



THE EXPANDING HORIZONS OF CIVIL AVIATION & INDIAN AIR FORCE

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The Decision

A Government of India press release dated May 08, 2018 conveyed a significant decision by Shri Suresh Prabhu the Union minister in charge of Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) which pertained to giving “in principle” approval to two new “greenfield” international airports at Pune (Purander, Maharashtra) and Jewar (NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh).¹ These approvals have been granted after having obtained relevant clearances from the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The development of these international airports along with the overall plan of developing 56 new airports under the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS)-UDAN² is in line with the overall commitment for promoting infrastructure development in the hitherto unconnected parts of the country.

Earlier, on April 26, 2018 the minister had also expressed his intention to promote indigenous manufacturing of aviation equipment and aircraft.³ The impact of these intentions and decisions on the future aviation landscape, of which Indian Air Force

(IAF) is one of the stakeholder, needs a closer examination so that the requirements of IAF are dovetailed in the overall national plan. These requirements mainly pertain to the availability of minimal infrastructure in every airfield to facilitate operations by at least two to three fighter aircraft (as a part of Operations Readiness Platform-ORP operations) as well as developing the necessary critical indigenous manufacturing capability as a part of an Indian aviation ecosystem.

IAF- A Stakeholder

The IAF has been a part of the Indian aviation ecosystem both as an operator as well as the recipient of manufactured products. It also extends its support to both scheduled and non-scheduled civil flights operating from its airbases around the country. However, what is perhaps not well known is that IAF was also the first indigenous manufacturer of a transport aircraft.

IAF was the first to establish a production line to indigenously manufacture the 45 seater “Avro HS-748” transport aircraft which undertook its first

flight on November 01, 1961 at Air Force Station, Kanpur.⁴ As per the terms of the production license obtained from A. V. Roe & Co. of Manchester (a subsidiary of Hawker Siddley-HS), the entire airframe including the wings were manufactured using indigenous rigs while other parts such as the engines (Rolls Royce Dart series), undercarriage system and electronics were sourced from Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) and fitted locally. This manufacturing process was later transferred to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and this production line became the HAL Kanpur division.

This aircraft manufacturing capability underwent a further expansion in 1983 with HAL-Kanpur division undertaking licensed manufacturing of the 19 seater Dornier (Do)-228 aircraft primarily for meeting the needs of the Indian Armed forces.⁵ On December 22, 2017 HAL also displayed a civil version of the Do-228 which has been issued necessary certification by the Directorate General Civil Aviation (DGCA) for civil operations. The stated aim for it was to provide a cost effective platform to be used under the RCS-UDAN scheme.⁶

IAF on its part has also operationalised several airfields in the hitherto inaccessible border regions of the country including those of Ziro, Along, Mechuka, Walong, Passighat and Tuting in Arunachal Pradesh.⁷ IAF fixed wing aircraft have been routinely operating from the Airports Authority of India (AAI) controlled airbases as also from certain designated portions of the national

highways.⁸ In February 2018 two Su-30 MkI aircraft also operated from the Jolly Grant airport in Dehradun.⁹ The Pakyong airport in Sikkim which was approved as a greenfield project in 2008 is likely to be utilised by the IAF too.¹⁰ On March 05, 2018 an IAF Dornier became the first aircraft to land at the airport paving way for the commencement of commercial flight operations scheduled for a later date.¹¹ These developments make the IAF, and by implication the MoD, a major stakeholder in these dual use infrastructure projects which are also likely to include dual use helipads for helicopter operations.

The Future Prospect

The paucity of land and national security imperatives which require necessary preparedness of the armed forces need to be looked at in a holistic manner. In order to meet these challenges, there is a need for continued involvement of IAF with the MoCA plan for developing the necessary infrastructure (learning from the experience gained during the IAF deployments in various civil airfields) as also the benefits which may accrue for developing an indigenous aviation manufacturing eco system, which can be supported by IAF with its experience in operating as well as manufacturing transport aircraft. It is therefore prudent that the role of the MoD and IAF as the principle stakeholder should extend beyond issuance of routine “no objection certificate” and must include the proposals for catering to the IAF operational and infrastructure requirements ranging from the provisioning of a dedicated tarmac area to

enforcing of Foreign Object Damage (FOD) prevention measures specifically intended to prevent engine damage to the low slung engines of fighter aircraft, within the proposed greenfield airports too. This is because even these are likely to be dual use airports and thus need to be designed to facilitate operations by IAF aircraft also.

Additionally, IAF also must continue to be a part of the developing aviation manufacturing ecosystem, even in the civil aviation sector, by setting relevant benchmarks based upon its requirements.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ PIB,GoI, "Committed to augmentation of Airport capacity through NABH (Nextgen Airports For Bharat) Nirman initiative : Suresh Prabhu Site Clearance Approval for setting up of Greenfield International Airport at Purander, Pune granted In-principle approval accorded to Govt of Uttar Pradesh for setting up of Noida International Greenfield Airport at Jewar", <http://pib.nic.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1531634> accessed on May 21,2018

² Airports Authority of India, Regional Connectivity Scheme-RCS Udan <https://www.aai.aero/en/rcs-udan>

³ PIB,GoI, "Manufacturing of Planes under Make In India and Safety & Security in Aviation Sector to be top priority: Suresh Prabhu Posted On: 26 APR 2018", <http://pib.nic.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1530398> accessed on May 21,2018

⁴ A. L. Saigal, Ed., "Birth of An Air Force: The Memoirs of Air Vice Marshal Harjinder Singh", (New Delhi: Palit & Palit Publishers, 1977), pp. 268-280

⁵ DGCA, "APPROVED FIRMS -DELHI REGION- Para 7 ", <http://dgca.nic.in/firms/DELHItot.pdf> accessed on May 21,2018

⁶ Ashwani Phadnis, Business Line, " Advantage Udan as 'Civilian' Dornier Takes Off", <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistic>

s/advantage-udan-as-civilian-dornier-takes-off/article10000625.ece accessed on May 21,2018

⁷ Defense Update, "India Allows Civilian Flights to Land at Six Military Airports Along China Border -April 22,2017", <https://defenceupdate.in/india-allows-civilian-flights-land-six-military-airports-along-china-border/> accessed

⁸ PIB,GoI, "Indian Air Force(IAF) Mirage -2000 Lands at Yamuna Expressway-May 21,2015", <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=121896> accessed on May 21,2018

⁹ PIB,GoI, "Activation of Civil Airfield: Dehradun-Feb 16,2018", <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=176592> accessed on May 21,2018

¹⁰ Defencenews, "An Engineering Marvel - Strategic Dual Use Airport in Sikkim to be inaugurated soon- May 09,2018, <http://defencenews.in/article/An-Engineering-Marvel---Strategic-Dual-Use-Airport-in-Sikkim-to-be-inaugurated-soon-558115> accessed on May 21,2018

¹¹ North East Today, "IAF's Dornier Aircraft Lands at Pakyong Airport-March 05,2018", <https://www.northeasttoday.in/iafs-dornier-aircraft-lands-at-pakyong-airport/> accessed on May 28,2018