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STRATEGIC BOMBER FOR IAF

It could be argued that the strategic bomber would be far more vulnerable to air defences than ballistic missiles as, in any India-China conflict, the dominance of the air would be unachievable by either side. On the other hand, a multi-role fighter, with its range enhanced by air-to-air refuelling could fulfil most of the missions a strategic bomber could.

On 06 August, Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha (retd), while delivering the keynote address at the first edition of the 'Chanakya Dialogues' hosted by the Chanakya Foundation in New Delhi, briefly mentioned the need for the Indian Air Force (IAF) to have a bomber squadron. The word 'bomber' nudges the reader to hark back to Douhet who, more than a century ago, propounded some tenets for a strategic bombing doctrine; these included placing the strategic bomber as the basic weapon of air power, and defining the goal of strategic bombardment as gaining command of the air. Indeed, Douhet stated a belief that, whatever the enemy may do to stop them, a sufficient number of bombers will always get through to reach their targets. This belief was reiterated by the more famous utterance by Stanley Baldwin to the British Parliament in 1932, "The bomber will always get through." However, bomber operations during the World War II, with Air Marshal Arthur "Bomber" Harris endeavouring to validate Douhet's theories, failed

to do so decisively. Since then, the offence versus defence cycle has kept the bomber alive. IAF has no pure bomber in its inventory currently and there are reports that IAF may be getting a strategic bomber soon. This article examines related issues.

The Strategic Connotation

World War II saw colossal payloads of bombs dropped on enemy target systems with strategic value but, during the years after the war, the term 'strategic bomber' attained a

new connotation as a currency of nuclear projection as part of a 'triad.' India, with two inimical neighbours, both nuclear, has nuclear deterrence as a prominent strategic preoccupation. While the nuclear factor hinders a total war scenario involving the use of air dropped nuclear device, the use of long-range bombers to attack strategic targets deep inside enemy territory remains a distinct possibility in scenarios other than a nuclear exchange. This



Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha (retd), former Chief of the Air Staff of India.

capability of using a bomber or long-range multi-role aircraft for bombing enemy targets is thus an essential element of aerospace power.

The large bombers that evolved during World War II and thereafter, were capable of carrying nuclear bombs, but the huge conventional payload they could carry and deliver in a concentrated manner rendered them 'strategic' in both — the nuclear and the conventional — contexts. These were used largely against targets deep within enemy territory and very rarely near battle areas where the fighter was the tactical instrument of war. However, since then, stupendous advances in fighter aircraft technology and performance have blurred the delineation between the bomber (with its strategic connotation) and the fighter (which was a tactical instrument of war). Today's multi-role fighters have fairly long radii of action and can deliver clustered and concentrated, conventional and precision-guided weapons with impressive strategic effect; air-to-air refuelling enables even longer ranges, matching those of long-range strategic bombers.

Indian Context

So far, India has had only one bomber — the Canberra, which had no nuclear capability but a modest "strategic" reach with a conventional weapon load of 8 tons. After Canberra became obsolescent, no other bomber was considered as a replacement. Self-evidently, a strategic bomber is not required for Pakistani target systems although if we had one, we would use it for that purpose. China is the preoccupation, especially in view of its deployment in 2021 near the Indian borders of the H-6K strategic bomber (which the Chinese military defines as a strategic bomber capable of carrying more than 10 tons of load to a minimum range of 8,000 km without refuelling). Also disturbing is mention by the Chinese

government-run media of the military deeming PLAAB as a 'strategic force' --- a term previously used only in the context of Peoples Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). China reportedly has 231 H-6 and 36 H-6K strategic bombers (the largest bomber fleet in the world) and the Chinese perception is that strategic bombers would be able to carry Chinese attacks to the 'Second Island Chain' which, incidentally, includes islands in East Pacific, including Guam (Andersen Air Force Base) which is US territory and one of the four US forward bomber bases. India would definitely figure as possible prey for these strategic bombers. China's recent misadventures in Galwan and Pangong amidst ongoing territorial disputes with India, its frequent transgressions into India, its increasing militarisation of Tibet including an extensive road network and a railway line up to Lhasa, as well as the construction of dual-use airports in Tibet are all sobering thoughts which hold implicit warnings for us.

Modern multi-role fighters have huge payloads; IAF's Su-30 MKI, Mirage 2000, Jaguars, Rafales can carry impressive payloads of



GP CAPT AK SACHDEV (RETD)

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bombs and have the potential to be modified for nuclear weapon delivery. Moreover, all of them are capable of air-to-air refuelling and can reach fairly deep into Chinese territory.

India, with two inimical neighbours, **both nuclear**, has nuclear **deterrence** as a prominent **strategic preoccupation**



The Indian Air Force thanked the UAE Air Force for providing mid-air refuelling to its Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets on their way to Egypt.



China's new Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapons Concept (HAWC) missile.

Chinese bombers can reach Indian cities, airports and military installations

So, do we need a strategic bomber? In terms of nuclear deterrence, to match China's numbers (in strategic bombers and nuclear-capable missiles) would be an impossible task, because of the lead China has. Given the extent of Chinese territory, the number of strategic bombers required would be large. However, in view of the fact that Chinese bombers can reach Indian cities, airports and military installations, the desirability of having strategic bombers capable of holding a similar threat for at least a proportion of Chinese target systems is undebatable.

Concluding Remarks

An indigenous strategic bomber, despite all the Atmanirbhar hype, is beyond the visual horizon (at least five decades away at a rough estimate) and Russia's Tu-160 (Russian name translates to 'White Swan' while NATO reports it as 'Blackjack') is on offer; six Tu-160s (out of the 35 Russia possesses) are ostensibly in the shopping cart. With a length of 54.1 metres and a wingspan of 55.7 metres, it has an internal payload capacity of 45 tons and

is the largest, fastest and heaviest strategic bomber in the world. With a max speed of 2,220 kmph, it can travel at twice the speed of sound. Its range of 12,300 km (without air-to-air refuelling) is very impressive although the fact that being a strategic asset, IAF would have to base it far from the Chinese and Pakistani borders would detract somewhat from that figure. It first flew in 1987 but has been improved with passing years and the advent of technology. Acquiring it now would also have the possible advantage of being offered the new Russian stealth strategic bomber PAK DA which is under development and likely to fly in the next 2 to 3 years (although the Ukraine War has put a dampener on that project).

However, the Tu-160 price tag — not yet made public — would be sobering. Even the US has had debates about the cost versus benefits of strategic bombers. Moreover, a possible strategic bomber acquisition needs to be seen against the backdrop of the dwindling fighter squadron strength, down to 31 against a sanctioned 42 (and a needed much higher figure possibly).

A 126 Medium Multi Role Combat Aircraft deal was scuttled by the government and the ongoing 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft deal limps along; one of the unstated reasons is a budgetary constraint.

That brings us to the all-important question of the comparative benefits of bolstering the fighter squadron strength vis a vis acquiring strategic bombers. Can our strategic missile systems serve the same purpose that strategic bombers (in small numbers, namely six only) would? Or do we want to have the third leg of the nuclear triad in place as a matter of status statement (India would be the fourth country after the US, Russia and China to possess a long-range strategic bomber)? It could be argued that the strategic bomber would be far more vulnerable to air defences than ballistic missiles as, in any India-China conflict, the dominance of the air would be unachievable by either side. On the other hand, a multi-role fighter, with its range enhanced by air-to-air refuelling could fulfil most of the missions a strategic bomber could. To conclude, as long as the "need" of having at least 42 fighter squadrons remains unfulfilled, the strategic bomber must remain a "want". **DSA**