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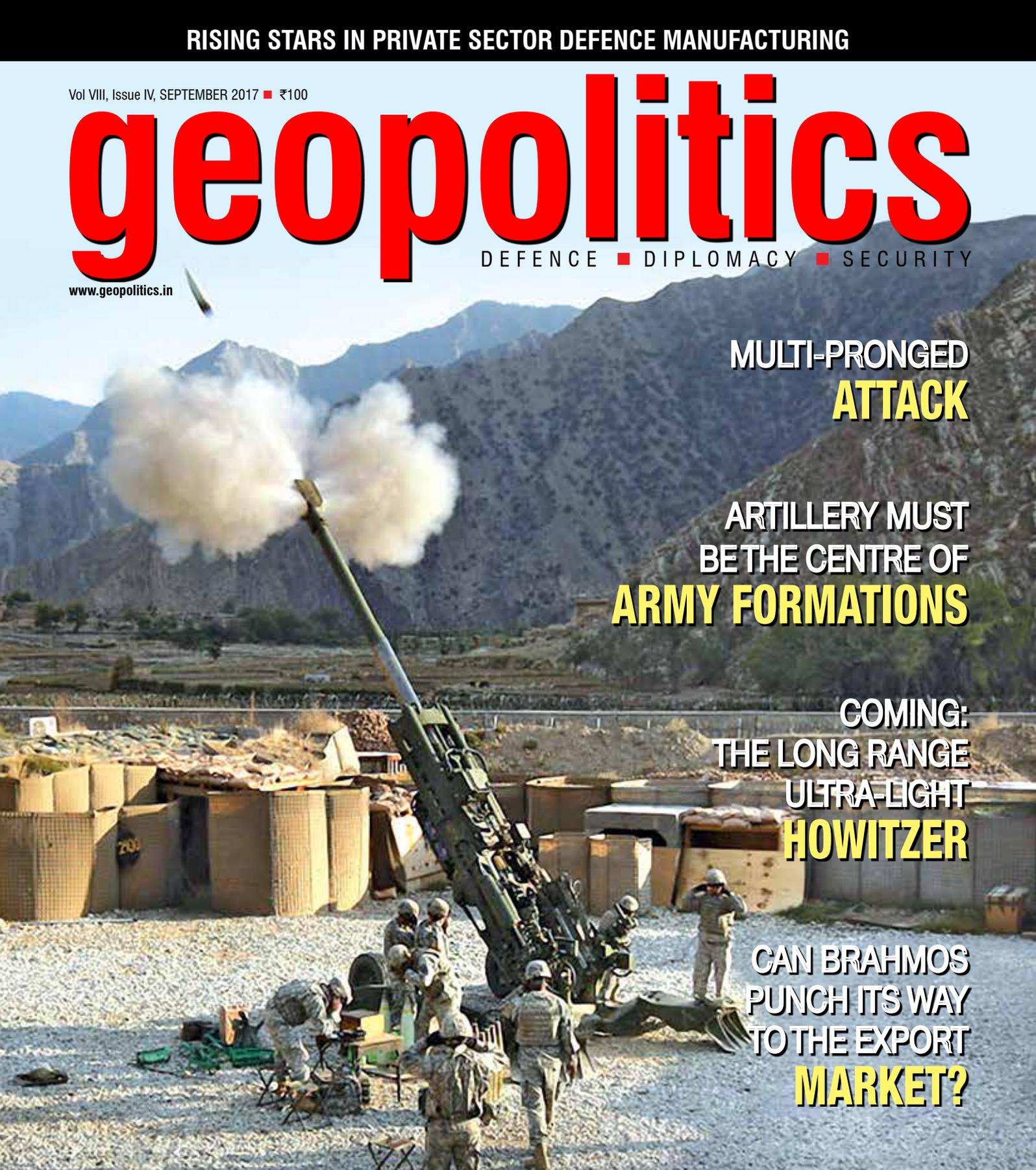
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MULTI-PRONGED
ATTACK

ARTILLERY MUST
BETHE CENTRE OF
ARMY FORMATIONS

COMING:
THE LONG RANGE
ULTRA-LIGHT
HOWITZER

CAN BRAHMOS
PUNCH ITS WAY
TO THE EXPORT
MARKET?



PREPARE TO FIRE



CAN BRAHMOS PUNCH ITS WAY TO THE EXPORT MARKET?

By exporting the BrahMos missile to Vietnam, India will not only gain considerable geopolitical leverage, prestige and user data, it will also help shed New Delhi's traditional reticence towards overseas military sales, writes **RAKESH KRISHNAN SIMHA**

India's myopic attitude towards weapons exports has led to peculiar outcomes. In 1978, the Indian Army was looking to dispose of 100 outdated Centurion tanks. These tanks had performed brilliantly in the 1965 war with Pakistan and could have been donated to a friendly African country. According to an American government report, they were sold as scrap to a foreign company which was an intermediary

of the racist South African regime. To New Delhi's deep embarrassment, the South African military, which was facing an international embargo, refurbished the tanks and used them against Black Africans.

In 'India's Ocean: *The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*', David Brewster writes that in September 1986, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe requested India to deploy a squadron of MiG-21

aircraft with Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots to provide protection against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Fearing it would get sucked into the African quagmire, India balked. The following year, India refused to sell MiG-21s to Zimbabwe for the same reason.

In the late 1980s Thailand requested India to supply Jaguar deep penetration strike aircraft that HAL was license producing for the Indian Air Force (IAF).

Since HAL was going to shut the Jaguar facility after completing the final order for the IAF, the Thai deal would have kept its production line humming for years. However, the government shot down the proposal in the belief that Thailand might deploy the aircraft against Vietnam, a friendly country. However, the Vietnamese military was several orders of magnitude more powerful than the Thai defence forces and a couple of Jaguar squadrons would scarcely have tilted the balance in Bangkok's favour.

The lack of a strategic culture, poor grasp of geopolitical realities and decision making paralysis in India's political leadership ensured that the country never quite got to exporting weapons. The government's pussyfooting over the export of BrahMos missiles, therefore, brings on a sense of déjà vu. For several years, India and Vietnam have been circling around a deal worth potentially hundreds of millions of dollars to provide supersonic cruise missiles to Hanoi. In August the Vietnamese media said India had delivered the system, but New Delhi poured cold water on the considerable excitement generated in India.

It is understandable why Vietnam is desperate seeking the BrahMos. The supersonic missile has been described as a "war winner" and "Brahmastra" by A Sivathanu Pillai, the founder of BrahMos Aerospace. In tests the world's fastest cruise missile has been known to cut warships in half. Its tremendous speed and accuracy give very little time to the enemy to take evasive action. Such destructive power and speed are unique in a non-strategic weapon. Armed with the missile, Vietnam will gain an asymmetric advantage against the much larger Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy. It would leave Chinese warships and coastal assets highly vulnerable to a crippling missile strike.

Old habits die hard

India's reasons for holding back the BrahMos could be three-fold. One, the Ministry of External Affairs has a long-standing policy of not upsetting China even if the dragon cares little about Indian sensibilities. That is because Beijing is said to be ultra-sensitive about the introduction of modern weapons by its neighbours, the MEA, which remains a status quo seeker, is said to be vehemently opposed to the sale.

Leading strategist Bharat Karnad writes that in 1998 when he first suggested that India supply the BrahMos to Vietnam, the then Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath's rather dismissive response in his meeting

with the National Security Advisory Board was that this was "not practicable" thing to do. According to him, it was "a phrase that has ever since remained etched in my mind and reflects the MEA's strategic myopia. In other words, China could arm Pakistan with nuclear missiles but for India to return the favour by equipping states on the Chinese periphery was not right. When Delhi fears even to do a strategic tit-for-tat, small wonder India has counted for so little for so long".

Secondly, BrahMos Aerospace may not have the spare capacity for fulfilling export orders. With all three branches of the military placing large orders for the BrahMos, exports may be overdoing it. The company is also in the process of testing the lighter BrahMos NG version for the Indian Air Force and is building the next generation extended range BrahMos which could see the missile able to hit targets 1000 km away (compared with 300 km currently). However, this assumption can be ruled out because BrahMos Aerospace would not be lobbying for exports if it didn't believe it couldn't meet the orders.

Thirdly, does the fine print in the agreement between India and Russia impose restrictions on exports? If this is an issue, then India needs to get the pact amended in step with current requirements. The Russian side needs to be convinced that they also stand to make a lot of money. Russian bureaucracy can be highly resistant to change, with Soviet-era officials having a penchant for stonewalling vital decisions.

On the bright side, the fact that weapon exports are being discussed at all in India is a quantum leap for a country that for decades wouldn't even contemplate the possibility of arming other countries. With a nationalist government in charge and the defence sector receiving a huge push from the Make in India policy, the situation is a lot different today.

Betting big on BrahMos

If the Vietnam deal goes through, it will make history as it would be India's first export of a major offensive weapon. The BrahMos is a perfect fit in the backdrop of Make in India because it is the only world class weapon currently being produced in the country. It would contribute hugely to India's image as a bold new entrant in the high-octane world of weapons.

The BrahMos can also be used as a bargaining tool against China. By supplying the missile to Vietnam – and other friendly countries in South East Asia – India can show Beijing that two can play the destabilising game. If China provides



Brahmos-On-Su30-MKI

high-end weapons to Pakistan, then India can offer the BrahMos to Vietnam, a country with a very professional and powerful military that had killed up to 68,000 Chinese troops in their last major clash, in 1979.

The missile system could therefore play a useful role in keeping Chinese weapons from being sold to Islamabad, which will then start feeling the pinch as it is too broke to get Western arms and ammunition. By exporting this class of missiles as well as other modern weapons to Vietnam and other countries located in the proximity of India's enemies (let's admit Pakistan and China are enemies and not just rivals), India can send a clear signal that it can raise the heat on its enemies.

Geopolitical embrace

Foreign military sales are a force multiplier

because they tie the seller and buyer in a long-term geopolitical embrace. This may eventually translate into further military sales. To illustrate, when India acquired the MiG-21 from Russia in 1965, nearly 100 per cent of its advanced weapons were of British or western origin. A decade later over 80 per cent of its weapons were from Russia.

Again, take India's current Flanker diplomacy. The induction of advanced Su-27/30 Flanker aircraft in the air forces of Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam proved to be an unexpected windfall for India. As a maintenance hub for the Russian made Flanker series aircraft and a trainer of foreign fighter pilots, the country earns a substantial amount of money. But more importantly, it strengthens New Delhi's ties with the region.

Considering that two of the air forces with which India has signed agreements

to service Flankers belong to Muslim majority countries – which have in the past openly supported Pakistan in wars against India – that is no mean achievement.

With Vietnam the ties are much deeper. Both nations have a commonality of weapons platforms by virtue of their Russian origin. They can therefore share expertise and resources available with their respective armed forces in terms of handling and maintaining these weapons.

India has also repaired and upgraded over 100 MiG-21 fighter planes of the Vietnamese People's Air Force and supplied them with enhanced avionics and radar systems. The Indian Navy has been supplying critical spares to Hanoi for its Russian origin ships and missile boats.

India has already made a significant foray into the hardware segment by offering Vietnam a \$100 million line of

credit to buy patrol vessels built by India's L&T. Vietnam could also become the first foreign customer for the Akash surface-to-air missile.

User feedback

Exports are critical because they allow a weapon to be used in a variety of environments and situations. Let's say India never exports the BrahMos. In such a case, we will know its effectiveness and impact only when or if India goes to war. On the other hand, by exporting it to, say, Vietnam, Brazil and Chile (all rumoured buyers) India will get feedback from three different sets of users with varied climatic conditions and war fighting philosophies. And if one of these countries fires the missile in anger, it would generate priceless data for the manufacturer as well as India's armed forces.

BrahMos Aerospace has not only created a new benchmark in cruise missile development, it has adopted the incremental or 'ladder' approach where more advanced – and innovative – versions of the missile are constantly being designed, tested, produced for all branches of the armed forces. Through exports, the company will be able to acquire feedback from an entirely new – foreign – perspective. That's a huge deal in the ultra-competitive world of modern weapons.

Breaking new ground

Despite having one of the world's largest military forces, India does not count among the top 20 arms exporters. It wasn't always like this. The country had a robust defence export sector during the World War II era when it was a major supplier to Britain. However, after independence the fixation with international peace and aversion for war made it impossible for India to build on its defence industrial base. For instance, speaking on the defence budget in the Lok Sabha in 1957, Acharya Kriplani, said: "The mounting expenses on the army must be cut down. The followers of Gandhi and adherents of universal peace should not increase military expenditure."

With the BrahMos, New Delhi can finally make a mark on the global arms bazaar. Considering that it is the only supersonic cruise missile in the world, there should be no dearth of buyers for it.

The author is a New Zealand based journalist who covers defence and military history. He is on the advisory board of Modern Diplomacy, a Europe based foreign affairs portal