

THE INDIAN AIR FORCE AT 86

Sanjay Badri-Maharaj reviews the IAF's declining squadron strength



Options and Challenges

At a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee of Defence on 27 October 2017, senior officers of the Indian Air Force, including then Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal SB Deo, were reportedly rebuked by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for “inappropriate responses” to the issue of declining squadron strength. It has been reported that the Indian Air Force virtually rehashed long standing issues of its depleting combat strength without offering any credible options. Besides being somewhat tiresome for the aforementioned Committee – having undoubtedly heard the same refrain for some time – the lack of solutions being offered is somewhat surprising considering that a number of steps are currently being considered to address the declining force levels. What is perhaps more serious is that some of these

steps are being pursued in somewhat half-hearted manner, which is not attributable to lack of budgetary support.

The IAF has recently issued another RFI for multi-role combat aircraft and the same six companies have responded with offering of the MiG-35, the Rafale, the Typhoon, the Gripen, the Lockheed-Martin F-16 and the Boeing F/A-18. Each parent company has reportedly tied-up with a local partner for the 114 aircraft in contention. Given the dreary history of fighter procurement in India, it is an open question as to whether this project too will produce any desired results.

The Current Situation

The Indian Air Force has an effective strength of 31 combat squadrons, which includes eleven squadrons of the Su-30MKI, three each of the MiG-29 and Mirage 2000

(currently undergoing an upgrade), six of the Jaguar (at the initial stage of an upgrade process) and seven of the MiG-21 variants. In addition, two upgraded MiG-27 squadrons continue to serve alongside the equivalent of half a squadron with the Tactics and Air Combat Development Establishment (TACDE). It is to be noted that early in the 21st century, peak strength of the Indian Air Force was approximately 39.5 combat squadrons, with four MiG-23BN and six MiG-27ML squadrons forming core of the strike assets and some seventeen MiG-21 FL/M/MF/bis squadrons forming bulk of the air defence force. These were complemented by Jaguar, Mirage 2000 and MiG-29 squadrons, which added a high-technology cutting edge to an otherwise mediocre inventory. Since then, the MiG-21 and MiG-27 squadrons have been in decline and the MiG-23s phased out completely.