

## **51. Congress and its Rafale delusion**

**By Gopal Krishna Agarwal,**

The Congress Party's conduct in the affair pertaining to the procurement of combat jets shows a complete disregard for national security and preference for private illicit enrichment over national interests. In the din over the Rafale deal, it was almost forgotten that the Indian Air Force needed to bolster its squadron strength in view of the obsolescence of some types of its fighter jets — the in-principle approval for the procurement of 126 fighter jets was, in fact, given way back in 2001.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi's attack on Rafale deal is based on lies. He first alleged that there was no Indo-French secrecy clause in the Rafale deal. This was denied by the French President. He then went on to say that Narendra Modi pressurised Dassault to sub-contract to Anil Ambani. This was denied by Dassault Aviation. He also attempted to present a fake audio tape during the debate on Rafale in Parliament. When asked to vouch for its authenticity, he withdrew it. Rahul Gandhi also referred to his conversation with the late Manohar Parrikar, which took place during his brief courtesy meeting with the ex-defence minister. The fact is no such conversation took place during that meeting.

The details on pricing have been reported by almost every defence reporter. During the negotiations with Rafale for a Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA), the basic price mentioned was Rs 550 crore plus inflation and exchange rate fluctuations. The adjusted price of a basic aircraft under the MMRCA would have been Rs 737 crore whereas the price negotiated under the current deal is Rs 650 crore — 9 per cent cheaper. The defence ministry has time and again said that total cost and number of aircraft is already in the public domain but details of equipment and their prices are confidential and covered by the Indo-French security agreement of 2008. Disclosing details of arms and ammunition fitted in these jets will defeat the purpose of purchasing the high-end fighter planes. The government has also negotiated a better maintenance and serviceability deal with Rafale.

The Congress is also misleading people on the offset clause as the procurement under this clause is based on a payment schedule and can be for any product covered under it — it is not for Rafale spare parts alone. The solvency challenges of the Anil Ambani group of companies makes him an easy target now. However, it was the Congress-led UPA government which had allowed the Anil Ambani group to commercially sell coal from mines that were allotted to it under the Ultra Mega Power Project (UMPP) for captive use — this exception was given to him when coal prices were going through the roof.

All the details pertaining to the Rafale deal were shared with the Supreme Court in a sealed cover. It was also informed that the CAG had been given access to all the files related to Rafale deal. The CAG report will be placed before the Parliamentary Committee. After going through the details of pricing and other terms and conditions, the Court had said that due process of procurement was followed and refused to order an investigation as sought by petitioners. Review petitions filed in the matter are likely to meet the same fate. Even the CAG report has given a clean chit to the government.

Recently, a newspaper article quoted details that are not even part of the official Rafale file. They were actually explanation notes on the matter after some media outfits carried reports on Rafale. There is also the question: Why only 36 jets? But then when did the government close the option for additional Rafales? The government is also being questioned on the missed opportunity to make full use of the leverage provided by the new offer from the Eurofighter Consortium. It has rightly said that entertaining the new offer at that stage was impermissible under the DPP and a violation of the CVC guidelines. It would have further delayed the procurement.

A lot of noise is also made about the deal being given the go ahead by a four-three decision. This dissent within the Indian negotiating team was answered by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Parliament: She said that in the highest traditions of the civil services, all views were aired and recorded and a collegiate decision taken after considering such opinions. All the decisions were taken after due process of inter-ministerial consultations as per defence procurement process.

The biggest irony of the Congress's campaign on Rafale is that an inter-governmental agreement (IGA) is being compared to a tender process that did not materialise. One can insert a number of supposedly "favourable"

conditions in the tendering process, the final outcome of which is subject to negotiations. To compare negotiable terms under such a “non-deal” to an actual agreement is unreasonable. IGA also eliminated middlemen and commission agents who had become a bane of all defence procurements through an open tendering process.

The Congress demand for a JPC to investigate the deal is unfair as the Supreme Court has already given a clean chit — and the review petition is pending. The CAG report is already with the Parliamentary Standing Committee and as such presently there are no adverse reports on evidences except unsubstantiated allegations.

The Congress and its sympathisers have failed to come up with any proof that could implicate the government.