is not just the ability to fight or bomb some places, but it lies in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capacities, which are being improved on a continuous basis. In this regard, India is already using unmanned ultra light flying machines and efforts are going on to make their payloads as effective as possible.

Referring to the declining number of fighting squadrons in the IAF he said the reason behind it is inducting newer technologies and fighting capabilities, which makes the ability more important than sheer numbers. But coming to number, India will achieve the Government authorized figure of 39 and half squadrons from the current level of 34 which may even decline a bit due to phasing out and modernizing operations. The reason for this is the long gestation period required to acquire new radars, aircraft, or platforms, Air Chief Marshal Fali Major said.

The importance of the show was underlined by the high level delegations including defence ministers sent by countries such as France, Peru, Bolivia, Surinam, Mongolia, Oman and the Maldives. The show organisers claimed that a total of 40 countries had sent delegates. To accommodate VVIPs, the organisers had to assemble a VVIP protocol lounge which appeared to always be occupied by uniformed senior officers from various countries. "Many countries have sent delegations not only to sell to India but also to buy", said a source from the show organiser, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). "Several of the delegations have specifically requested for meetings with Indian vendors such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) which makes aircraft and helicopters, Bharat Electronics Ltd. and Brahmos, the Indo-Russian cruise missile manufac-





Chief of Army Staff General Deepak Kapoor having a look at the SPIKE-MR/LR missile of Israel.

turer and many other Indian firms have interesting products that fit in nicely with price conscious buyers." And sure enough, HAL marked its first international sale by handing over the first of a batch of seven Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) DHRUV choppers to Ecuador. It quickly followed this up by signing up with Suriname for three CHETAK helicopters.

India's MMRCA tender

The biggest buzz at Aero India 2009 was about India's impending buy a total of 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) in a deal estimated to be worth \$10 billion. All five contenders - Boeing (F/A 18), Lock-



Chief of Indian Air Staff Air Chief Marshal F.H. Major addressing a press conference, at Aero India 2009.

heed Martin (F-16), MiG (MiG-35), Eurocopter (TYPHOON), Dassault (RAFALE) and SAAB (GRIPEN) unleashed a major PR and marketing blitz at Aero India 2009 with rumours flying thick and fast about who is in and who is out the race to one of the world's biggest fighter aircraft deals in recent times. The contenders kept the crowd of spectators enthralled with their flying displays. However, SAAB was conspicuous as it had not brought an aircraft for either static or flying displays. SAAB executives were otherwise busy denying an Indian newspaper report that the GRIPEN was out of contention for having failed to meet certain parameters of the tender requirements. No confirmation of this came from the Indian MOD and sources told this correspondent privately, "it is but certain that all five will have to be invited for trials if they meet all the tendering conditions. However, the conditions stipulate that the systems which India wants on the fighters have to be in service for a certain time. There could be issues here with some of the contenders. You could see some eliminations before the bidders are invited for flight trials or the elimination process could be kept waiting until after the trials which will give the evaluators sufficient data to accept or reject the bidders." Irrespective of how the selection process proceeds, it is certain that the Indian Air Force will be buying from only one manufacturer- which means the four others will have to pack their bags and leave.

Some manufacturers already are on a roll in India. Lockheed Martin is a good example - It has won a US government mandated foreign military sales (FMS) agreement to sell C130 J HERCULES transport planes to India and going by the frequency with which the US defence giant was



General Howie Chandler, Pacific Air Forces Commander, watches a C-17 GLOBEMASTER III demonstration at the Aero India 09 air show at Air Force Station Yelahanka, India. (Photo: USAF)

flying joy ride sorties in the C130 J at Aero India, it appeared mighty pleased with the sale and hoping for the big one with the F-16 as well.

Boeing too has got a share of the great Indian defence feeding frenzy with the sale of three P8I long range maritime reconnaissance aircraft worth \$2 billion at current dollar to rupee conversion rate. The aircraft to be delivered by 2013-2015 will replace the Russian TUPOLEV 142M in the Indian Navy's inventory.

While India has been an extremely promising market for most western manufacturers, for Russia it has been marked by declining numbers. While the MiG-35 is in the race for the MMRC tender, no "big" order has gone Russia's way since the Sukhoi-30MKI deal a few years ago. Differences over the price of the ADMIRAL GORSHKOV aircraft carrier are threatening the future of the MiG-29 carrier based fighters deal which India has already committed to buy. However, Russian officials at Aero India 2009 do not seem unduly perturbed. The "Helicopters of Russia" company has bid or is waiting to bid in all the combat helicopter tenders of the Indian MOD. A total of 320 helicopters is the kind of the market the company sees in India. "We have presented to the Indian Defence Ministry, our line of new models and modernised helicopters," said Igor Pshenichny, Deputy General Director of Helicopters of Russia at a press conference. Helicopters offered include the Ka-226T multirole helicopter and the Mi-28H NIGHT HUNTER helicopter gunship.

Pshenichny said his company had offered to modernise radar systems installed on Ka-31 helicopters used by the Indian Navy. He said the Helicopters of Russia Company would invest \$1.5 million in building a helicopter maintenance and service centre in northern India.

EADS though prominent in India has not been among the big orders except for group company MBDA which has a good hold over the Indian short-range missile requirement of the Indian Army. It recently won a contract to supply MILAN anti-tank missiles. In an apparent bid to get more of EADS defence products being sold in India, Bernhard Gerwert, CEO of Military Air Systems, an integrated Business Unit of EADS Defence & Security, said "India is our partner of choice and therefore we invite India

to join the EUROFIGHTER TYPHOON programme as a partner. We are ready to provide our operational, support, engineering and development capabilities to the Indian aerospace and defence sector which is growing fast and we want to grow together with this dynamic development."

Upgrades and conversion projects

While the focus at Aero India 2009 was largely on new procurement, upgrades and conversion projects too received some focus.

HAL Rotor Wing Research & Development Centre (RWRDC) Design Chief Dr Prasad Sampath said that HAL and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) will convert the CHETAK helicopter into an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). He said converting it into a rotary-wing UAV would be far cheaper than buying new UAVs so similar range and endurance. All it required was integration of the remote flying and command and control systems.

Even as the IAF retired the last of its MiG-23 fighters, it is in the process of commencing the modernisation programme of the JAGUAR fighters. Two contenders- Honeywell and Rolls Royce are in the race to provide a more powerful engine for the modernisation programme which will also include new avionics, communication and weapons systems.

Homeland Defence Equipment

Aero India 2009 had a good display of homeland defence equipment what with the focus of many countries on internal security. Raytheon displayed its airborne standoff radar (ASTOR) for Indian homeland security which would help to secure India's vast coastline which has assumed major importance in the wake of Mumbai terror attacks.

The ASTOR system provides 24-hour surveillance and target acquisition capability. It delivers wide area, all weather surveillance and reconnaissance imagery in near real time for peacekeeping, war fighting and homeland security needs. Thales too was displaying a range of homeland defence equipment in surveillance, intruder detection and C2.



Luftwaffe EUROFIGHTER conducts aerobatic manoeuvres during a demonstration over an F-16 FIGHTING FALCON at Aero India 09. (Photo: USAF)

