



## RUNWAYS GALORE: EXPRESSWAYS, THE NEW FORCE ENABLERS?



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The recent operations of IAF aircraft from the Agra-Lucknow Expressway on 24 Oct 2017 would certainly have aroused more than mere curiosity among our neighbours, especially China and Pakistan. Although such operations are not a novelty any more – as many European nations have undertaken fighter aircraft operations from dispersed locations, including highways, since long<sup>1</sup> – yet the war-time potential that such capability provides cannot be taken lightly. Pakistan has already operationalised four stretches of its main motorways<sup>2</sup> – each being 9000 ft long – and carried out operations by its fighter aircraft from such facilities during Ex Highmark 2010.

So is there any reason for us to cheer? Of course, there is, on several counts.

First, this is the culmination of efforts (by the IAF) to get the polity to understand operational imperatives, enough to effect mobilisation of resources to ‘get it done’ on a war footing. That events like Doklam were catalysts would be undermining the far-sightedness of the military (IAF)-civil combine that had carved out the basic requirements for ‘usable stretches of Expressways’ for emergency use by fighter – and transport – aircraft of the IAF long before the stand-off at Doklam ever happened. Second, this gives the IAF an opportunity to streamline its procedures for operations from such dispersed locations, train its pilots regularly for such operations, and work out the requirements for sustained operations from such locations if the need arises. Third, it provides the IAF an opportunity to take stock of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations it has carried out in the past and assess whether availability of a similar landing surface in the vicinity of the affected areas could have in any way reduced human suffering/deaths due to timely medical assistance. Fourthly, from a purely civil standpoint, does the successful landing of the IAF’s workhorse – the C-130 Hercules transport aircraft – with a complement of the IAF commandos (GARUDs) on

1 | [www.capsindia.org](http://www.capsindia.org)

board, give strength to the Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Shri Nitin Gadkari's vision of using stretches of Expressways/National Highways for civil aircraft operations?<sup>3</sup> Viewed purely from the perspective of connectivity of Tier 1/Tier 2 cities to respective regional Tier 3 cities – which is also the dream project of the Prime Minister with his 'Mission UDAN' (*Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik*) – utilisation of a portion of the highway as a runway for the Tier 3 cities has merit.

How does the creation of such infrastructure benefit the taxpayer? For this, one has to examine the threat to national security and how this threat (especially from China) has steadily increased over time. The taxpayer needs to be assured that with creation of such infrastructure, national security will only get enhanced, thereby providing a 'return on investment'. A brief explanation of the likely concept of operations (CONOPS) that China is likely to favour in a future conflict with India will make it easier for the lay reader to comprehend where 'Highway Runways' fit into the scheme of things.

The Chinese military has undergone a major transformation with the erstwhile seven Military Regions being replaced with five Theatre Commands on 01 Feb 2016. What was till now the PLA Second Artillery Command has been recommissioned as the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) on 31 Dec 2015, and is now responsible for all the conventional and strategic (nuclear) missiles held by China.

Keeping in mind the geographical advantage that the IAF enjoys vis-à-vis the PLAAF (on account of the Indian airfields in the NE sector being almost at sea level, while those in the Tibet Autonomous Region being situated at an average altitude of 11000 ft amsl), and which translates into an operational advantage for the IAF fighter aircraft (as they can get airborne with full weapon loads, while the PLAAF fighter aircraft do not enjoy the same luxury while operating from airfields in the TAR), the Chinese will be forced to largely rely on its missile forces in the opening rounds of a conflict with India. With the large – though not infinite – number of short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and cruise missiles in its inventory, the Chinese would endeavour to target IAF airfields and critical command and control infrastructure in the NE sector in an attempt to keep the IAF off the back of the PLA Army once it launches a ground offensive. Given the improved accuracy of these missiles in recent years, keeping own airfields safe from such attacks would be a challenge for the IAF; however, with the induction of the S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Russia in the near future, the threat from SRBMs/cruise missiles would be neutralised to a large extent.

In the present scenario, then, the threat of own airfields being neutralised (temporarily, till the runway rehabilitation teams repair the runway for operations) is an existential one and for which we need to stay prepared. With 'highway runways' available in the area – the more the better – dispersal,

and/or recovery of costly fighter assets can be ensured. As experience is gained during operations from such highways, rearming – besides merely refuelling – could also be considered in the future, thereby giving the IAF fighters the ability to ‘hit back’ in anger.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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<sup>1</sup> Finland is known to have dispersed its aircraft on frozen lakes as early as 1939-40 during the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland. Germany, Poland, Switzerland and Sweden also have portions of highways earmarked for operations by fighter aircraft in case of a war time requirement.

<sup>2</sup> The M-1 Motorway (Peshawar-Islamabad) and the M-2 Motorway (Islamabad-Lahore)

<sup>3</sup> *The highways masquerading as secret military airfields*, Benedict Brook, Innovative Motoring; available at <http://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/motoring/the-highways-masquerading-as-secret-military-airfields/news-story/adccbeb1ed6ab0d4ce20ac92bce72d20>; accessed on October 25, 2017