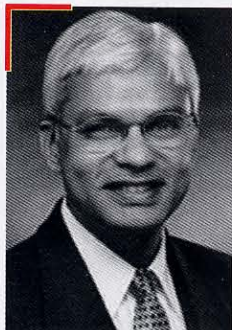


Natural Born Partners

For the US, training and equipment of the IAF pilots make them perfect collaborators



■ Ashley J. Tellis

On 16 February 2004, eight F-15C fighters from the United States Air Force's (USAF) 3rd Wing located at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, supported by a tanker and air-lift control element from Travis Air Force Base, California, began Cope

telling the Senate Appropriations defence subcommittee that the results of Cope India were 'very revealing,' and Rep. Duke Cunningham (R-CA) was supposed to have declared that US F-15Cs participating in the exercise were defeated more than 90 per cent of the time by the IAF. The bottom line, according to various USAF officials who have been quoted on this issue, was that continued US air dominance required restructuring its adversary training and acquiring a new stealth fighter, the F-22, because as Col Mike Snodgrass, commander of the 3rd Wing at Elmendorf put it, "We've taken (the F-15) about as far as we can and it's now time to move to the next generation." Soon after this story appeared, the internet and various blogs focussed on defence issues soon lighted up with furious discussions asking, 'Are Indian fighter pilots better than US fighter pilots?'

This is indeed a provocative question. What has been published thus far about Cope India, however, does not permit a clear answer and the IAF, very wisely, has not succumbed to any triumphalism – for good reason. To reach a reasoned conclusion about the quality of US versus Indian pilots would require many more exercises like Cope India, restricting participation to pilots of only equivalent experience, and allowing both sides to fly their airplanes to the limits of their aerodynamic performance and their sensors and weapons to the limits of their capability. These conditions are difficult to incorporate in any exercise for reasons of both safety and operational security. Other factors specific to Cope India also make judging the quality of US pilots a difficult matter in its own right. For one thing, the American contingent was smaller in number compared to its counterpart: when exercises involve highly disparate opposing numbers like the 4-on-12 fights that characterised some aspects of Cope India, the resulting outcomes are dependent on more than simply pilot quality. There are also issues relating to dispari-

ty of doctrine. USAF fighter aircraft employed in both offensive and defensive counter-air operations in a real conflict would never be committed without supporting high-value assets like the E-3A AWACS and RC-135 Rivet Joint. In contrast, USAF F-15s at Gwalior had to rely exclusively on their relatively shorter-ranged onboard radars, with their air-to-air weapons too limited by artificial exercise constraints. Indian pilots too faced limitations, but of a different sort that make comparison difficult. For the Indian military in general, protecting expensive combat assets is an important concern. The Indian defence budget is simply not large enough to allow such systems to be easily sacrificed. This constraint explains why even the best Indian pilots are often risk averse: while they are happy to push their sophisticated air planes to their limit, they are reluctant to employ them in tactically risky ways. This is an issue of ethos, which complicates how pilot quality in an otherwise proficient force may be judged.

While it is entirely inappropriate, therefore, to pan US combat performance on the basis of a scripted exercise like Cope India – remember the USAF has its own self-interested reasons for advertising the exercise as a 'wake up call' – the large volume of published reporting does underline two important facts about the Indian Air Force.

First, the IAF emphasis on acquiring the best available technology Indian resources can buy is a smart one. Unlike land combat, where small relative differences in technology can be compensated for by superior motivation, air (and to a lesser degree naval) warfare is far less forgiving where disparities in weapon systems quality is concerned. The IAF brought to Cope India four of its best combat aircraft: the Mirage 2000, which the IAF employs for both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions; the Mig-29, a late generation tactical air combat aircraft with excellent manoeuvring capabilities; the refurbished Mig-21-

India 2004, a dissimilar air combat exercise, at the Gwalior air base in central India. The Indian Air Force (IAF) pulled together a diverse force consisting of older model Su-30Ks, the newly upgraded MiG-21 (93) bis, MiG-29s, Mirage 2000H/THs, and MiG-27MLs, for the weeklong effort aimed at testing counter-air capabilities and manoeuvring proficiency. As might have been expected, this exercise, the first in over 40 years between the two air forces, received considerable attention because it showcased the dramatic transformation in bilateral relations begun by President Bush and then-Prime Minister Vajpayee. After its completion, public interest predictably waned as several other activities associated with US-India defence cooperation unfolded in turn.

Cope India 2004, however, was destined to receive renewed attention. On 4 June 2004, Hampton Stephens writing in 'Inside the Air Force' noted that the exercise had caused USAF officers 'to re-evaluate the way the service trains its fighter pilots, while bolstering the case for buying the F/A-22 as a way to ensure continued air dominance for the United States.' The story further argued, 'the surprising sophistication of Indian fighter aircraft and skill of Indian pilots... should provide a reality check for those who had assumed unquestioned US air superiority...' General John Jumper, USAF Chief of Staff, was quoted as

Hampton Stephens writing in 'Inside the Air Force' noted that, 'the surprising sophistication of Indian fighter aircraft and skill of Indian pilots... should provide a reality check for those who had assumed unquestioned US air superiority...'

93 'Bison,' which simulated its new beyond visual range missile capabilities; and the Su-30K Flanker, which despite being a simulacrum of the MKI version (that the IAF chose not to field in this exercise) acquitted itself impressively. Each of these aircraft came equipped with a variety of Indian and international subsystems not usually found on the 'standard' models. In all the war fighting dimensions tested out in Cope India – defensive and offensive counter air and close air combat – the quality of these aircraft, their sensors, their electronic warfare and countermeasures equipment, and their weapons, albeit simulated within exercise restrictions, sufficiently impressed both their American flying counterparts

2004 has provided good reason to reconsider this mythology. In critical areas that make a difference to air combat outcomes – knowledge of one's own aircraft, situational awareness, safety, electronic warfare, and defensive and offensive weapons employment – IAF pilots demonstrated a proficiency that would make them formidable opponents in any sub-continental conflict involving either Pakistan or China. Where the latter is concerned, the difference in pilot proficiency alone – especially in regards to the Su-30 platform, which in different variants is operated by both the Indian and Chinese Air Forces – is remarkable. Whereas Chinese pilots appear to be barely graduating from simplistic and

spares prevented Indian pilots from chalking up the flying hours required to sustain a world-class air arm. Today, Indian pilots fly in excess of 200 flying hours annually, on par with the best Western air forces. Although these levels admittedly vary by squadron, they do imply that the best units will demonstrate the kind of proficiency that produces, in Col Snodgrass' words, 'an IAF pilot who was very proficient in his aircraft and smart on tactics.'

These two realities make the IAF an attractive US partner in future combined operations in Asia. However, the IAF has to go much further before that promise is realised. It will need to, inter alia: demonstrate increased operating reach through a maturation of its air-to-air refuelling capabilities (as will be displayed in Cooperative Cope Thunder); standardise on its IFF capabilities to ensure compatibility with Western systems; adapt its doctrine for combined operations; and, develop myriad other capabilities ranging from compatible fuels to hospitable infrastructure. The IAF, obviously, cannot embark on this course without appropriate political direction. And it is here that the most important decision has to be made: Can New Delhi conceive of itself as Washington's operational partner in some future 'coalition of the willing?' In at least two instances in the recent past, India answered this question in the affirmative. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the government of India took the bold step of offering Washington unprecedented access to a variety of Indian military facilities in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Similarly, the Indian Navy began escorting high value US shipping through the Straits of Malacca as part of a national commitment to assisting the war against terrorism.

While both these events occurred against a specific political backdrop, the larger question will not go away. The United States will remain the pre-eminent power in the international system for a long time to come. It will on occasion seek contributions from friends and allies to create episodic coalitions of the willing. India, because of its capabilities and its values, remains a desirable potential partner in any such effort. While it is not possible to discern how New Delhi might respond to any future American entreaty in this regard, Cope India clearly underscored that, at least as far as the air force is concerned, India has the capacity to make an outstanding contribution – if it wants to. ●
(Ashley J. Tellis is Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, US)



American Air Force officers during Cope India in Gwalior

and the USAF leadership back home. When matched to the technological additions either underway or on the horizon – air-to-air refuelling and airborne early warning – the fighter arm of the IAF gives it capabilities that most air forces in the world would simply envy.

Second, the IAF has demonstrated that getting the most out of its sophisticated airplanes requires constant attention to training and tactics. The received wisdom about the two principal air forces in the Indian subcontinent is that the Pakistan Air Force is the best trained, while the Indian Air Force is the best equipped. Cope India

highly formulaic manoeuvres that characterised their employment of the SU-30MKK, their Indian counterparts are far more adventurous. Although the latter fly predominantly Russian airplanes, they have deliberately rejected Soviet style tactics in favour of various indigenous routines that emphasise greater autonomy and individual initiative. Parenthetically, the same is true of India's armoured forces, which deploy Russian equipment, but have eschewed Soviet armour doctrines and employment concepts. For a brief period after the Soviet collapse, the IAF's training regimen was devastated as shortages of