

Re-energising



India's Air Power



Maj Gen Ashok Mehta, who took part in the recent roundtable conference organised by the *Delhi Forum for Strategic Studies* and *Vayu Aerospace & Defence Review* at New Delhi, encapsulates the IAF's current crisis

The story can now be told about how the IAF, confronting an operational crisis after a protracted delay of many years, got the MoD to issue an RFI for 114 single-engine fighter aircraft in 2016 to start a new process of establishing an additional fighter assembly line in addition to production of the existing LCA. But the MoD and IAF are adept in self-attribution. The new RFI, made public on 6 April seems to be a repeat of the follies committed in the procurement rigmarole of the MMRCA in 2007. The process



Moderating the Conference was Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Naval Staff and Lt Gen Kamal Davar, President DFSS and first Director-General Defence Intelligence Agency

and competitors are the same, though Defence Secretary Sanjay Mitra, at the DefExpo 2018 was evasive, telling the media "that these were early days." Earlier in Parliament, Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that the IAF will have 32 squadrons by 2020. Remember this government had inherited 34 squadrons in 2014. The new process may well end up like it did in 2015, unable to conclude the contract and instead outright purchase 36 Rafale aircraft forfeiting additional numbers and transfer of technology. The IAF crisis is so serious that it requires the 'Modi solution' of 2015 and not the conventional defence procurement route given the acute deficiencies in India's air power and looming threats.

Just a week before the RFI of 6 April, a Delhi-based think tank *Delhi Forum For Strategic Studies* along with *Vayu Aerospace & Defence Review* assembled a group of former senior Air Force, Navy and Army officers (including two former IAF Chiefs, a former Navy Chief, senior defence bureaucrats and ex-Chairman HAL, plus other strategic thinkers) to agonise on the IAF's dwindling combat fighter strength which would plummet from the present 31

squadrons to 24 combat squadrons by 2032 – unless urgent strategic decisions are taken by the highest executive. Following the day-long brainstorming it was decided that former IAF Chiefs would seek a meeting with Prime Minister Modi apprising him of the growing crisis and requesting he immediately order an IAF capability review against a two front collusive threat and simultaneously order a government-to-government 'Make in India' contract with the Company for its chosen single engine fighter (the Saab Gripen was repeatedly hinted at) and establishing a new production line integral with transfer of technology but avoiding the tedious MMRCA tendering process which it has already gone through. This route was tentatively explored in October 2016 along with Lockheed Martin's F-16 but the project mysteriously vanished. The *DFSS/Vayu* conclusions were thereafter circulated and hopefully have been given due consideration.

Then on 6 April, the IAF issued an elaborate RFI (73 pages) for single/twin engined fighters against the one page RFI for 100 to 200 single engine fighters circulated in October 2016. The latter effort faded away without progress, the new process now seeks 110 aircraft with responses expected by early-July, and RFP to be issued by end-2018. Wishful thinking? The RFP for the MMRCA took three years after issue of the RFI. In the event and after strenuous evaluation, the French Rafale was declared as the lowest bidder (L1) in 2012. But after inconclusive negotiations, the new Prime Minister Modi chose to go directly for purchase of 36 Rafales and the original MMRCA tender was thereafter cancelled without clarification on



Air Marshal Ajit Bhavnani, former Vice Chief of the Air Staff, making his presentation