

AIR POWER IN NO WAR- NO PEACE SCENARIO

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On the occasion of the first anniversary of Balakot air strikes I am glad to be amongst the fraternity of the Armed Forces. On this momentous occasion, I remember the sacrifices of the armed forces personnel in the service of the Nation and pay homage to those who have laid down their lives. I also remember the martyrs of Pulwama and wish to convey my personal gratitude to families of the CRPF security personnel who lost their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. I would like to assure them and every citizen of India that we will remain ready and willing to respond appropriately to any threat to our national security at all times.

I am sure that this seminar will help develop a better understanding of such skirmishes and facilitate the improvement of our response options in the future.

Today the whole world stands united in the fight against terrorism and in the interest of world peace, the major nations of the world stand with India to

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counter countries like Pakistan. We recently observed the effect of collective diplomatic and financial pressure on Pakistan. Terrorists like Hafiz Saeed who were treated as VIPs and heroes in their country are now behind bars. Yet we realise that whatever initiatives have been taken are still not enough in our fight against terrorism. Until and unless Pakistan is held accountable, it will continue with its policy of duplicity and deceit. I believe we still need to put in a lot of work in this direction.

For a long time, India has been viewed as a country that did not respond adequately against terrorism, despite grave provocations. The surgical strike of 2016 and the air strikes of 2019 at Balakot have changed this perspective for posterity. These actions were not only resolute military strikes against terrorism and terror supporting elements, they also conveyed a strong and unequivocal message that went beyond its immediate impact. These effects need to be viewed from various perspectives which I shall put in perspective today.

Let me start with our approach towards terrorism. The most significant outcome of the Balakot air strikes is the reflection of India's clear perspective in its fight against terrorism. Terrorism has been a low cost option that Pakistan has employed against India for which a suitable lesson has been conveyed to them. Through this action, we also indicated that the terrorist infrastructures and terrorist training facilities around the Line of Control and International Border are not safe havens for terrorists anymore. It was made amply clear that terrorism will not remain an option that can be proliferated anymore from across the border.

I have little doubt that the Balakot strike forced the rewriting of many a manual and rule book across the LoC. For those who preferred to place India in an imaginary understanding of the past and bracketed India's actions into predictable options, the out-of-the-box reality of our response has given them more than one reason to pause and reconsider any misadventure. These actions have been supported not only by our citizens but the world and have further strengthened our resolve against terrorism. Attempts at obfuscating reality have been rejected unequivocally. This

was a sign of changing times. Today, one year down post Balakot, I would again like to thank the countries, friends and well-wishers who supported and stood by us. Our approach to terrorism therefore was and will remain a judicious combination of clinical military action backed by mature and responsible diplomatic outreach.

The second important aspect that emerges from Balakot is our intent and capability. I remember the debate post Balakot vividly. I feel one year later, this is an opportune time to discuss the operation in all its manifestations dispassionately. Time and distance often create opportunities to reflect with greater objectivity and realism.

Balakot strikes have shown the importance and impact of military precision. Like I said, this incident has rewritten many doctrines across the LoC. It is also important to understand what it represents as a statement of intent and capability.

There are countries that spend multiple times of India's defence budget. Also, there are countries with more sophisticated and modern weapons and aircraft. There may be trained airmen and soldiers who are committed but, until and unless there is a strong will power supporting it, these efforts will never be successful. And Balakot is a successful example of how national security and critical elements can be effectively combined. I would like to congratulate the Indian Air Force on this. However, our efforts have not stopped after Balakot operation. This has been an important milestone in our quest which made our capability development more efficient and feasible. Balakot operation has taught us how to think strategically instead of tactically. It also indicates that an operational victory is won on the ground, however the war must be won against the enemy's mind.

Balakot represented the first time that Indian aerospace power was put into offensive use across the border since the war in 1971. In the last 50 years the security scenario has transformed and more so in the last two decades. Kargil and cross-border terrorism are examples of such new warfare. Hybrid warfare is today's reality and now we face a real threat from a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic tools. There is no clear-cut beginning, nor a clear

ending in this changing conflict scenario. I will touch upon three major aspects that need emphasis.

First and foremost is the point of expanding battle space. In yesteryears, wars were fought almost always along national borders within restricted geographical areas. But with the induction of long-range weapons this has been changing. Battlegrounds have expanded and it is now possible to reach any corner of a country across borders. Keeping intermediate obstacles and objectives aside, it has become possible to strike inside enemy lines. This means that the whole country is a battleground, including its communication lines for trade and supplies. Another important aspect is recognising the sources of negative power and ending them. It is not necessary that these will be present in countries with whom we have a direct conflict only. Aerospace power plays an important role in this. The attack on the Saudi Aramco Refineries in September 2019 and the killing of Qasim Suleimani by a UCAV attack is an example of this. On one hand, this fight showed the strategic importance of combat aviation. But, on the other hand, it also tells us that we have to be on the lookout against attack from all sources. We need to have a focused approach to increase battle space transparency. And aerospace power will have to play an important role in this.

The second aspect is about time compression. Today our enemies have real-time planning cycle. We have to work very fast to address any challenge that tries to stop our country's peaceful progress. And that means that forces like the Indian Air Force have to be ready for decisive blows with precision and minimal collateral in a short time.

The third aspect is about technological infusion. Generally, aviation and especially military aviation, is mostly dependent on technological changes. And as such artificial intelligence, high-speed weapons and space-based sensors and tools will be very influential. This, again, defines the role played by kinetic forces. Slowly, unmanned aircraft and systems will start combat support missions and we have to be equally ready for that.

Technology infusion has enabled state and non-state actors to launch attacks through kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities with minimal investment. This means a very high cost for creating defensive mechanisms to protect our interests and values. Here, we should use our current capabilities as well as new technologies. I believe that the role of air warriors like you will be very important here. We are proud of your bravery and courage, zeal and sacrifices you make to protect us and our country. We need to reorient our training to meet the challenges posed by hybrid warfare. As far as government support is concerned, I assure you that all resources required will be made available to our forces.

Organisationally we have initiated some major structural reforms in the way we intend tackling threats to our nation. It will take some time to operationalise the full set-up. This transition time is very important. It is also important that all stakeholders invest in making these changes effective and successful. No doubt we will face primary problems in the beginning, and we should be ready for that. It is imperative that we use our professional knowledge to find solutions to these problems.

Once again, I thank the organisers of this seminar for initiating deliberations on a very timely and appropriate theme. My best wishes for future deliberations.

Thank you.