

CURRENT EVENTS

War on skies

Military resists attempts to grab airspace and spectrum

By Monika Shinghal

Richa Agarwal, CEO of Bareilly-based garment manufacturing firm PN Global, is having a tough time. She often has to travel to the Gulf, Europe and most of the big Indian cities, but Bareilly doesn't have an airport. To reach the nearest airport, the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi, she has to spend a lot of time travelling by rail. So she tries to keep in touch with her clients through her cell phone. But with call congestion rates as high as 70 per cent, her conference calls get disconnected. Only three out of her ten mobile calls get through.

She blames her mobile operator and the civil aviation ministry for the dip in her sales. But the real problem lies elsewhere. It is the scarcity of spectrum and airspace, both held by the armed forces, which has made life difficult for her.

Although the aviation industry is booming with frequent mergers and acquisitions, the infrastructure has

not grown. Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, an aviation consultancy firm, reports that domestic passenger movement will grow at a rate of 20-25 per cent leading to a passenger traffic movement of 120 million by 2010. To fly them, 250 more aircraft are needed by 2012.

But the problem is that there won't be enough space in the sky for all of them to fly. Currently, 35 per cent of the total Indian airspace is for military operations and the remaining 65 per cent for civil aviation. The Indian Air Force monitors not only the military space but also the civil space through a network of radar and reporting centres.

The Air Force is supposed to know about every aircraft flying through the Indian space. Any miscommunication on this can lead to problems. For instance, on July 31 last year a United States Air Force Boeing-747 flying from Nainbati to Hong Kong was refused entry into the Indian airspace owing to a suspicious change in its particulars from military to civil. It was asked to land at Mumbai for veri-



Fighting for space: By 2012, India will need 250 more aircraft

fication. It was later confirmed that it was a civil registered aircraft and that there was a mix-up by Nainbati air traffic control in forwarding the details.

The vigil has been upgraded since the Purulia incident a decade ago when a chartered plane entered the Indian airspace and dropped arms. Air Force officials say that they are in constant training and patrolling, and need their own space. As a former Air Force chief once put it, there are four times more military planes flying at any given point of time in the Indian airspace than India-registered civil planes.

Military air activity gets intense during exercises. Last September, an IAF fighter formation was found flying too close to a civil airliner during Exercise Gagan Shakti. Though the fighter aircraft did not pose any threat to the civil aircraft, the incident did cause some panic.

The problem now is that the draft Civil Aviation Policy 2020 proposes to release more airspace from the

IAF's control for civil use. The proposal has not gone down well with the defence ministry. It has sought a comprehensive national aviation policy to be prepared after consulting the IAF. In fact, IAF chief openly expressed his reservations on the defence ministry not being consulted in drafting the policy.

"There is no squabble between the civil airlines and the IAF over airspace," said Air Vice-Marshal DC. Kumaria, assistant chief of staff (Op C&D). "The draft policy proposes to vest the entire Indian airspace with civil aviation authorities. This needs further discussion. The proposal for flexible use of airspace has been put forth by the IAF to the Director-General of Civil Aviation and it includes airspace requirements for military aviation."

IAF officials say that they have always been receptive to civil requests. Barnaria says civil trainers currently operate from 19 aerodromes and a joint working group

has been proposed to coordinate the optimisation of airspace and air traffic management issues.

However, a top official in Airport Authority of India says the IAF is intransigent. "There is a need for the IAF and civil aviation to work on a give-and-take principle," the official said. According to M. Thiagarajan, managing director, Paramount Airways, "We could optimise the utilisation of restricted airspace networking of radar and data systems by mutual compatibility. Additional land may be provided at civilian enclaves in military airports and vice-versa."

The civil aviation ministry is also believed to have suggested to the defence ministry that civil airspace management in most countries vests with the civil authorities and that India too should follow suit. But IAF officials do not agree.

"Countries with friendly neighbours have joint civil-military agencies controlling the airspaces. They

do not have hostile neighbours," said an officer. In fact, during the times there were dozens of instances of airspace violations by Pakistani aircraft and scores of violations of the airspace agreement. Thiagarajan also agrees that "it is imperative for us to formulate our own standards and procedures by understanding the underlying nuances." Following IAF objections, the Civil Aviation Policy has been referred to a Group of Ministers headed by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

Richa Agarwal's cell phone connectivity problem, too, is now before a group of ministers headed by Defence Minister A.K. Antony, following a disagreement between the defence and the telecom ministry over the unblocking of 45 MHz of spectrum for mobile services. This spectrum is required by the mobile operators to achieve the 500 million subscriber target by year end. Scarcity of 3G services has also delayed the start of 3G services in the country.

The defence ministry has indicated that it is not averse to releasing spectrum for mobile services provided that it is assured of a safe and dedicated network. According to sources in the Army, the solution being offered by BSNL to the Air Force is not acceptable to the Army and the Navy as it does not integrate with their existing networks.

"BSNL's network solution does not meet our requirements," said a senior signals officer in the Army. "The topology and technology for the Army and Navy networks should be changed. This would increase the DoT outlay to Rs 4,900 crore. Ideally, we require a fibre-based solution."

According to the officer, the work on any alternate medium has not yet started. So it would not be feasible for them to release it, said he. "National security will not be compromised. The ministry of communications and IT should release the required budget and proceed the work on Army and Navy networks simultaneously to enable them to release the spectrum." ■

We should optimise the utilisation of restricted airspace. Additional land may be given at civilian enclaves in military airports.

M. THIAGARAJAN,
MD, PARAMOUNT AIRWAYS

