

The Hindu



ANALYSIS

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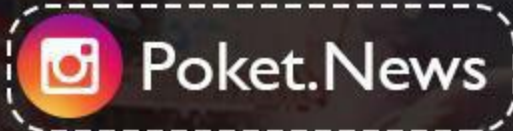
14 SEP 2019

BY AMIT SAINI





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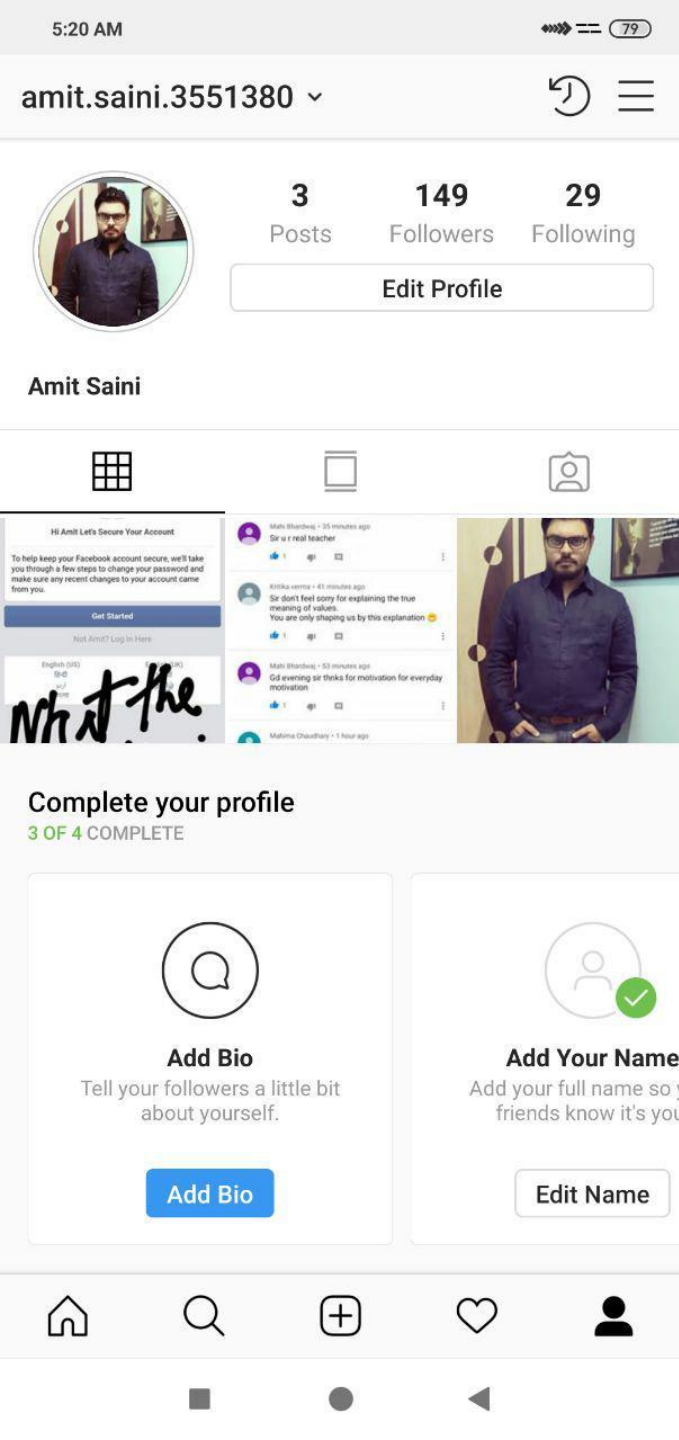
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In Afghan peace derailment, a wagon of hope

The suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the global community and India to reset the peace process



GAUTAM MUKHOPADHAYA

In a characteristically mercurial tweet on September 9 morning (Indian Standard Time), U.S. President Donald Trump abruptly called off ‘peace’ talks with the Taliban – led directly by the U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad – citing the killing of an American soldier just days before in a suicide bomb attack for which the Taliban claimed credit. He also revealed that he had secretly invited the Taliban and the Afghanistan President, Ashraf Ghani, separately to Camp David over the weekend to clinch a deal personally. The agreement had been in the making over many rounds of talks, largely in Doha, Qatar, of which the Afghan government was not a part on account of a Taliban veto that the U.S. implicitly accepted, ostensibly to bring peace to Afghanistan.

Agreement contours

The tweet capped a turbulent week during which Mr. Khalilzad briefed Mr. Ghani and the Chief Executive of the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah, on the interim agreement over several rounds of talks. They were shown but not given a copy of this. The salient details of the agreement were revealed on a private television channel on the evening of September 2. They centred primarily on an initial timetable for the withdrawal of around 5,400 out of nearly 14,000 U.S. troops from five Afghan bases in 135 days. Also included was a tight timeline of two weeks to kick-start intra-Afghan talks before the Afghan presidential elections scheduled on Sep-

tember 28. The announcement was accompanied by a wave of violence that included offensives against strategic provincial capitals in the north and suicide bombings in Kabul, including one just as Mr. Khalilzad was wrapping up his TV interview. They were clearly intended to sabotage the elections. These were not allowed to affect the agreement.

Out of sync

The deal as negotiated was one-sided, partial and highly flawed. It was loaded heavily towards Mr. Trump’s goal of a withdrawal of all U.S. troops by November 2020, weak in guarantees against terrorism aimed at the U.S., and lacking safeguards for the security and stability of Afghanistan. Unresolved differences over the withdrawal of the remaining troops (8,600) amid U.S. insistence on a residual counter-terrorism (CT) and intelligence presence, and a lack of trust in the Taliban at critical levels in the U.S., were among the reasons for Mr. Trump’s decision.

Other elements of what the U.S. maintained was a composite agreement, were also seriously compromised. The comprehensive ceasefire was watered down to a limited ‘reduction’ in violence (observed more in its escalation). And, the intra-Afghan government talks were effectively downgraded, under Taliban pressure, to talks with a non-official delegation. The Afghan government with which the U.S. has bilateral strategic partnership and security agreements, was sidelined and powerless, contributing to a public sense of helplessness that decisions regarding Afghanistan were being taken by foreigners. The government has gained from the backlash.

The most insidious aspect of the announcement was its timing and attempt to rush intra-Afghan talks just days before the presidential elections with the aim of under-



mining the elections and rendering them meaningless. The fear was that if successful, they could have undercut plans to instal an interim, transitional or power-sharing arrangement that could provide the fig-leaf of a mechanism and an illusion of peace to pull out U.S. forces. It would have paved the way for a dominant position for the Taliban in any future dispensation before they took over power altogether. It would have pushed Afghanistan towards instability and even a civil war worse than the intra-Mujahideen fighting of the 1990s with unpredictable consequences.

More fundamentally, the agreement was also widely criticised in the U.S. and elsewhere. It was seen as a “negotiated withdrawal”, “abdication”, and even a “surrender” rather than a peace agreement, sacrificing the political, military and economic investments and civic gains of the last 18 years including democracy and the advancement of women, and creating the conditions for a likely descent into civil war, fanning radical extremism. In Afghanistan, the agreement was widely perceived as a sell-out and a betrayal of Afghanistan to the Taliban and Pakistan. These are concerns Indians share deeply.

Short-lived relief

Under the circumstances, notwithstanding the manner and reasons for calling off the talks for which Mr. Trump has been rightly lampooned – particularly the shocking invitation to the Taliban to Camp David just days before the

9/11 anniversary – his tweet at least had the virtue of pulling Afghanistan away from the brink of disaster foretold. Behind the decision was an instinct that it was a bad deal for the U.S. and exasperation with the Taliban’s attempts to extract maximum advantage for the meeting; the Taliban’s insistence on the announcement of the deal before the visit, deprived him of the lime-light for sealing the deal.

However, while Afghanistan and the world may breathe a sigh of relief that the Khalilzad deal has been aborted for now, this may be short-lived. The mindset of a unilateral pullout unmindful of its consequences for Afghanistan and the region and the danger of Trumpian swings, remains. For now, Mr. Trump has proclaimed the talks to be “dead” and ordered offensive operations. But he still needs a counter-terrorism strategy for which he would have to look for options. The demand for a peace process will also remain. Things could change again in a few months.

A role for India

Nevertheless, the suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the holding of Afghan presidential elections and a window of opportunity for the international community and India to reset their approach to peace and withdrawal.

First, the Afghan election authorities and security forces should be supported in every way to conduct free and fair elections as an exercise of Afghan sovereignty. Concerns about misuse of government apparatus should be addressed. The Taliban will try to disrupt it. But a reasonably good turnout even if elections are held only in secure areas would be a barometer of support elsewhere, victory for the constitutional order and ‘Islamic Republic’, and a repudiation of the ‘Islamic Emirates’ of the Taliban.

Second, its outcome could provide a stronger foundation for talks with the Taliban that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled, and not as dictated from Washington, Islamabad, Doha or Moscow. India should be able to support such talks.

Third, free from elections, the Afghan government should take the lead in forging a national consensus behind talks with the Taliban that it has failed to do until now.

Fourth, the international community should support this process and focus its efforts on the Taliban to demonstrate their ‘nationalism’ by distancing themselves from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, halting attacks against fellow Afghans, agreeing to a ceasefire, and negotiating directly with a representative Afghan delegation.

Fifth, resumed U.S. military pressure on the Taliban is not enough. The Doha talks dispel any doubt that the route to peace in Afghanistan is through Pakistan even though it was the U.S. that was making the concessions. Every possible instrument should be brought to bear on Pakistan to deliver on this.

Crucial to Afghanistan’s future is its ability to stand on its own feet economically, through investment in Afghanistan’s mineral sector to generate revenues, and militarily, through a progressive ‘Afghanisation’ of security forces at a lower budget. India should be able to help in this.

Finally, India should be able to use Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s rapport with Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to influence their policies and play a larger international diplomatic role in Afghanistan.

Gautam Mukhopadhyaya is a former Ambassador to Afghanistan (2010-2013) and, currently, Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi

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- The **most insidious aspect of the announcement was its timing and attempt to rush intra-Afghan talks** just days before the presidential elections with the aim of undermining the elections and rendering them meaningless. **The fear was that if successful,** they could have undercut plans to install an interim, transitional or power-sharing arrangement that could provide the fig-leaf of a mechanism and an illusion of peace to pull out U.S. forces. **It would have paved the way for a dominant position for the Taliban in any future dispensation before they took over power altogether.** It would have pushed Afghanistan towards instability and even a civil war worse than the intra-Mujahideen fighting of the 1990s with unpredictable consequences.
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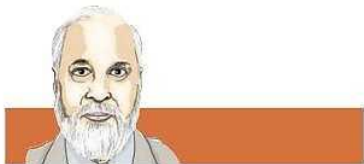
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Mains questions

1. After the aborted talks with Taliban, what options are there with USA for a better future for Afghanistan ?
2. What role India can play in suppressing terror groups with establishing & upholding the democratic government in Afghanistan ?
3. What role Pakistan can play positively in Afghanistan after USA-Taliban talk failure ? How it will be a imagemaker for Pakistan ?

A milestone in greater transparency, accountability

The launch of the Jan Soochna Portal in Rajasthan is a vital cog in access to the right to information



MADAN LOKUR

The Jan Soochna Portal (JSP) launched by the government of Rajasthan yesterday is a remarkable achievement in furtherance of the right to information (RTI) – especially Section 4 of the RTI Act – that deals with proactive disclosure of information. Transparency must be accompanied by accountability, and that is where the JSP has great value and significance since it places the power of making the State government accountable to everyone who accesses the information made available on the portal.

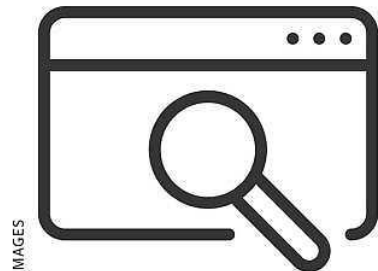
Has transparency accompanied by accountability brought about transformation in any system? During my association with the eCommittee of the Supreme Court of India, and keeping transparency in the justice delivery system in mind, a National Judicial Data Grid was launched. This gave information about all pending cases across the country. Some time back, a year-wise breakup of pending cases was given on the grid and it was found that more than 70,000 cases were pending for over 30 years. These figures meant nothing until the justice delivery system was

asked to account for the enormous delay in such a large number of cases. Chief Justices and Registrars in many courts appreciated the fact that they needed to answer questions relating to such enormous delays; now many courts have begun to concentrate on the disposal of old cases with considerable success. This is a good example of transparency accompanied by accountability brought about by civil society.

Several access points

I had the privilege of a sneak preview of the JSP. Details of every activity of the government such as availability of food grains and ration shops and their distribution, implementation of various schemes and their beneficiaries and a variety of other information are available on a real-time basis virtually making it a Janta Information System. The portal has been arrived at through a regular and rigorous consultative process between government officials, IT professionals and civil society. Such a process of dialogue should be practised in all spheres to genuinely harness the benefits of information technology. Digital divide is indeed a serious problem in India. To bridge this, care should be taken to ensure that access points are open and free.

Since the information is available on the Internet, every citizen, right down to the municipal ward and panchayat, has access to the



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information. For example, I saw that on a random basis, a number of identified persons in a particular area had not availed themselves of any rations for several months. Such persons can be easily contacted and if they do not want to avail the benefits available to them, they can surrender it in favour of some other deserving person. Similarly, the government of Rajasthan, like some other States, has waived farmers' loans. The portal gives the details of every farmer in every bank branch whose loans have been waived, along with the amounts. Another significant piece of information is about mining leases. Illegal mining has been a major issue in different parts of the country, with people unable to determine the details of clearances given. This portal gives the list of mines in every district, provides geographical coordinates, and the area where mining has been permitted, including the land deed identifiers. It also pro-

vides details about pollution and environment clearances. Finally, the portal provides details of production and royalties and taxes paid. This kind of information can facilitate a progressive partnership between government and citizens for a cleaner society.

What is important is that a tremendous amount of information is available on the files of the government of Rajasthan, which till date could only be accessed through the filing of RTI applications. However, with the use of technology and digitisation of records and information, this information is made freely available on the JSP. To this extent, there is no need for anyone to take recourse to the RTI Act and await a response. All information can be accessed immediately, free of cost.

Key challenges

The mere launch of the JSP is not enough. There are huge challenges with regard to maintenance issues and ensuring that there is no let-up in the availability of information. With this in mind, draft guidelines have been framed for the development and maintenance of the JSP. Once implemented, this will ensure that the information system continues uninterrupted. Various departments of the government of Rajasthan, called Line Departments, have been given a set of obligations that they are expected to fulfil. For example, they are expected

to ensure digitisation of records. In addition, the Department of Information Technology will serve as the nodal department for the development, operationalisation and maintenance of the JSP.

This department has been informed of its obligations, which includes adherence to the norms and standards laid down by a digital dialogue advisory group. To ensure that the responsibilities are carried out, the advisory group will be the monitoring agency. Grievance redressal officers will be appointed so that citizens can make the State government truly accountable.

Training for citizens

The government of Rajasthan has also taken steps to train citizens so that they are aware of the facilities available. This by itself may not be enough. Therefore, it has been decided to host the JSP in decentralised locations, right down to the municipal ward and panchayat levels. They will have access to welfare schemes, revenue activities such as mining, and other service delivery issues such as health and education.

It would be wonderful if all other State governments follow the Rajasthan government's initiative, which aims to make people, including the marginalised sections, a part of the governance process.

Justice Madan Lokur is a retired judge of the Supreme Court of India

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Rajasthan launches information portal

In a first for a State, citizens can access details pertaining to 13 departments

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

JAIPUR

In a pioneering step, the first-ever public information portal was launched in Rajasthan on Friday promising to provide information about government authorities and departments suo motu to the public in the true spirit of the Right To Information Act. The portal has brought yet another distinction to Rajasthan, where the RTI movement had started in 1990s.

Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot inaugurated the portal at B.M. Birla Auditorium here in the presence of former Chief Information Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah, former Law Commission



Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, second from left, inaugurating the portal on Friday. ■ PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

chairman Justice A.P. Shah and a galaxy of RTI activists, including Magsaysay Award winner Aruna Roy.

The State government collaborated with the civil society groups to develop the portal, the first of its kind in

the country, initially giving information pertaining to 13 departments on a single platform.

In his inaugural address, Mr. Gehlot said the new web portal, named the Jan Soochna Portal-2019, would

ensure compliance with Section 4(2) of the RTI Act mandating the public authorities to disclose information in the public domain, so that the people need not file applications under the law to obtain information. "I have a sentimental attachment with the RTI Act... I attended the first dharna seeking this right 20 years ago," he said.

In a veiled reference to the RTI Amendment Bill passed by the Parliament recently, Mr. Gehlot said attempts to weaken the statute would only erode the resolve to bring transparency and accountability in administration.

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Rajasthan launches information portal

"We will not let this happen and will never allow this path-breaking law to lose its teeth. This portal displays our government's resolve for strict enforcement of RTI Act."

Ms. Roy said the portal would eventually turn out to be an effective medium for "digital dialogue" with the people as well as a strong instrument for ensuring transparency in governance. She applauded the State government's action to combine technology, justice and information and said the ci-

vil society would take RTI movement to the masses.

Information kiosks

The State government will set up information kiosks in village panchayats and self-service e-mitra centres in the towns to enable the people to access the information useful for them. A message of Congress president and UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi praising the initiative and expressing the hope that it would strengthen the spirit of the RTI Act, was also telecast.

Exports contract 6%, trade deficit widens marginally

Imports also witness contraction; iron ore exports grow by a whopping 357%

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

India's exports contracted 6.05% in August to \$26.13 billion, official data released on Friday showed. The trade deficit widened marginally to \$13.45 billion.

"Exports in August 2019 were \$26.13 billion, as compared to \$27.81 billion in August 2018, exhibiting a negative growth of 6.05%," the government said in a release. "In rupee terms, exports were ₹1,85,881.11 crore in August 2019, as compared to ₹1,93,397.12 crore in August 2018, registering a negative growth of 3.89%." The sectors that saw notable contraction in their exports include rice (-23.95%), other

Little cheer on **trade front**



Month	Exports*	Imports*	Trade deficit, \$ bn
April	0.64	4.48	15.33
May	3.93	4.31	15.36
June	(9.71)	(9.06)	15.28
July	2.25	(10.43)	13.43
August	(6.05)	(13.45)	13.45

* YEAR-ON-YEAR CHANGE, %

cereals (-41.8%), oil meals (-44.4%), and oil seeds (-31.8%). Iron ore exports,

notably, grew by a whopping 356.7%. "Imports in August 2019 were \$39.58 billion

(₹2,81,606.41 crore), which was 13.45% lower in dollar terms and 11.46% lower in rupee terms over imports of \$45.73 billion (₹3,18,043.86 crore) in August 2018."

The major commodity groups that saw a contraction in imports in August include coal, coke and briquettes (-23.75%), organic and inorganic chemicals (-14.95%), petroleum, crude and products (-8.9%), electrical and non-electrical machinery (-8.8%), and electronic goods (-4.12%). The contraction in both exports and imports has meant that the trade deficit has widened only marginally in August from the \$13.43 billion in the previous month.

SC asks govt. if it plans to link social media, Aadhaar

Court will hear Facebook's petition to bunch all Aadhaar cases on Sept. 24

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday decided to hear a plea by Facebook to call forth petitions pending in various High Courts concerning the linking of social media accounts of users with their Aadhaar numbers.

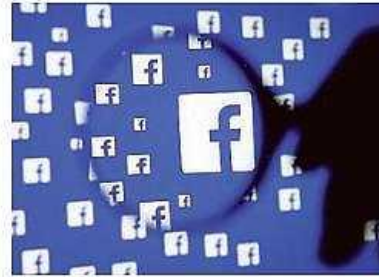
A Bench of Justices Deepak Gupta and Aniruddha Bose scheduled the case for hearing on September 24.

"We will only be hearing on the question of transfer

and will not look into the merits," Justice Gupta said.

Facebook wants the apex court to transfer the pending petitions to itself and decide them finally. The company has contended that any rule to enforce the linking of Aadhaar with social media accounts would be an invasion of privacy, which has been affirmed as a fundamental right by the Supreme Court.

The Bench made the Centre a party to the proceedings. Justice Gupta said



the court wants to know whether the Centre was working on any law on linking Aadhaar or an authentic government identity proof with social media accounts. It would decide the transfer with an eye on the government's plans in this regard. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, for the Centre, hinted

that the apex court itself should decide the case. Mr. Mehta said the High Courts were taking too long.

The court informed Tamil Nadu Additional Advocate General Balaji Srinivasan that the State's application to modify an August 20 stay of proceedings in the Madras High Court regarding Aadhaar-social media accounts linking would be tagged with the transfer petition and heard along with it on September 24.

The Tamil Nadu government, in a written response to Facebook's plea, went on the offensive against the so-

cial media company, contending that the concerns voiced by the company in the Supreme Court about citizen's privacy flew in the face of its own "primary business model" to commercialise users' data.

Facebook and WhatsApp have strongly objected to Aadhaar linkage, asserting that it would affect the privacy of its users. It said a nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court had upheld privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution.

But Tamil Nadu has countered that the "whole attempt" of Facebook was to

"evade compliance with Indian law".

As proof, the State sought to show how the Chennai Police's Cyber Cell had sent social media companies 1,940 requests for information in connection with various investigations between 2016-18.

All that the State Police got in reply was the IP (Internet Protocol) log details on 484 requests, including 211 sent by Facebook, four by YouTube, one by Twitter and none by WhatsApp. Tamil Nadu said that the companies had refused to part with information in 1,456 cases.

Big leap for Naval variant of LCA Tejas

Flight path

A brief timeline of the development of the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas, a 4.5 generation, light weight, multirole fighter

1983	2001	2011	2013	Feb. 2019
DRDO gets permission to build the jet	LCA performs maiden successful flight	Receives Initial Operational Clearance-I	Receives Initial Operational Clearance-II	Receives Final Operational Clearance

Good show: The LCA after clearing the test at a facility in Goa on Friday.

■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

NAVAL VARIANT

April 2012: Naval variant makes its maiden flight; two prototypes have been flying as part of the development

Dec. 2014: First prototype

(NP1) makes successful first flight

Sept. 13, 2019: Performs "arrested landing", the ability to land on an aircraft carrier

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The naval variant of the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas made a successful short arrested landing on the Shore Based Test Facility (SBTF) in Goa on Friday. This is a big step forward in the delayed project for the LCA to eventually operate from an aircraft carrier.

"Today, the first-ever arrested landing of LCA [NP1] at the shore-based test facility at INS Hansa Goa, will pave the way for this indigenous platform to undertake aircraft carrier landing demonstration on board INS Vikramaditya," the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) said in a statement.

The LCA made its maiden successful trap on the SBTF with the tail hook of the aircraft connecting with the arrestor wire on the deck and coming to halt within a short distance, a defence source explained.

The naval LCA made its

maiden flight in April 2012 and two prototypes have been flying as part of the development. The first prototype (NP1) made a successful first flight in 2014.

"The flight lasted about 40 minutes and the aircraft carried out arrested landing on the SBTF within 90m as required," another defence source said. The aircraft, Naval Prototype (NP)-1, is a twin seater but was piloted only by chief test pilot Commodore J.A. Maolankar, the source added.

Tough landing gears
The SBTF, which replicates the flight deck of an aircraft carrier was specifically built to train naval pilots in the complex manoeuvres of landing on the short flight deck of an aircraft carrier before they move on to the actual carrier.

The naval LCA is designed with stronger landing gears to absorb forces exerted by the ski jump ramp during take-off, to be

airborne within 200 m and land within 100 m, as against 1,000 m required for normal runways. Its special flight control law mode allows hands-free take-off, relieving the pilot workload, as the aircraft leaps from the ramp and automatically puts the aircraft in an ascending trajectory, sources had stated.

In December 2016, then Navy Chief Adm Sunil Lanba stated that the LCA in the present form "does not meet the carrier capability which is required by the Navy" but added that they would continue to support the development programme. The current weight of the naval LCA with the underpowered engine did not allow it to fly from a carrier, he said.

The Navy is currently operating Russian MiG-29K fighters from INS Vikramaditya. They will also fly from the first Indigenous Aircraft Carrier Vikrant once it enters service.

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- The naval version has stronger landing gears to absorb forces exerted by the ski jump ramp during take-off, allowing it to be airborne from a much shorter runway on the carrier deck
- In Dec. 2016, the then Navy chief Sunil Lanba said the current weight of the naval LCA, with the underpowered engine, does not allow it to fly from a carrier