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INTERVIEW
Anees Ahmed

MISTRAL
...Partners in Real Time

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Interview
with
Anees Ahmed
Chairman & Managing Director
Mistral Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

For nearly twenty years, Mistral Solutions have shown their operational, technology and engineering excellence to offer customers a comprehensive package of end-to-end embedded design services from frontend consulting and planning to developing, integrating and managing turnkey solutions across verticals from Defence to Homeland Security. They have a range of advanced Homeland Security solutions to offer that correspond to global standards. Recently SecurityLink INDIA spoke to Anees Ahmed, Chairman & Managing Director, Mistral Solutions. Some excerpts:

SecurityLink INDIA: Please give us a brief on the evolution of the entity called Mistral Solutions.

Anees Ahmed (AA): Mistral is an Indian company which has been in the business of Product Design and System Engineering for nearly twenty years. Our prime focus in the Indian market has been Defence electronics. We have been working with a lot of Defence R&D labs on RADAR, SONAR, Electronic Warfare, Avionics, Control Systems and so on. We also provide Homeland Security solutions such as mobile command & control vehicles, special communication command systems, video analytics and synopsis platforms etc; we have also worked with drones and aerostats for different applications. In the US, our focus is on Product Engineering Services – i.e., we design and develop products for US companies which could be in Defence, Homeland Security, IoT or consumer sectors. So for the US market, our focus is more on design services and in India, we work with leading Defence R&D labs, Defence public sector units and directly with some Defence organizations. We design, develop, build, and deliver a complete solution.

In the Homeland Security domain, we are working more with Special Forces such as NSG, and several state police and departments looking for specialized high-tech solutions.

SecurityLink INDIA: Which sector are you more comfortable with – Defence or Homeland Security?

AA: Of course the Defence sector. For Homeland Security, procedures are longer because of the involvement of state governments. Since it is a nascent market, sometimes it is not too clear what they want in terms of solutions and even if they are, it is subject to too many clearances. In Defence, however, customers are very clear about their requirements and we also are well versed with their purchase and other procedure policies. From a technology perspective, other than NSG, very few states and cities, other than Bengaluru and Karnataka

have evinced interest in procuring and adopting high-tech solutions. We have seen some interest from states such as Delhi, Gujarat, and the new states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Other states are yet to show an interest in latest technology adoption.

SecurityLink INDIA: How is Mistral structured and what is your modus operandi?

AA: Mistral is completely an Indian company. We have private equity investors – there are minority private equity shareholders – and we are also one of the largest employee held company in the country, almost 25% of the company is employee held, and that is one of the ways that we are able to retain high-tech talent for so many years.

We do everything right from custom design to engineering, development and deployment. If a client wants us to do system integration we do that as well.

Our corporate office is in Bengaluru where we have a huge test facility and R&D lab. We have a team of 350 engineers working with us in the Bengaluru center. We also have sales and support office in Hyderabad and Delhi. We also have an engineering design office in Texas and California USA.

SecurityLink INDIA: Are you in both hardware and software? What is your priority expertise?

AA: We have expertise in both Hardware and Software development. Our end designs are electronics sub-systems that are usually deployed for RADAR, SONAR, Electronic Warfare and Telemetry applications. We specialize in the design and development of sub-systems and not end products. Today in India, complete products are being built by system integrators like Bharat Elec-

tronics. For example, BEL supplies fully functional RADARs while we provide the crucial RADAR signal processing unit that forms part of the RADAR.

In Homeland Security, we are involved in the complete system integration except in very large Tier 1 projects like safe cities, where we do a part of it.

SecurityLink INDIA: So if we divide projects into Tier 1 to Tier 3, where do you feel Mistral is most efficient in?

AA: It will be more in Tier 2 projects. We are mostly comfortable with projects of around INR 10-20-50 crores. In case we are involved with a Tier 1 project of say around 200-300 crores and above, we execute a part of the project in which our expertise lies. A lot of the project involves aspects such as IT, Power etc., where we do not have expertise.

SecurityLink INDIA: What is your complete range of products and solutions?

AA: Our present range of products includes:

- Mobile Command and Control Vehicles (MCCV): Special purpose Emergency Response Vehicles which serve as local command and control centers.
- Video Analytics and Synopsis System: Provides a very short video representation of a video footage captured over a long time period using filters like color, size, direction etc.
- Wireless communication systems.
- COFDM Wireless Body Worn cameras suitable for line-of-sight and non-line-of-sight transmission.
- Aerostats and tethered drones for aerial surveillance with long battery life.

> **A major challenge observed in the Indian market is that the understanding of technology is very limited. Most decision makers in our police forces do not have a technology background and are not too tech savvy**

- Advanced AR smart glasses for a 360 degree external view from inside a closed area.
- IP Mesh Radios for seamless communication.

SecurityLink INDIA: Being specific to Homeland Security, what are the key challenges that you face in the Indian market?

AA: A major challenge observed in the Indian market is that the understanding of technology is very limited. Most decision makers in our police forces do not have a technology background and are not too tech savvy. Technology adoption is still slow in India and that is a huge challenge. Even the advanced specifications in the government tenders are more camera centric. Capturing data is easy, but studying the data requires intelligent solutions.

Another challenge observed is the lack of proper maintenance of the solution installed. Systems are bought with a 2-3 yr warranty, but there is no renewal to the warranty after it expires. Critical installations need to be continuously maintained and serviced. For example, an installation that costs around 100 crore also calls for an additional budget of 10 crore every year for maintenance. Not allocating this 10 crore in the initial budget will result in the sheer wastage of the whole 100 cr solution. The lack of understanding and unwillingness to

spend on maintenance prevents the decision maker from looking into this important aspect of a project and wastage of public money.

SecurityLink INDIA: How do you view the trend and prospective of security industry in India and where is it heading?

AA: In the Indian security market, the leading requirement is for surveillance video cameras. Everything revolves around video based security. Even drones and aerostats are meant to only collect video feeds. However, the need for the day is smart and intelligent analytics and integration. Today, for example in police, one plateau of police is not able to communicate efficiently with the other because they all use different medium and technology. So integrating these platforms is very, very important. In the case of a national emergency or a natural calamity, departments like police, fire, ambulance, electricity, power and water supply, hospitals etc., need to be in sync with each other to handle the situation effectively. They need to be integrated on a common platform to interact and for fast resolution of the call. This is of course owing to policy issues but it also involves technology disparity.

We need an open environment. We have the systems and solutions to patch and integrate these diverse systems even in the existing circumstances.

SecurityLink INDIA: What is the USP of Mistral solutions, especially for India?

AA: See, where Mistral really scores over others is that when you come to us with a problem, we will devise and put together the complete solution at your disposal. We look for relevant solutions available globally and if not available, we design customized solutions, develop it and engineer it here. So our USP is the understanding of the complex technological requirements and delivering them accordingly.

SecurityLink INDIA: Please comment on your go-to-market strategy.

AA: We directly showcase our solutions to customers. Our go-to-market is more about creating awareness. We do a lot of mailer campaigns and inform customers about the kind of solutions available. Many times we personally go and give demos of our systems.

We also participate in several trade shows, and are visible in media through articles and interviews such as this. We

are a niche company, and anybody who wants a hi-tech solution they can Google and they will find us on the top.

SecurityLink INDIA: But that way, being a new player in Homeland Security market, wouldn't you take long to establish?

AA: The Homeland Security business is still in a very nascent stage in India. There is no consolidated comprehensive solution as of now. There are talks about several projects, for example, the Safe City projects, though currently the project is still being spoken about and very little has been implemented. Even if the safe city project progresses, it will still be highly camera centric. It will take very long for this market to mature in India.

SecurityLink INDIA: Are you doing projects in the private sector as well?

AA: I would say very little as of now, we have worked with some ports so far. But I am definitely keen at exploring this market because at least the decision making is faster there.

SecurityLink INDIA: What is your strategy on after sales technical support?

AA: We ensure 100% technical support and maintenance of our systems. When we deploy a solution, we ensure proper training is given to the users. We also ensure that every month or every quarter, our field engineers are sent to evaluate the functioning and preventive maintenance of the solution. We have gone to the extent of replacing parts at our cost if they are found to be non functional. We are very particular about our brand as a high-tech compa-

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ny and we provide extensive support to maintain that.

SecurityLink INDIA: How do you do R&D in India?

AA: We have always been an R&D team and we are one of the best R&D companies in India. We have a huge team comprising of 350 engineers working for more than 18 years.

SecurityLink INDIA: How much effort do you invest in training?

AA: Wherever we deploy our solutions, we make sure the customers are well trained. We impart training at all levels.

SecurityLink INDIA: IoT is an important development today, how does it impact security & surveillance implementations?

AA: Security and surveillance are more about sensors – the most popular being the video camera sensor. Today, sensors are linked and connected by the internet. These sensors pick up relevant data and transmit them to your immediate device – mobile phone or your computer. So this is going to revolutionize the Indian market. If our home or office is connected with a camera and required sensors, we can monitor and control appliances while being physically away just using our mobile phone. It saves money, makes things efficient and keeps things under control – but it needs a very high upload speed.

In the Indian scenario however, most of the internet providers give us a good download speed but not a good upload speed. Many of these applications need a good upload speed, but if you have a fibre-optic connection, you have got the solution.

Use of IoT has also given scope for integration of technologies at a larger level. Light can talk to sensor, sensor can talk to camera and so on and thereby a lot of smart device will start coming in.

SecurityLink INDIA: How does the 'Make in India' call impact Mistral Solutions?

AA: I am hoping that it will be highly beneficial to us because we are an Indian company and we have been in technology and R&D from a long time. As of now, there is a lot of talk around 'Make in India' though, implementation is yet to happen in a big way. We will definitely benefit from it, as we have 'Designed in India' copyrighted by us. Every design we make is 'Designed by Indians.'

SecurityLink INDIA: 100 smart cities project is the burning issue today, how is Mistral impacted?

AA: Again, if it happens definitely we will get some pieces of it. I am sure it will happen; it is just a matter of time.

SecurityLink INDIA: Who are your main competitors and how do you differentiate MISTRAL from them?

AA: We do not face competition for many solutions as they are unique to our market such as our aerostats and tethered drones. In MCCV we see some local vehicle body builders trying to compete with us.

Let me clarify that our vehicles are designed and fabricated based on global standards. We also keep military standards in mind while designing and so our systems are far more robust, rugged and efficient than others in the market.

There are quite a few system integration companies which are working MCCV on projects such as Roltas, GMR, BlueStar and so on.

SecurityLink INDIA: Kindly let us know some of the company's new initiatives, and launches in the pipeline?

AA: There are some solutions we are working on in wearable glasses – for augmented reality. With the glasses on, we can have a 360° external view from inside a closed area. These are very advanced solutions. We have been working on Wearable Glass Solutions for the US market for over six years now. We would like to bring these solutions to the Indian Homeland Security market too.

SecurityLink INDIA: Kindly highlight some of the recent major projects you have accomplished in India?

AA: We are working extensively with the Karnataka police on several projects and have accomplished many MCCV projects for them. We have also worked with the Bengaluru and Mumbai airports. We have accomplished CCTV projects with ports in Gujarat. Till last year, we were maintaining the CCTV project in Patiala Court Delhi.

We are currently working with NSG for some specialized projects in the drones and aerostat area.

SecurityLink INDIA: What message would you like to give to the readers of SecurityLink INDIA?

AA: Technology is going to be the future. Going forward, technology will get cheaper. For increased efficiency, reduced costs and proper safety and security, we need to start adopting technology on a larger scale. There is a limitation to how much humans can do in terms of safety and security, beyond that it is technology which will help us. ∎