

India-Russia to co-develop midrange transport aircraft

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The two countries have also agreed to the licensed production in India of the RD-33 engines that power the frontline MiG-29 fighters of the Indian Air Force. They also discussed Russia's offer of the advanced MiG-35 jet to meet the IAF's requirement of multi-role combat aircraft (MRCA). The RD-33 engine also powers the MiG-35.

The protocols on the MTA and the aero engines were signed after the sixth meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC) here, after which Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony and his Russian counterpart Sergei Ivanov addressed a joint press conference.

'We have transformed our relations from that of supplier-buyer to that of partners in scientific cooperation,' Ivanov said, adding the two countries would soon begin work on the next generation of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile they are successfully co-producing.

Questioned about the progress made in the Russian proposal to co-develop a fifth generation jet, Ivanov replied: 'Sometime ago, India showed interest in the project. India has informed us that the final choice has been made. As of now, we can open our contractual works with respect to India's accession to the project.'

What this means is that India has expressed its interest in the project but is studying the costs involved. This is all the more so in the light of the country's own efforts to design a similar aircraft that would be one step ahead of the Sukhoi SU-30MKI, currently the most advanced fighter in the IAF fleet.

There are indications that the issue would be discussed at Thursday's summit here between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who will be the chief guest at the Republic Day parade here Friday.

Ivanov, who is also Russia's deputy prime minister and is slated to succeed Putin next year, is here ahead of the president's visit. He was in Bangalore Monday-Tuesday to visit defence establishments like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and meet with captains of industry.

Speaking about the commission meeting, Antony described it as 'most successful', adding that discussions were held on additional purchases of T-90 main battle tanks, SU-30 fighters and Mi-17 helicopters but that no final decision had been taken.

'We had a fruitful discussion today in a cordial, free and frank manner,' the minister stated.

Noting that India-Russia strategic relations were 'time tested' and based on mutual trust and understanding, he said: 'We share common concern in the fight against global terrorism and in

maintaining peace in our region.

'Our defence relations are cordial, productive and to the mutual benefit of both countries. The cooperation between our defence industries is not just symbolic but extends to joint R and D projects.'

Ivanov, however, dodged a question on China's sale to Pakistan of the JF-17 fighter the two countries have developed but which is powered by a Russian engine.

'We are carrying out military sales on the basis of international agreements. We supply armaments and other equipment on the basis of end user certificates and the same is applicable to the engines,' he replied.

With 70 percent of the equipment of the Indian armed forces being of Russian origin, the IRIGC-MTC was established in 2000 to cover areas like interaction between the two militaries, technical cooperation, supply of defence systems, equipment upgradation, licensed and joint production and joint development and production.

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