

China displaces India as largest tourism market for Maldives

Male: Amidst a diplomatic row between Maldives and India, Chinese tourists have overtaken Indian holidaymakers visiting the archipelago nation, according to official figures released here Monday.

According to official statistics from the Maldivian ministry of tourism, as of Feb 4, China, with 23,972 tourists, occupied the number one slot (11.2% market share in 2024). The country had been placed at the third spot in 2023.

India, which was at the number 1 slot in 2023, has slipped down to the 5th position as of Sunday with 16,536 tourists (7.7% market share in 2024) coming to the island nation.

Now, in 2024, as of Feb 4, Russia with 21,898 tourists (10.2% market share) was in the second spot, continuing its 2023 ranking. Italy, which was at spot six in 2023, rose to the number three position in 2024 with 21,321 tourists (9.9% market share), while the UK, with 18,078 tourists and 8.4% market share retained its number four position, the official data showed. PTI

As Pak, China fly ahead, India guns for 12 more 'eyes in sky'

Pak Has 11 Early Warning Aircraft, China 30; India Trails With Just 3

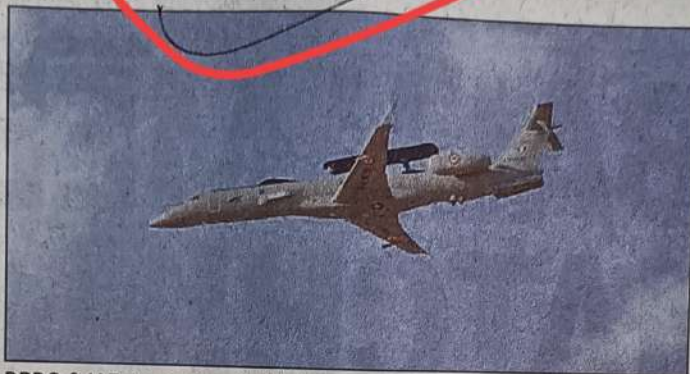
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New Delhi: India is now stepping on the gas to develop and induct advanced indigenous airborne early-warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft or "eyes in the sky", which will boost surveillance and detection capabilities along the China and Pakistan borders as well as help direct friendly fighters during air combat with enemy jets.

The DRDO-IAF combine is actively pushing ahead with programmes to develop six Mark-1A as well as six Mark-2 versions of the Netra AEW&C aircraft, three of which were earlier built and inducted from Feb 2017 onwards.

Sources said defence ministry will next week take up the acceptance of necessity (AoN) for the six Mark-1A aircraft, which will entail mounting active electronically scanned array antenna-based radars, electronic and signal intelligence systems on Brazilian Embraer jets, at a cost of around Rs 9,000 crore.

"These six AEW&C aircraft will be like the first three



DRDO & IAF are eyeing six Mark-1A and six Mark-2 versions of the Netra AEW&C aircraft, three of which were inducted from Feb 2017 onwards

Embraer-145 jet-based Netra, which have 240-degree radar coverage. But there will be better software and more advanced technologies like new gallium nitride-based TR (transmit/receive) modules for the radars," a source said.

The developmental work on the six Mark-2 aircraft, with bigger and more capable versions of the AEW&C radars and sensors to be mounted on second-hand Airbus-321 planes bought from Air India, is already at an advanced stage at a cost of Rs 10,990 crore.

"Delivery of the first such AEW&C Mark-2 aircraft,

which will also have an antenna in the nose in addition to the main dorsal antenna to give 300-degree radar coverage, should take place in 2026-27. Technologies from the Mark-2 aircraft, in fact, will flow into the Mark-1A ones," the source added.

Both the projects are critical for India because it is lagging far behind Pakistan, let alone China, in the AEW&C and AWACS arena. Apart from the three Netras, IAF only has three Israeli Phalcon AWACS mounted on Russian IL-76 transport aircraft — with 360-degree radar cov-

erage and a 400-km range — that were inducted in 2009-2011 under a \$1.1 billion deal.

Pakistan now has 11 Swedish Saab-2000 Erieye AEW&C and Chinese Karakoram Eagle ZDK-03 AWACS aircraft. China has around 30 AEW&C aircraft, including Kong Jing-2000 'Mainring', KJ-200 'Moth' and KJ-500 aircraft.

IAF felt the critical operational need for more AEW&C aircraft during the aerial skirmish with Pakistani fighters, which were aided by Saab-2000 Erieye AEW&C, in Feb 2019 after the cross-border Balakot air-strikes. The ongoing confrontation with China in eastern Ladakh has further driven home the requirement.

In a major plus for IAF, the existing Netras and the Phalcons are fully plugged into its integrated air command and control system (IACCS). This fully-automated air defence network with data links is being progressively expanded to integrate the wide array of military radars with each other as well as with civilian radars to plug surveillance gaps in Indian airspace.

4 flight trials of high-speed expendable aerial target

'ABHYAS' successful

BALASORE (Odisha) Feb 5 (PTI)

FOUR flight trials of high-speed expendable aerial target 'ABHYAS' were successfully carried out by the DRDO from the Integrated Test Range at Odisha's Chandipur between January 30 and February 2, official sources said.

The trials were conducted with four different mission objectives in a revised robust configuration using a single booster designed by Advanced Systems Laboratory, Hyderabad to provide reduced launch acceleration, they said.

The objectives such as the safe release of the booster, launcher clearance and attaining the required end of launch velocity were achieved.

During the flight trials, various parameters such as required endurance, speed, manoeuvrability, altitude and range were successfully validated.

Designed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation's Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE), ABHYAS offers a realistic threat scenario for the practice of weapon systems, the sources said.



It is designed for autonomous flying with the help of an auto pilot indigenously made by the ADE.

It has radar cross-section, visual and infrared augmentation system required for weapon practice.

ABHYAS has a laptop-based ground control system with which the aircraft can be integrated and pre-flight checks, data recording during the flight, replay after the flight and post-flight analysis can be carried out.

It requires minimum logistics and is cost-effective compared to imported equivalents, they said.

The systems tested recently were realised through production agencies Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Larsen & Toubro (L&T) Defence.

With identified production agencies, ABHYAS is ready for production. The system has export potential and can be offered to friendly countries, they added.

India, China have strong economic, cultural links: Consul General

MUMBAI, Feb 5 (PTI)

CHINESE Consul General in Mumbai Kong Xianhua has said the economic and cultural connections between the people of China and India are so strong that nothing and nobody could push them apart.

Kong was addressing a gathering on Friday on the occasion of the Chinese New Year Reception and Chinese Cultural Festival in Mumbai.

He said that 2023 marked a year of achievements and harvest for both China and India.

"It is the extensive cooperation between our people that makes it happen," he said.

The China-India trade volume surpassed 136.2 billion dollars in 2023, he said.

The Chinese Embassy and its Consulates-General in India have issued more than 1.8 lakh visas in the last year, showing a new high of Indian visitors to China after the pandemic, he said.

One of the biggest news in Mumbai these days is that the Coastal Road is set to open this month, he said.

"It is worth noting that the tunnel under Malabar Hill (in south Mumbai), the hardest part of the project, was built with a Chinese tunnel boring machine by the efforts of both

Chinese and Indian engineers," he said.

The envoy also said that they had held a promotional event for the China International Import Exhibition, calling on more Indian companies to look at the Chinese market, the second largest in the world, he said. "We held the Chinese Proficiency Competition, the first time in Mumbai, inspiring Indian youngsters to learn Chinese. These events gave me a very deep impression that the economic and cultural connections between our people are so strong that nothing and nobody could push us apart," he said.

Bukele heads for reelection as El Salvador President

SAN SALVADOR, Feb 5 (AP)

VOTERS in El Salvador appeared to give Nayib Bukele a second term as President, putting him well on his way to a landslide victory in an election that for many hinged on the tradeoff of curtailed civil liberties for security in a country once terrorised by gangs.

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal said late on Sunday that with ballots from 31% of polling places tallied, Bukele had 83% of the vote, far ahead of his nearest competitor's 7% for the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. The electoral site updating the count crashed shortly before

midnight. After casting his vote, Bukele made clear that he expects the newly elected Legislative Assembly to continue extending the special powers he has enjoyed since March 2022 to combat the gangs. Later, standing on the balcony of the National Palace, he said that the country had made history.

"Why are there so many eyes on a small (Latin) American country," he asked thousands of supporters. "They're afraid of the power of example."

"Salvadorans have given the example to the entire world that any problem can be solved if there is the will to do it," he said.

Iran warns US about hitting spy ship

JERUSALEM, Feb 5 (AP)

IRAN has issued a warning to the US over potentially targeting two cargo ships in the Mideast long suspected of serving as forward operating bases for Iranian commandos.

The warning came just after the US and the United Kingdom launched a massive airstrike campaign against Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The statement from Iran on the Behshad and Saviz ships

appeared to signal Tehran's growing unease over US strikes in recent days in Iraq, Syria and Yemen targeting militias backed by the Islamic Republic.

Those strikes were in retaliation for the killing of three US soldiers and wounding of dozens of others in Jordan, attacks that stem back to Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which has escalated tensions across the wider Middle East and raised fears about a regional conflict breaking out.

US threatens retaliation

JERUSALEM, Feb 5 (AP)

AFTER a weekend of retaliatory strikes, the United States on Sunday warned Iran and the militias it arms and funds that it will conduct more attacks if American forces in the Mideast continue to be targeted, but that it does not want an "open-ended military campaign" across the region.

"We are prepared to deal with anything that any group or any country tries to come

at us with," said Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden's national security adviser. Sullivan said Iran should expect "a swift and forceful response" if it - and not one of its proxies - "chose to respond directly" against the US.

Sullivan delivered the warnings during interviews after the US and Britain on Saturday struck 36 Houthi targets in Yemen. The militants have fired on American, international interests.

All Indian troops in Maldives to be sent back before May 10: Muizzu

MALE, Feb 5 (PTI)

MALDIVIAN President Mohamed Muizzu on Monday said the first group of Indian military personnel will be sent back from the island nation before March 10 and the remaining manning two aviation platforms will be withdrawn before May 10, as he articulated the need to bolster the Indian Ocean archipelagic nation's military capabilities.

In his maiden address to Parliament, Muizzu, widely seen as a pro-China leader, said the support of a large majority of the Maldivian citizens for his administration was for the "pledges to

withdraw foreign military troops from the country."

Soon after taking oath as the President of Maldives on November 17, Muizzu formally requested India to withdraw 88 military personnel from his country by March 15, saying the Maldivian people have given him a "strong mandate" to make this request to New Delhi.

In the presidential runoff held in September last year, Muizzu, 45, defeated India-friendly incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. His Government is also reviewing more than 100 bilateral agreements signed with India by the previous government.