Need for IAF's Strategic Thinking

What is the issue?

- The first Rafale fighter aircraft for the Indian Air Force (IAF) was recently handed over to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in France.
- Even as the Indian Air Force gets ready to welcome its new acquisitions, ad hocism should give way to strategic thinking.

What is the significance?

- The receiving of Rafale fighter aircraft is the latest in a series of much-needed yet delayed steps to bolster the IAF's combat capabilities.
- The IAF has historically been one of the best-equipped forces in the region.
- However, it has seen its advantage, particularly quantitative, against China and Pakistan narrow dramatically over the past two decades.
- The IAF is today faced with the twin tasks -
    i. of having to acquire technological superiority over its two adversaries
    ii. of gathering enough aircraft to start off any collusive misadventures
- On the technological front, the Rafale jet offers an unprecedented air-to-air capability in the form of the MBDA Meteor missile.
- [MBDA is a European developer and manufacturer of missiles]
- Rafale also offers a new long-range precision strike capability with the MBDA's SCALP air-launched cruise missile.
- [The Storm Shadow / SCALP is a long-range, air-launched, stand-off attack missile]
- Rafale also provides the IAF with a combat platform that is more completely and tightly integrated by the original equipment manufacturer.
- This offers an advantage over any number of modified and upgraded aircraft presently in service.
- The Indian government is paying to Dassault (for Rafale) to not only modify and certify the aircraft to an exacting specification but also to stand by its reliability in service.
- This is something that has never been done with a fighter aircraft in Indian service to date.

What are the challenges to IAF's air power?

- Air power is an expensive business.

- Moreover, there is a scenario where manpower and running costs consume a huge share of the budget.
- Given this, the principal impediment to a comprehensive renewal of the IAF is a financial one.
- As such, lower capital costs and lower sustainment costs have to go hand in hand.
- In the indigenous option, the HAL's Tejas Light Combat Aircraft is domestically produced and paid for mostly in rupees.
- It is both fiscally attractive and certainly good enough to replace the IAF's ageing MiG-21 and MiG-27 fleet as it stands.
- However, non-compliance with a 1980s Air Staff Requirement (specifications for design and development of aircraft) and low production rates continue to raise questions about MIG's future.

What are the other challenges?

- **Defence budgets** have remained effectively flat for a long time, and with a slowing economy, an increase in capital outlay is not likely.
- **Procurement funding** will also necessarily have to compete with funding for research and development for upcoming domestic projects.
- These include the redesigned LCA Mk.2 and fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA).
- Finally, even if all near-term procurements proceed to plan, there is still much to be desired.
- These include training of air and ground crew, and building of infrastructure.
- Besides, actually operationalising new types will pose their own challenges that will slow the effective rate of force accretion.
- **Neighbourhood** - The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) are not standing still.
- The PAF is over-burdened with a number of legacy issues that are similar to the IAF.
- Pakistan is however well placed to recapitalise a significant proportion of its air force with a relatively modern aircraft.
- E.g. the availability of the Sino-Pak JF-17 cheaply and in numbers, along with access to a wide range of Chinese weaponry developed for the type
- As China ramps up its fifth-generation aircraft programmes and unit costs drop, there is little doubt these platforms will also find their way into Pakistan.

What is the way forward?

- While primarily oriented toward taking on the U.S. military in the Pacific and beyond, China's formidable aerial arsenal cannot be ignored by India.

- So, as the IAF gets ready to welcome its new acquisitions, it should be clear about the challenges it faces.
- Notably, India’s strategic and operational environment is undergoing a dramatic transformation.
- Ad hocism should give way to strategic thinking if these challenges are to be effectively met.

Source: The Hindu

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