

## Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur on the IAF's urgent need for **AIR COMBAT ENABLERS**



*Inflight refueling of an IAF A.50 AWACS*

Lost in the din of public discourse about the depleting (fighter) squadron strength of the Indian Air Force, is the equally dire need of combat enablers, without which the IAF would be severely handicapped in bringing force to bear in an optimal manner.

While a Flight Refuelling Aircraft (FRA) enhances strike ranges of fighters, an Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) platform creates a composite air picture by fusing the radar pictures from all ground—and air—based radars with its own. This composite air picture, along with feeds from onboard communication and

electronic sensors, is used by the AWACS to direct own strikes against the adversary as also control own fighters to intercept his incoming raids.

India's indigenous AWACS programme started in the 1980s, when an Avro transport aircraft was used as a technology demonstrator test bed for development of home-grown system. After many flight tests, spread agonisingly over a decade, the prototype crashed on 11 January 1999, tragically killing all eight on board; with this ended India's brief tryst with an indigenous early warning system till the phased array balance beam Embraer145-mounted AEW&C

programme started at the beginning of this century. In the interim, the Israeli-built Phalcon system on an Il-76 (known as the A-50) was procured with the three contracted aircraft arriving between 2009 and 2011.

The Embraer AEW&C aircraft has also been inducted with an Initial Operational Clearance certificate only — implying that certain operational parameters are yet to be achieved.

The IAF, thus, still has only three Phalcon AWACS and one AEW&C system (with the second due to be delivered this year). This is inadequate considering the security threat from Pakistan and China,