

The Indian Air Force at 85



Ground Realities

Not so long back, India had prided in its Air Force which was three times the size of its western adversary, the Pakistan Air Force and possessed a far more modern combat aircraft inventory than that of China's. Sadly, this has changed in the last two decades. The IAF is today down to some 32 combat squadrons, vis-a-vis the authorised 42, and the IAF's edge over the PAF is at an all-time low ratio of 1.5:1, instead of the desired 3:1.

China has an increasing number of state-of-the-art indigenously developed aircraft programmes which include two stealth fighter aircraft, a modern heavy transport aircraft and two attack helicopter types already in service. With China's defence budget being over three times that of India's, they will continue to pull away and surge ahead. Meanwhile, the IAF's acquisition plans have been mired by slow decision making and the very long delayed development of the indigenous Tejas LCA.

At the current pace, it may take the IAF another 15 years to reach the authorised 42 combat squadrons strength. A two-pronged approach is thus required to get back on track : drive hard the 'Make in India' plan, and accelerate procurement of already selected systems.

IAF current combat assets

The IAF's top-of-the-line air dominance fighter, with significant ability for surface strike, is the Sukhoi Su-30MKI, with 272 on order and already some 230 in service as on date. Three squadrons of MiG-29s are being upgraded jointly with Russia to UPG standards, as are 50 plus Dassault Mirage 2000 aircraft, brought up to Mirage 2000-5 Mk.2 standards with modern avionics and new weapons. The IAF has six squadrons of the Jaguar DPSA and two of



The IAF's fleet of Mirage 2000s are being upgraded to 'I' standards