

AIR POWER IN NO WAR- NO PEACE SCENARIO

RKS BHADAURIA

Hon'ble Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat, Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Karambir Singh, Secretary R&D and Chairman DRDO, Dr. G Satheesh Reddy, former Chiefs, senior veterans, ladies and gentlemen, very good morning.

At the outset, I would like to thank DG CAPS for organising this seminar and selecting a very apt subject—'Air Power in No-War No-Peace Scenario', especially to commemorate the first anniversary of Balakot strike by IAF. We need to delve into the unique capabilities of Air Power and deliberate on all options of utilising Air Power in a scenario of 'No-War No-Peace'.

I must take you back one year when the government took a very tough and bold decision to strike at the very heart of the terrorist training camps, across the LoC. IAF was tasked and we achieved the task of destroying the targets with precision. This political decision and subsequent air strike changed many paradigms. First and foremost was the basic message that terrorist attacks on our soil will not be acceptable and there will be a response. All three services were ready to undertake any such operation. Target characteristic dictated the service best suited to undertake the task. The use of Air Power to strike the target, breaking the taboo that Air Power should not be used in sub-conventional warfare. This was the most important change

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in paradigm. The success of the mission proved the aptness of Air Power as the instrument of choice. At the politico-diplomatic level, the ability to de-escalate and get back to normal after the desired message was conveyed. De-escalation was achieved through coordination between all the concerned agencies. This was a significant development that was previously not thought to be possible in use of air power in sub-conventional scenario.

To recap the Balakot mission; on February 26, 2019, early morning, IAF successfully struck the chosen target. Pakistan Air Force responded after 30-odd hours with a huge package in a mission which they called 'Op Swift Retort'. IAF with MiG-21, Su-30 and Mirages, engaged this large package, and thwarted their attack. Thereafter, there were no further missions undertaken. The reason being that the retort itself from PAF was designed to demonstrate action taken for consumption of their domestic audience and it was fundamentally tailored to seek de-escalation. On our part, there was no reason for us to launch again, as we had achieved our objectives and the enemy did not cause any damage in his retort. In fact we surprised them with our Air Defence response. Further diplomatic activities de-escalated the situation rapidly. The mission was a demonstration of fine coordination between various agencies, calibrated use of air power and control of escalation. It is important to remember that the success of this mission showcased that Air Power and its unique capabilities can be used to great effect in such a scenario.

There were many takeaways. First and foremost, as I mentioned before, it was the demonstration of our will to strike against targets across the LoC. This credit goes to our higher leadership and is fundamental to such actions even in the future. Second, it was a highly coordinated effort. The right selection of target, our capability of acquiring imagery and intelligence and finally the ability to hit with pinpoint accuracy with standoff weapons. The Balakot Air Strike clearly demonstrated that there exists a space below the threshold of conventional war wherein Air Power can be used for targeting and yet control further escalation.

Previous norms had been against the use of Air Power in response to terrorist attacks. Though Air Power has been used across the world in such

scenarios, it was the first time that our ability to undertake such air strikes using standoff weapons was successfully exploited and demonstrated. It is important that when you undertake such missions, you have the moral high ground and in our case we did, as we were striking targets which were terrorist training camps and not any other civilian or military targets. It was important to hit the target successfully and also to ensure no collateral damage occurs. All in all it was a well-considered decision which was well executed.

There were some takeaways for us, from the air engagements that followed the day after the strike. We had a weapons edge with regard to BVR capability over Pakistan Air Force at the time of Kargil war which was subsequently lost. Thereafter, it has taken a decade and a half of struggle in acquisition processes to be able to get back a similar or a better BVR weapon capability. It did not materialise at the time of Balakot but it will materialise soon with the induction of Rafale fighters. In an air engagement, especially in deeply contested airspace, it is important to have not just a weapon's edge but also technological superiority. And for all the people in blues sitting here, once we have got back this 'edge', it is important to remember this lesson and see that in your lifetime you do not allow this 'edge' to slip away. Also, we cannot depend only on the Meteor class of BVR on Rafale, it is also important that similar capability be complemented on our other platforms.

Over the last year, IAF has procured a number of advanced weapon systems. We have inducted new sensors and expedited efforts towards some indigenous missiles. We have completed the trials of BrahMos on Su-30 and already inducted a squadron of these aircraft, as you are aware, at Thanjavur. We have been working towards enhancing our weapons, sensors, secure communications and networking capabilities. Also, there were remedial measures introduced after the fratricide of the Mi-17 helicopter during the skirmish last year.

Another area where we have made changes has been in our operational training pattern. Our focus is on integrated training and ability to rapidly move from peacetime to wartime status, to be able to conduct a mission

and handle the response. Training is also essential to optimally absorb new technology as we induct advanced weapons and sensors.

With regard to the road ahead, our acquisition plans of weapons, AWACS, AAR and sensors are progressing as planned. Here it is important that indigenous technology and weapon systems fetch up to meet the requirements in coming years. IAF and DRDO need to converge to develop weapons and technology from indigenous sources and industry. I am sure that Secy R&D and DRDO who is also here amongst us will agree that with renewed focus we can attain self-reliance in defence manufacturing. It is when our indigenous Astra Missile, which is a huge success, is inducted on Su-30, LCA and MiG-29 aircraft that enhanced performance will spread across the Indian Air Force. Indigenous technology projects should succeed in an acceptable time frame and our industry needs to step up to deliver on these products. From an IAF perspective, we will be very proud and happy to employ indigenous weapons in the next skirmish.

Over the course of this seminar, I am sure, discussions will take place on all issues of Air Power in wars affecting its use in scenarios of 'No War, No Peace'. I wish the participants of the seminar the very best. I'm sure that the eminent speakers through their discussions will reveal many areas that will immensely benefit IAF.

Jai Hind!