



Does India really need a strategic bomber?



(Photo by Vitaly Kuzmin taken at the Moscow Victory Day Parade)

It has been a long debated issue whether India should consider a long range strategic bomber or not and once again this issue flared up recently when the former Indian Air Force Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha stated in a dialogue with Chanakya Forum that Indian strategic command forces needed a squadron of such bombers. The need for these has become more important as there are multiple roles that simply cannot be replicated with multirole aircraft like Rafale and Su-30MKI's. However, a major question also arises that given the condition of Indian defence where IAF is not able to meet its basic requirement of combat aircraft; so, does having a "luxury" like strategic bombers make any sense?

The modern active strategic bombers currently in service are Northrop Grumman B-2 spirit, Boeing B-52 Stratofortress, Rockwell B-1 Lancer with United States, Xian H-6 with China and Tupolev Tu-95, Tu-22M and Tu-160 with Russia. As of now only three nations, ie, US, Russia and China operate strategic bombers. Multiple futuristic bombers like B-21 Raider from US, Xian H-20 from China and Tu PAK-DA from Russia are under development with these featuring improved stealth characteristics and longer endurance.

Utility of Strategic bombers from Indian perspective

A strategic bomber is like an aircraft carrier of skies, it would give a similar increase in firepower and physiological impact as an aircraft carrier does to an enemy's navy. The bomber that can be most likely operated by India in future is the Russian Tu-160 White Swan having a maximum range of 12,000 kms, ability to carry 45,000 kgs of weapon load and travel at 2.05 Mach (faster than multiple combat aircraft). The strategic bombers can perform multiple roles in general and can prove to be even more efficient from an Indian perspective as we are going to discuss in detail.

Neutralising enemy air defence systems: The reason why we believe a quote from the distant past that "A bomber will always get through, no matters what defensive systems are used" is still valid today is because strategic bombers like Tu-160 and B-1 Lancer can carry long range standoff weapons that can easily neutralise air defence systems as modern as they get. Hypothetically if a Tu-160 is modified to carry 10 air launched BrahMos missiles with extended range in future, it can easily release this payload from a safer distance and can rain a havoc over enemy SAM sites. The collapse of ADS can easily make way

for other aerial assets or bombers to march quite deep into a country.

A counter argument could be that enemy ADS can also be suppressed by ground based missile launchers, however it should be understood that the ground base launchers are stationary targets that are themselves under threat of enemy cruise missiles while relatively it is difficult to shoot or intercept a bomber which is constantly maneuvering and moving at speed of Mach-2 at a distance that is out of range of enemy SAMs. It should also be understood from Indian perspective that not every nation operates ADS as deadly as S-400s so it would make airspace of our western neighbors as a cakewalk, deep punitive strikes like Balakot could be done anytime without much consideration, while in regions like Ladakh the ADS either of China or India have reduced potential due to hilly terrain which creates line of sight issues and can drastically reduce effective combat range of ADS, the bombers on the other hand with advantage of height can make Chinese ADS even more vulnerable to strike.

The Indian Ocean region: If strategic bombers are procured then from Indian perspective they'll find its most utility in the Indian Ocean region. The first Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Lt. Gen. David Deptula of USAF wrote in an air force magazine, "In a modern threat environment, especially in Asia Pacific region, the advantage of using bombers in a maritime strike role is becoming more relevant to future military strategies, plan and budget priorities", he further emphasised on how bombers could strike mobile naval assets with precision in no time and at a less risk than what a naval warship would face. It should also be understood that once a naval warship had exhausted its weapon load, it would have to travel back to coast to get them refilled, the process could take days or even weeks depending on distance from shores while at same time the warship itself remains a potential target to offensive assets. On the other hand a bomber having supersonic speed with adequate range could reach at