

## Defence Acquisitions

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The Indian armed forces are heavily dependent upon the import of weapons, armaments and weapon delivery systems. Our indigenisation programme has not given us the self sufficiency whereby we could manufacture a large part of our own requirements. In the international arms market there are a number of players, each eager to either monopolise or acquire a large share in our own arms purchase programme. Because weapons and delivery systems are very costly and our armed forces are very large in numbers any defence deal is always of several thousand crores of rupees. The stakes are so high that there are no means, fair or foul, which arms suppliers will not use to obtain an order from India. The arms bazaar does have a great deal of corruption.

The army needs tanks, artillery pieces, infantry weapons, helicopters and all sorts of other weapon systems because in the last few decades we have purchased nothing. The Air Force need both fixed wing and rotary aircraft, with particular emphasis on acquisition of modern fighter aircraft. At present we have lost our edge even over Pakistan and we have two major threats to face, one from Pakistan and the other from China. The Navy needs at least two more aircraft carriers, several nuclear and conventional submarines, surface vessels such as destroyers and frigates in order to have a balanced blue water Navy. Some progress is being made by the Navy in indigenous vessel construction, but the Air Force clearly needs to import Raphaele Fighters, rotary aircraft for VIP, combat and transport purposes and the Army urgently needs fresh induction of artillery. The systems to be acquired have undergone extensive testing and the three Services have been able to narrow down their choices. The process of acquisition is quite advanced, but not yet completed. It is in this environment that on the basis of some complaint every deal is put on hold. Three examples of this are the Agusta Westland helicopter acquisition, signing of the final agreement regarding Raphaele Fighter and the acquisition of 155mm guns for the Army. The media, print and electronic, has suddenly started sniffing out corruption in all these cases, the helicopter deal is virtually off and one doubts whether in the next generation of two we shall ever acquire the fighter aircraft and the guns that we need.

The method employed by the media, especially television, does not appear to be very ethical. If we take the VVIP helicopter deal, anchors of programmes on various televisions channels, led by Arnab Goswami of Times Now, first make an announcement that the channel has unearthed corruption, then scraps of paper are briefly shown as the documentary proof with the channel, then some panelists are called, one unfortunate person is grilled and then the channel states that more sensation will follow. What is written on those sheets is not known except to the extent that the anchor enlightens us, whether they are a complete document in themselves or whether they are part of a larger whole or are being read out of context, whether they are at all relevant to the case under discussion, is never made known fully. For example, in one channel there is reference to a person who sued Dassault Corporation for an amount he claimed as commission for some sale of Mirage 2000 aircraft to India and from this a conclusion was sought to be arrived at that as the Raphaele is also built by the same company which manufacturers Mirage 2000, therefore, it is suspect. The Bofors gun purchase were attempted to be aborted, the fact that Sweden had given all the drawings and specifications of the gun, which

lay dormant in the Defence Ministry for years, but were good enough for our ordnance factories to manufacture the gun is not even mentioned by the media. Instead every deal for the 155 mm gun, whether Swedish, South African or originating from Singapore, has been sabotaged by allegations of corruption. If government allows this to happen with the Raphaele, we might as well totally disarm the Defence Forces, disband them and employ village chowkidars armed with lathis to face Pakistan and China.

Reverting specifically to the Agusta Westland helicopter purchase, the purchase has taken almost fifteen years to reach a stage of completion. The Air Force wants to phase out the Russian MI8 helicopters used for VIP duty because they have outlived their life. The original specifications for the replacement aircraft would have left only one vendor in the field. Therefore, the specifications were altered to allow more companies to bid for the aircraft. Because the order was for only twelve aircraft no company, other than one which met some of the requirements and would become a single vendor, would find it profitable to change the design and production line to meet these requirements. The decision to change the specifications and enlarge the scope of participation was correct and four different companies gave their bids. Of these the bid by Finmeccanica was found to be both technically and financially advantageous and the order was placed with the company. Three aircraft arrived. Thereafter it was alleged by some persons arrested in Italy that they paid bribes to Indian middlemen and officials in this case. There is no allegation that the helicopters are substandard, the financial bid not competitive and to our advantage, or that the performance of the aircraft is not satisfactory. Under these circumstances to panic and cancel the deal is not justified. If there is corruption punish the guilty. What is more, impose a heavy fine on Finmeccanica for violating the integrity clause, but for heaven's sake do not foreclose the deal and deprive ourselves of helicopters we need, thus exposing VVIPs to necessary risk because they are forced to fly in obsolete helicopters.

In any case the media has painted a picture of India as being utterly corrupt and government, by its constant dithering, has proved that India is not a country with which anyone should have any commercial relationship. The media and government are causing incalculable damage to India's image and have, in combination, made our armed forces vulnerable and, perhaps, increasingly incapable of neutralising our enemies. It is about time that government stood firm, made the process of large scale acquisition totally straight forward and open for inspection and proved its own resolve to take quick and hard decisions. As it is, by the time we acquire a weapon system so much time has elapsed that the system itself is obsolete by the time it is made operational. That certainly leaves our armed forces in an unenviable situation. The people who thus expose India to foreign adventurism are the real traitors.

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