

SALIENCE OF AIR POWER IN INDIA'S FUTURE TRAJECTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Decades after having weathered wide ranging challenges, India today is on an upward trajectory, buoyed by stable and sustained economic growth. The foreign policy initiatives and stances taken in the recent past have drawn attention to the fact that India is not only a country with a vast market potential, but also one with a thriving democracy, and which is increasingly proving itself as a responsible world player committed to international growth and security. With the world focus having taken a perceptible shift towards Asia, India's comparative pairing with China is inevitable. Tapering economic growth, continued energy hunger, nationalistic assertiveness and geographic belligerence, supported by a rapidly modernising military, lay clear its true intentions behind *Zhongguyao heping jueqi*¹ or "China's peaceful rise". Despite inhibitions in openly admitting so, India's elevation to a great power status and a justified place on the international table, will most inevitably run into the Chinese gauntlet of its hegemonic ambitions. China, however, would most certainly balk at terming its foreign policy 'hegemonic' or 'ambitious', simply because of the deep conviction of its rightful position at the apex of the world order as an ancient civilisation.

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1. Sujian Guo, "Challenges and Opportunities for China's 'Peaceful Rise'", January 9, 2006.

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The regional geopolitics of Asia has in the recent years been dominated by China. The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative to revive the ancient Silk Routes² is the centrepiece of its foreign policy and economic strategy. The OBOR aims to connect Asia, Europe and Africa along five routes. The Silk Road Economic Belt focusses on linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia; connecting China with the Middle East through Central Asia; and bringing together China and Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, on the other hand, focusses on using its coastal ports to link China with Europe through the South China Sea (SCS) and Indian Ocean and connect China with the South Pacific Ocean.³ The increased Chinese activity and presence in the Indian Ocean, its actions in the SCS, the seemingly unconditional support of Pakistan and vast investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are all vital to its OBOR strategy. The significant aspect is that the all-important sea 'Roads' – which link it to European markets and Africa's vast resources – are more direct and faster than the overland 'Belts'. The \$46 billion CPEC which links China's Muslim-dominated Xinjiang province to the Gwadar deep-sea port in Pakistan is the key to its OBOR strategy as it effectively provides direct access to the Arabian Gulf. It is also a security challenge for India because it passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK).

India is located in a tough neighbourhood, landlocked from the rest of Asia from the north. Across the borders are two adversaries with whom it has fought five wars—four with Pakistan and one with China. Delhi's bilateral engagements with its immediate neighbours of Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and even Afghanistan, have been offset by the strategic friendship of China and Pakistan; a friendship which has been, and will increasingly

2. http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

3. HKTDC Research, "The Belt and Road Initiative", May 16, 2017.

be, used as leverage against India. From a security perspective, given the geography, it shares over 15,000 km of land border with its neighbours. Of this, 3,488 km is shared with China, 3,323 km with Pakistan and 106 km with Afghanistan⁴ which is subsumed in PoK. Thus, a total of 6,917 km of live borders tie down Indian land forces completely. Rapid improvements in both capabilities and capacities have taken place in the militaries – and especially the air forces – of Pakistan and China. This is important since Indian air power played a significant role in all the wars with Pakistan and would have played a vital role against China as well in 1962, had it been allowed to participate. Air power will certainly continue to play a vital role in all future conflicts, and especially so against China.

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THE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGES OF AIR POWER

To make a case for a greater role of air power, especially in the Indian context, its salience needs a revisit. Air warfare's greatest prophet, Giulio Douhet, stressed on "the openness of the sky and the speed with which aircraft could cross it". Armies followed roads and railways, and then had to fight their way through the enemy's defences. Navies were restricted to the sea and slowed by the heavy medium of water. He advocated, "Because of its independence of surface limitations and its superior speed, the aeroplane is the offensive weapon par excellence." His key thoughts are relevant even today: *air is a violent and crucial battlefield; the country controlling the air will control the surface; the third dimension will carry war to all people in all places; the psychological effects of air bombardment would be great.*⁵

4. http://www.mha.nic.in/hindi/sites/upload_files/mhahindi/files/pdf/BM_Intro_E_.pdf

5. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, Translated by Dino Ferrari, New Imprint Air Force History and Museum Programme, 1998.

However, through both the World Wars, the Cold War era, the Vietnam and Korean conflicts⁶, air power remained subordinated to the surface forces. Even during the Arab-Israeli and the Indo-Pak Wars – where it was employed with decisive results – air power was still to remain an adjunct of the ground war. The 'Air-Land Battle'⁷ of the Eighties evolved out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO's) war-fighting scenario, where the ground forces dictated the tactical battle. Deep battle or strategic attack was the preserve of the air force and the space between – the interdiction battle spaces – became the contentious area. The Gulf War⁸ was to bridge this gap, where air power seamlessly integrated the deep battle, the intermediate space and the tactical one. Military professionals, strategists, tacticians, thinkers and analysts the world over conceded that the war set new benchmarks. It brought out four invaluable lessons: the renewed relevance of air superiority; the vulnerability of strategic centres of gravity to air power; its ability to produce greater targeting effects across strategic, operational and tactical realms by simultaneous parallel operations; and, finally, the redefinition of the effects of 'mass and surprise' by 'stealth and precision'.

One fact which emerges clearly is that air power, having constantly evolved apace with technology, was no longer an adjunct (to the army), but a critical war-fighting imperative. Its capabilities have evolved rapidly, thereby expanding its roles, missions and tasks. The concepts of air operations consequently, have not only expanded and adapted rapidly, they will continue to do so in the future. The key transformational changes which air power has undergone can be summarised as:

- Use of air power is not necessarily escalatory. Unlike the early wars where involvement of the air force invariably meant 'ratcheting up' the scale of conflict in the escalatory ladder, this is no longer true today. The Kargil War is a classic case where, after the initial reservations of

6. William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Air University Press, April 2003).

7. <http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/aspj/airchronicles/aureview/1984/may-jun/romjue.html>

8. Edward C. Mann III, *Thunder and Lightning, Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates* (Air University Press, April 1995).

the political leadership⁹, air power was used extensively in a localised conflict, in which the Indian Air Force (IAF) was employed with a strict and constricting mandate of not crossing the LoC/IB (Line of Control/International Boundary). Despite the politically imposed limited freedom of employment, it turned the tide by hastening the end of what otherwise would have been a protracted ground conflict; a conflict which we would have ultimately won, but with much greater losses of men and material. And, equally important, was the fact that the IAF, despite operating with strict rules of engagement, produced war-winning effects without giving the adversary any opportunity or space to escalate the conflict. This was possible due to its professionalism, where despite the loss of two aircraft and aircrew to man-portable surface-to-air missiles, and its naturally consequent pressures for retribution, the IAF strictly adhered to the political red lines. Air power, thus, has the distinct advantage of creating effects with precision standoff targeting and limiting collateral damage, without crossing borders or placing boots on the ground. Almost every major power today – the USA, UK, France, Israel, Russia, Italy, UAE, Jordan, Pakistan and even Saudi Arabia—has employed its air forces in localised or limited conflicts.

- It is indisputably the new opening batsman. The preparatory and mobilisation time lines needed for surface forces, which is in weeks if not months, give away the surprise and intent, and allow the adversary time to prepare. Air power, on the other hand, can act within hours. It is truly the first responder, which, with its speed, agility, reach and response, acts well inside the decision cycle of the adversary.
- It provides the vital war-winning asymmetry needed, especially against strong adversaries as in the case of the Arab–Israel War of 1967. While total air superiority is still the ideal desired end state, favourable air situation, local air superiority or air dominance are all equally acceptable for air power to create the vital asymmetric advantage needed by own surface forces against the enemy.

9. Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2006), pp. 203

Boots on the ground are still relevant, but large attrition of surface forces has become increasingly unacceptable the world over. Air power certainly cannot capture territory, but it definitely can reduce losses of ground forces by causing attrition of the enemy's military power before committing our own.

- Air power is no longer a 'mere supporter' but a 'dominant shaper' of war or conflict. From the opening rounds till conflict termination, air power has amply displayed its capability to actually shape the battle. It can prosecute a vast variety of roles, tasks and missions across the entire spectrum of warfare, whether deep into enemy territory, or across large continental or maritime spaces.

- A merger of operations has taken place where air power operates in parallel across the strategic-operational-tactical realms seamlessly. It has the ability to

simultaneously attack high value strategic centres of gravity of national power deep in the enemy heartland, interdict and destroy the vast array of vital counter-force and counter-value targets, infrastructure, logistics and communications, military and non-military targets in the intermediate space, and support the surface forces directly in the tactical battle areas and spaces. The unique ability to 'do' all three at the same time is what truly sets air power apart from other hard power tools of national power.

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THE DRAGON'S PSYCHE: SUN TZU AT WORK

To put the future role of air power in Asia in the correct perspective, a brief overview of the Chinese psyche is an important start point. Hu Jintao's policy of *Zhongguo heping jueqi* or 'China's peaceful rise' fuelled concern across the world with the use of the word 'rise'. Since 2004, the Chinese

leadership has, therefore, officially used the term ‘*Zhongguoyo hepingfazhan*’ or ‘China’s peaceful development’, to alleviate international perceptions¹⁰. Notwithstanding the semantics, its transformation from a status quo approach to a revisionist one has been evident since then. The very use of the word ‘peaceful’ in its national policy was possibly an overt justification or a clarification of a covert intent. Being a nation which reveres a vision of its past as a leading ancient civilisation which was a ‘central’ or ‘middle’ kingdom in the world, it naturally venerates its thinkers and strategists like Confucius

and Sun Tzu. Aaron L Friedberg famously quoted, “Idiosyncratic history as a solitary great presence has left it with tacit assumptions of centrality and hierarchical superiority; Chinese decision-makers retain a stubborn faith in superior strategic wisdom found in ancient texts”¹¹.

While Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* is essentially a military treatise, its applications have been widely applied in businesses and national strategies in the East. A few contemporary Chinese quotes and actions compared with Sun Tzu’s precepts provide a valuable insight into their psyche:

Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile. Never take the lead - but aim to do something big.

— Deng Xiaoping¹²

10. Jason Buhi, *Foreign Policy and the Chinese Constitutions During the Hu Jintao Administration*.

11. Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Source of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing’s Assertiveness*, *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2015.

12. Joseph Yu-Shek Cheng and Franklin Wankun Zhang, “Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis”.

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, seem unable; when using forces seem inactive; when far away, make him believe we are near.

— Sun Tzu¹³

This was the policy approach adopted in the initial years of the Chinese economic rise, where the focus was primarily on creating a strong market base, expanding its energy basket and modernising its military. It is driven primarily by economic progress necessary to uplift its vast population into the middle class.¹⁴ In the past, it deliberately stayed out of international commitments expected of responsible major powers. It remained focussed on the strategic vision of becoming a great power comparable to the USA, filling the security void with the waning of American power¹⁵ and international influence. The pragmatic occidental mindset of the West possibly underestimated the idealistic oriental approach of its long-term strategy. China was clearly biding its time.

China's president Xi Jinping has taken on a new military title, in his latest move to exert greater control over the armed forces. Mr. Xi is now commander-in-chief of the military's joint operations command centre.

— BBC News April 21, 2016¹⁶

In war, the general receives his commands from the sovereign.

— Sun Tzu¹⁷

President Xi's series of actions to cleanse the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of corruption and gain firm control, underscores the belief that a strong military is vital to China's growth trajectory. The pace of his centralisation of power since the 19th Party Congress has caught even experienced China

13. Sun Tzu, Lionel Giles, *The Art of War* (Canterbury Classics, 2014).

14. Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon* (Random House, 2011), p. 330.

15. Ibid.

16. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36101140>

17. Sun Tzu, n. 13, ch. 7.

watchers off-guard.¹⁸ The 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' added into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution at the Congress, has elevated him to the ideological authority of Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong through the inclusion of his name (an honour his two predecessors did not receive). An astute and ambitious politician, with a clear strategic vision of restoring China to its former glory, Xi has manoeuvred deftly to position himself not only as the 'the general' but as 'the sovereign' as well.

China's PLA sees US battle networks which rely heavily on satellites and the internet to identify targets, coordinate attacks, guide 'smart bombs' and more, as its 'Achilles heel.'

— RAND Study¹⁹

Therefore, the skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows kingdoms without lengthy operations in the field.

— Sun Tzu²⁰

The vast investments in cyber and space, with rapid advancements towards self-reliance have been a part of a long-term strategy. The Gaofen 4 is the world's most powerful geo spy satellite²¹. It has a colour image resolution of slightly less than 50m which is enough to track aircraft carriers by their wake at sea. Its coverage is a 7,000 km by 7,000 km box of 49 million sq km of Asian land and water, in and around China. When the Jilin constellation is completed in 2030, it will have 138 small satellites that provide a snapshot of any place on Earth every ten minutes. The Yaogan satellite constellation and its associated Anti-Submarine Ballistic Missile (ASBM) system provide

18. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/xi-jinpings-latest-power-move-in-context/>

19. Edmund J. Burke, Astrid Stuth *Assessing the Training and Operational Proficiency of China's Aerospace Forces* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2016).

20. Sun Tzu, n. 13, ch. 3.

21. <http://defenceforumindia.com/forum/threads/gaofen-4-the-worlds-most-powerful-geo-spy-satellite-popular-science.75198/>

it Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities so as to keep US carrier strike groups well away from the Chinese mainland and SCS. In the cyber domain, its Strategic Support Force (SSF), combines cyber and electronic warfare specialists, along with intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and space experts of the PLA. According to RAdm Yin Zhuo of the PLA Navy, who is linked to the SSF's creation, its main task is "ensuring the military's local advantages in aerospace, space, cyber, and electromagnetic battlefields through operations, such as target tracking and reconnaissance, satellite navigation, attack and defence in cyber and electromagnetic spaces – the underlying goal of which should be attaining victory in future wars".²²

Chinese transgressions into the Indian border shot up considerably from 271 instances in 2016 to 415 transgressions in 2017, according to official reports.

— The Quint²³

Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected.

— Sun Tzu²⁴

India is the only country with which China has not resolved its border disputes and its erstwhile backburner approach has been replaced by more assertive actions in recent times. Historically, almost every official visit or event between India and China has coincided with a Chinese border violation or a territory related statement or action.²⁵ Days before Premier Li Keqiang was to visit India in May 2013, the Chinese forces transgressed into Depsang, Ladakh. Even when President Xi Jinping visited India in September 2014, his arrival was punctuated with the arrival of the PLA

22. <http://cimsec.org/strategic-support-force-chinas-information-warfare-service/27200>

23. <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/chinese-transgressions-face-offs-increase-along-lac-official-data>

24. Sun Tzu, n. 13, ch. 6.

25. D S Rajan, "Will Chinese Intrusions into India's Borders Ever End?" Paper no 5915, South Asia Analysis Group, April 14, 2015.

in Ladakh, where a tense standoff followed. The renaming of six places in Arunachal by China prior to the Dalai Lama's visit resonates of a Sun Tzu approach to its border issue with India. The 73-day-long Doklam faceoff underscored the '*unexpected*' approach, possibly testing India's resolve on its relations with Bhutan. While the crisis may have been averted, to many it provides "insights into Chinese coercive strategies and how they may be thwarted".²⁶

*The strategic concept of active defense is the essence of the CPC's military thought - China's military strategy.*²⁷

— Xinhua

Knowing the enemy enables you to take the offensive, knowing yourself enables you to stand on the defensive. Attack is the secret of defense; defense is the planning of the attack.

— Sun Tzu²⁸

Fighting a quick battle to force a quick resolution (QBQR or Suzhan Sujue); information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, joint operations to gain victory; the basis of preparations for military struggle will be placed on winning informationized local wars.

— Current PLA strategy²⁹

If the campaign is protracted, the resources of the state will not be equal to the strain; there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.

— Sun Tzu³⁰

26. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/08/countering-chinese-coercion-the-case-of-doklam.html>

27. Full Text: China's Military Strategy, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm

28. Sun Tzu, n. 13, ch. 3.

29. Anthony H. Cordesman and Steven Colley, with the assistance of Michael Wang, "Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis", CSIS Report, October 10, 2015.

30. Sun Tzu, n. 13, ch. 3.

The Chinese leadership, realising the necessity of a strong air force as a vital element of its hard power, has invested heavily in its rapid modernisation and long-term growth. The PLAAF, in the recent years, has undergone a quiet and very significant transformation – from a tactical force towards a strategic one.

There can be little doubt that active defence and QBQR, enabled by joint operations in a networked battle space, are the cornerstones of China's new strategic outlook. The signs are clear: we are looking at a China which no longer shrouds its intentions and goals. Since there are innumerable such parallels which can be drawn, it leaves little doubt that Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is the common golden thread of the past and current Chinese strategy. The deep-rooted faith in Sun Tzu provides insight into the growing strength and trajectory of China's military, especially the

PLA Air Force (PLAAF). The Chinese leadership, realising the necessity of a strong air force as a vital element of its hard power, has invested heavily in its rapid modernisation and long-term growth. According to Friedberg, "China's military build-up, particularly the expansion of its long-range nuclear forces and its development of A2/AD capabilities, poses a serious threat to both the American position in East Asia, and the security of other regional powers."

RISE OF PLAAF: STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION

The PLAAF, in the recent years, has undergone a quiet and very significant transformation – from a tactical force towards a strategic one. This has been possible due to the transformational leadership of two successive PLAAF Chiefs³¹, Xu Quiliang and Ma Xiaotian. Xu is the first PLAAF officer to become Vice Chairman (VC) of the Central Military Commission (CMC), a position which places him directly under General Secretary Xi Jinping. He is also the first PLAAF general to serve as the Deputy Chief of General Staff (DCGS). As VC, he is the front man of Xi's anti-corruption drive.

31. Burke, et al., n. 19.

His current position allows him to influence Chinese decision-making and advocate for the PLAAF behind closed doors. Ma is the first PLAAF officer to serve as commandant of the National Defence University, the highest military educational establishment directly under the CMC. It is committed to the joint education at the national security level for the PLA and civilian government agencies, policy consultation for strategic and defence issues and the development of mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation between the PLA and other armed forces. He is the second PLAAF

general to serve as the DCGS after Xu and as a member of the CMC. This new trend indicates the elevation of the PLAAF as an important element of its national power.

Xu was the first to roll out the tenets of the PLAAF's strategic goals and space capabilities: "The Air Force will extend its reach from the sky to space, from defence of Chinese territory to attack (of threats) as well. We will improve the overall capability to strike a long-distance target with high precision, fight electronic or Internet warfare with back-up from space . . . and deliver our military strategic assets".³² Five years later, Ma used the PLAAF's anniversary to rephrase these goals as a "powerful people's Air Force for integrated air and space operations that is capable of attack and defence and of providing a strong support for the realization of the China dream and the dream of making the armed forces strong",³³ to reflect Xi Jinping's priorities. Ma was quick to seize the opportunity of the East and South China Seas crises to showcase the PLAAF as an effective tool of Chinese national will and hard

The Pentagon revealed that China has built air bases capable of supporting PLAAF operations, 24 hardened aircraft hangars, plus other supporting infrastructure such as barracks and communications facilities.

32. Stephen Chen and Greg Torode, "China to put Weapons in Space", *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 2009.

33. Ma Xiaotian and Tian Xiushi, "Speed Up the Building of a Powerful People's Air Force for Integrated Air and Space Operations That is Capable of Attack and Defence-Studying Chairman Xi Jinping's Important Expositions on the Building and Development of the Air Force", *Seeking Truth*, October 30, 2014.

power. He successfully expanded the PLAAF's mission set to the maritime domain by writing, "The Air Force must be fully and clearly aware that the air actions for safeguarding maritime rights and interests bring about higher requirements for guidance on the employment of the Air Force, as well as Air Force building and comprehensive support; be fully and clearly aware of the importance of winning the initiative in the air struggle for effectively coping with various security threats from the maritime domain; be fully and clearly aware that the new situation in the maritime rights defence struggle brings about new requirements for the Air Force to quicken its transformation from homeland air defence to possessing both offensive and defensive capabilities".³⁴ A review of the PLAAF's maritime involvement in the recent years provides a clearer insight:

- On November 23, 2013, the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced that its "East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone" (ECS ADIZ) would be effective at 10:00 am that same day. The ECS ADIZ asserted coverage of the air space over the Senkaku Islands, which are administered by Japan and claimed by the PRC as the Diaoyu Islands, and by Taiwan as the Diaoyutai Islands. The ECS ADIZ overlaps the existing ADIZs of Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Taiwan. It also warned that "China's armed forces will adopt defensive emergency measures to respond to aircraft that do not cooperate in the identification or refuse to follow the instructions." Despite international outrage, the PLAAF carried out 313 ADIZ patrols in 2013.³⁵
- On September 24, 2016, a total of 40 aircraft, including SU 30 aircraft, H-6K bombers, accompanied with air tanker aircraft flew in the Okinawa Strait.³⁶ Shen Jinke, a PLAAF spokesperson, noted that the drill involved "reconnaissance and early warning, attacks on sea surface targets, and in-flight refuelling to test the Air Force's fighting capacity on the high seas." A similar exercise was repeated on November 12, 2016, with the PLAAF exercising simultaneously in the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait. This

34. Ibid.

35. "East China Sea Tensions Approaching a Slow Boil", file:///C:/Users/USER/Desktop/East%20China%20sea.html

36. Ibid.

prompted RAdm Yin Zhuo to claim that the PLAAF can now fight in two separate war-zones at the same time, based on its first simultaneous mission over two strategic locations beyond what China describes as the “First Island Chain”.

- The PLAAF has since deployed the KJ 500 Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft and J-11BH fighters in Woody Island³⁷ and airfields in the Spratly Islands. The Pentagon revealed that China has built air bases capable of supporting PLAAF operations, 24 hardened aircraft hangars, plus other supporting infrastructure such as barracks and communications facilities. Each of the three runways on these islands is about 2,700 m long, with Surface-Air Missile (SAM) systems and close-in weapons systems to defend them. Once construction ends, the three islands will be able to deploy a combined total of up to three fighter regiments in the Spratlys.³⁸ A PLAAF fighter regiment consists of three squadrons, with each squadron consisting of three flights of four aircraft each. This means it can deploy over 100 J-11 air superiority fighters in the heart of the SCS.
- Japan’s Air Self-Defence Force reported its fighters scrambled 1,168 times over the 12 months, up from 873 last year. A record 851 jets headed off approaching Chinese planes, or 280 more instances than in the corresponding period last year.³⁹
- The PLAAF recently sent out multiple aircraft formations to conduct combat exercises over the Western Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea (SCS), according to a March 25 statement by the Ministry of National Defence (MND) in Beijing. Shen Jinke was quoted as saying that multiple Chinese aircraft, which included the Xian Aircraft Corporation (XAC) H-6K strategic bomber and the Sukhoi Su-30 fighter, flew over the Miyako Strait and carried out combat training over the Western Pacific to test long-range operational capabilities⁴⁰.

37. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/china-stations-combat-aircraft-on-south-china-sea-island/>

38. <http://thediplomat.com/tag/china-militarization-of-spratly-islands/>

39. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-scrambles/japan-scrambles-jet-fighters-at-record-pace-as-chinese-military-activity-rises-idUSKBN17F0J6>

40. <http://www.janes.com/article/78841/plaaf-conducts-combat-exercises-over-western-pacific-south-china-sea>

Clearly, China has successfully used the PLAAF for political signalling, show of military capability and intent, and as a future coercive potential in the East and South China Seas.

• With the HQ-9 SAMs, as well as Shenyang J-11 "Flanker" and Xian JH-7 "Flounder" fighter jets, PLAAF operations on Woody Island, enable an A2/AD bubble in the SCS.⁴¹

Clearly, China has successfully used the PLAAF for political signalling, show of military capability and intent, and as a future coercive potential in the East and South China Seas. Interestingly, Ding Laihang the current PLAAF chief, is clearly committed to furthering the strategy of his predecessors. "In the past, our strategies and guidelines focused on territorial air defence. Now we have been shifting our attention to honing our ability in terms of long-range strategic projection and long-range strike," he told China National Radio. "A strategic force must go out," he said. "We will continue to carry out long-distance training over oceans".⁴²

ASIAN WATERS: THE FUTURE BATTLEGROUND?

Being landlocked from all three sides in the north and given the regional challenges, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is the key to India's future growth. Geography, energy, trade, natural resources, Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and, therefore, security, underscore the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean to India. Mahan's prophetic beliefs, "Whoever dominates the Indian Ocean dominates Asia" and "the destiny of the world would be decided in these waters", have never been more relevant. Though we do not have an articulated national security strategy, the importance of the IOR is clear to our national leadership. The prime minister defined India's approach to the IOR by declaring it a 'policy priority' and the strategy of 'SAGAR' which stands for "Security and Growth for All in the Region".⁴³ Just as for India, the IOR is

41. <https://fightersweep.com/4214/chinese-fighter-jets-deployed-to-artificial-islands/>

42. http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-09/05/content_31577141.htm

43. <http://www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-at-the-international-fleet-review-2016-in-visakhapatnam-andhra-pradesh-413019>

equally vital to China's growth trajectory. The real challenge in the Asian waters is dictated by China's "Malacca Dilemma"⁴⁴ as a crucial choke point through which 80 percent of its oil imports and trade passes. The possibility of interference or denial of access through this strait triggers the deepest concerns of China's energy security. Increasingly assertive Chinese behaviour in the SCS arises out of its security concerns. The presence of the South China Fleet, development of artificial island bases, increased PLAAF activity and the clearly aggressive geopolitical posturing claiming historic rights within the Nine Dash Line, are indicative of a strategy systematically working towards establishing an indomitable presence in the region.

From India's security perspective, the Malacca Strait also links the IOR to the SCS. A vital strategic assessment which emerges from it is that the Indian Ocean and South China Sea are the co-joined twins of the Asian waters, and their interdependence is an imperative in any future strategic calculus in the region. Therefore, the challenges of the SCS directly and indirectly impact the IOR. This has increasingly been evident in the recent years, with increased PLA Navy (PLAN) presence and activity, whether it is active anti-piracy missions off the Somali coast and the Gulf of Aden, expansion of Gwadar and Hambantota ports or the development of the 'String of Pearls' shipping and submarine facilities. **The IOR being the vital 'Road' of China's OBOR strategy, greater power projection will be inevitable. Presently, it is constrained in employing the PLAN effectively in the region till it achieves its long-term ambition of at least a two carrier task force.** The situation in the ECS and SCS has not constrained the PLAN from increasingly making its presence felt in the IOR.

The conflicting ownership claims amongst the island territories and the waters of the East China Sea with Japan and Taiwan, led China to declare an

44. Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma'", *Asian Security*, vol 4, issue 2, 2008.

ADIZ in 2013 which triggered an international furore.⁴⁵ The ADIZ declaration is classic Douhet—the country controlling the air would control the surface. Given the rapidly diminished international acceptance of capturing of territory, and the revival of maritime power for control of the seas, control of the air space over the projected maritime power is the new air power paradigm. Notwithstanding the relevance of a carrier task force, the ability of land-based air assets to swiftly reach the area of interest with mid-air refuelling, undeniably brings a vital hard power capability to the table. The PLAAF's increasing capability to assert its influence over its neighbouring countries gives China an added instrument of coercion and dominance.

The current flip-flop policy shifts of the new president of the US towards countries in the region have effectively fuelled the fears of Chinese domination of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A report by the Asia Foundation⁴⁶ had cautioned that a US retreat from Asia would create a leadership vacuum and trigger massive destabilisation of the region. While China's bilateral engagements amongst the Southeast Asian countries have pushed their trade upwards, its actions in the ECS and especially the SCS have not inspired confidence amongst its neighbours, who are caught in a dilemma of choice between economic progress and national security. China has since expanded at least seven reefs and islets in the SCS, of which Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief in the Spratlys, and Woody Islands in the Paracel Islands have military capable airfields.⁴⁷ It will certainly commence operating from these artificial islands in the near future which will escalate the regional insecurity. Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia are all upgrading their navies. The Chinese South Sea Fleet has more ships than all the SCS nations combined. The close proximity of the similarly sized East Sea Fleet doubles the threat and questions the efficacy of the regional build-

45. Mark Stokes, "China's Air Defense Identification System: The Role of PLA Air Surveillance", Project 2049 Institute.

46. Asian Views on America's Role in Asia, Asia Foundation, 2016.

47. "China's Artificial Islands Construction Activities in the South China Sea: Impact on the Southeast Asian Security Complex", http://global-initiativ.weebly.com/uploads/4/8/0/4/48042567/romero-15-16_spri2330_final_paper_china_rsct_n5.pdf

up towards a 'gray hull strategy'. Steven Stashwick argues, "The potential flashpoint maritime disputes in the South China Sea are, for now, being most actively prosecuted using a law enforcement 'white hull' strategy, begging how relevant the expanding navy 'gray hull' fleets are to solving the problem".⁴⁸ Any credible deterrence in the region, therefore, has to be bolstered with air power. Among the Southeast Asian nations, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam have small air forces. Most of them are a mix of aircraft of varying vintage with limited modern combat assets. Their combatworthy fighter, Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) systems and tankers are tabled below (Table 1).

Table 1: Southeast Asia's Air Forces, 1995-2015

Year	Indonesia				Malaysia			
	≤3G Fighters	≥4G Fighters	AEW&C	Tankers	≤3G Fighters	≥4G Fighters	AEW&C	Tankers
1995	50	11	0	2	74	18	0	0
2000	87	10	0	2	32	25	0	0
2005	58	14	0	2	36	23	0	4
2010	58	16	0	2	36	36	0	4
2015*	42	26	0	1	29	36	0	4
Year	Philippines				Vietnam			
	≤3G Fighters	≥4G Fighters	AEW&C	Tankers	≤3G Fighters	≥4G Fighters	AEW&C	Tankers
1995	11	0	0	0	190	0	0	0
2000	11	0	0	0	177	12	0	0
2005	11	0	0	0	193	16	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0	193	16	0	0
2015*	0	12	0	0	63	47	0	0

Key:

<3G Fighters=third (or earlier) generation fighters; >4G Fighters = fourth (or later) generation fighters;

AEW&C = airborne early warning and control aircraft; Tankers= aerial refueling aircraft

Notes:

* These include the completion of currently ordered serial production by 2015 and continuation of normal retirement patterns

Sources: *The Military Balance* 1995-2014 eds.; *Jane's World Air Forces* 2005-2014

48. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/naval-buildups-in-the-south-china-sea/>

Table 2: Taiwanese Air Force 2012–2023

Nominal			
	2012	2018	2023
F-16	145	121	145
Mirage	57	57	57
IDF	126	126	126
F-5	60	0	0
TOTAL	388	304	328
Estimated Available (Operational Rate)			
	2012	2018	2023
F-16	90 (70%)	73 (70%)	96 (75%)
Mirage	42 (75%)	34 (60%)	17 (30%)
IDF	100 (80%)	100 (80%)	88 (70%)
F-5	15 (26%)	0	0
TOTAL	247	207	201

Notes: F-16 availability figures account for fighters deployed at Luke AFB for training purposes, estimated availability rates, and the estimated shortfall during the upgrade process. Mirage and IDF figures based on estimated availability rates. F-5 figures based on the end of their service life in 2018 and the fact that replacement trainers are not expected to have the same emergency combat ability. 2012 operational rates are based on testimony of the LY by a Taiwan Air Force chief of staff.

The Taiwanese Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) currently has 145 F-16A/Bs, 57 Mirage 2000D/Es, 126 IDFs, and 60 F-5E/Fs. However, not all the aircraft are operational. Of these, 70 percent of F16s and only 26 percent of the rapidly ageing F-5s are operational. In total, out of 388 combat fighters, only 247 are operational. It also has 6 AEW and about 22 maritime reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft. The only other air force of consequence is the Republic of Singapore Air Force which is the most modern amongst the Southeast Asian Air Forces. It is equipped with 62 block 52/52+ F-16 C/D, 40 F-15SG and 27 F-5E/F fighters, all the Advanced Medium-Range, Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) equipped and Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR) capable. It has 4 Gulfstream 550 AEW&C aircraft and also has 9 KC135/130 tankers, with 6 KC 30 Airbus 330 tankers on order. Simply put, none of these nations can match up to the PLAAF individually. Yet, all of them are running programmes to

modernise their air forces having realised that the only credible conventional deterrence possible against a maritime threat is a strong air power with a modern inventory. Together, however, these air forces can certainly offset some of the asymmetry in China's favour in the contested waters of the region, especially if brought together by a common purpose and training.

AIR POWER: THE REGIONAL GAME CHANGER

The Indian Air Force, with its legacy of contribution in four wars, is a force which both its adversaries are wary of. This is because it has not only consistently proven its capabilities operationally; it has also displayed its strategic agility time and again. The airlift of 1,600 troops in the IL76 aircraft with fighter escorts, flying non-stop over 2,000 km within nine hours of the request for help to avert a coup in the Maldives in 1988,⁴⁹ is a classic example. This capability has been underscored in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) response, from the tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina, the Malaysian floods, the earthquake in Nepal, evacuation of stranded Indians from Yemen to the extensive air rescue and relief operations in the Kashmir and Uttarakhand floods⁵⁰. The Service has an unparalleled HADR record in Asia if not the world, proving its soft power capability for all to see.

While the air force has not fought a war since Kargil, it has credibly showcased its professionalism in a large number of international exercises with the US, UK, France, Singapore, UAE and Russia. The Cope India Exercise with the US held in India in 2004 and the IAF's first ever participation in the multinational Red Flag Exercise in the US in 2008 proved the IAF's capabilities to adapt, innovate and more than hold its own against the most modern of air forces, despite technological shortcomings. About the capabilities of IAF pilots, the US Air Force (USAF) team leader of Cope India 04, Col Greg Newbech, said: "What we've seen in the last two weeks is the IAF can stand toe-to-toe with the best air force in the world. I pity the pilot who has to face the IAF and chances the day to underestimate him; because he won't

49. http://indianairforce.nic.in/show_page.php?pg_id=109

50. <http://nidm.gov.in/idmc/Proceedings/ArmedForcesNov29/1.pdf>

Pakistan has India in a bear-hug of sorts, much as we want to disengage and pull away; it serves to perpetuate the Indian threat as it enables the Pakistan military to remain the power centre. The regular Kashmir baiting, cross-border terrorism and periodical India-bashing sustains the Pakistan military's 'India's anti-Pak hegemonic agenda' narrative to its people.

be going home⁵¹". In the 2008 Red Flag, the spokesperson of the USAF, Capt Marcus Wilson, had this to say, "The IAF is a world class air force with great aircraft and great leadership. It's a great training opportunity for the USAF and IAF to integrate our assets in a training environment. We would like to have the IAF here as a regular participant".⁵² The combat skills came as a surprise to most modern air forces because till the end of the Nineties, the IAF had not participated in any international exercise. Due to its predominantly Russian inventory, it was mistakenly presumed by the West (the US and NATO), that the IAF flew outdated Russian tactics. There was also very little knowledge or awareness

about the IAF's history and capability amongst Western defence analysts, air power practitioners and its students. But having rubbed shoulders and exercised with practically all the major air forces for over a decade, it has earned the reputation of being a professional and formidable air power.

Even though the IAF is going through its lowest ever fighter squadron strength, it retains an operational edge over its adversaries individually. The real challenge, however, is a collusive Sino-Pak threat, for which our present numbers are inadequate. So how does the threat scenario pan out for India? First, let us look at the threats individually. Pakistan has India in a bear-hug of sorts, much as we want to disengage and pull away; it serves to perpetuate the Indian threat as it enables the Pakistan military to remain the power centre. The regular Kashmir baiting, cross-border terrorism and periodical India-bashing sustains the Pakistan military's 'India's anti-Pak

51. <https://theaviationist.com/2014/05/02/cope-india-2004-results/>

52. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/us-air-force-wants-iaf-in-red-flag-exercise/story-MvyAPb12xLCFgmyfspky9K.html>

hegemonic agenda' narrative to its people. Given the history of four wars, all initiated by Pakistan, India does not have much choice but continue to look at its western neighbour as an immediate threat. The western border is seen as a potential nuclear conflict hotspot internationally. The Kargil War proved that conventional conflict is still possible under the nuclear umbrella, and in keeping with the recent Indian hard power response by way of surgical strikes, the Pakistan threat is alive and well. Though it has a strong and modernised air force, despite the reduced numbers, the IAF retains the advantage by way of modern platforms, weapons, force-multipliers, and net-centric operations.

China, on the other hand, is the actual long-term adversary, if not a direct threat. Till recently, India did not feature much on the Chinese strategic calculus, as its real world challenges lie on the eastern side. US support and power projection in the Southeast and East Asian regions is its bigger challenge. However, having successfully given clear indications of its rising power trajectory, the Chinese approach to India has undergone a recent hardening. It stood its ground in stonewalling India in its Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) entry and UN Security Council seat, and actively, as well as openly supported Pakistan on the Masood Azhar issue⁵³. It is keen to get boots on the ground along the CPEC corridor which passes through PoK⁵⁴, giving it a direct opening into the Arabian Sea – an alternate route for its trade and energy requirements which otherwise are totally dependent on the IOR-Malacca Strait route.

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Chinese occupied Aksai Chin are vital as they link Tibet to the Xinjiang province which shares borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. This is China's gateway to the resource rich Central Asian Region.

53. <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/no-change-in-stand-on-indias-nsg-membership-masood-azhar-says-china-1636990>

54. <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/chinese-troops-will-be-positioned-in-pakistan-security-agencies-to-government-1286550>

According to Kevin McCauley, "The current round of ambitious PLA reforms, including creation of peace-time joint theatre commands, will significantly increase joint operations capabilities in the newly formed Western Theatre Command (WTC) with responsibility for the Indian strategic direction".⁵⁵ He analyses that the WTC contains the Combined Arms Tactical Training Bases (CATTB) located at Xichang and Qingtongxia. These are highly developed training facilities for both combined arms and joint training with the PLAAF which typically contain direction, evaluation and simulation facilities. Exercise umpires, Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement Systems (MILES), data collection systems, and Opposing Forces (OPFOR) are employed to promote training realism and evaluation. The Qingtongxia CATTB includes an urban warfare training village, electromagnetic environment simulation, monitoring and control systems, as well as a 1:500 scale (900m x 700m) mock-up of the contested Aksai Chin border region. The PLAAF experimental training base at Dingxin is used for live fire and complex electromagnetic environment training and PLAAF units rotate through this large training area. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Chinese occupied Aksai Chin are vital as they link Tibet to the Xinjiang province which shares borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. This is China's gateway to the resource rich Central Asian Region, and geographically vital for all its economic initiatives, i.e. the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), OBOR, and CPEC. Since China has committed and invested so much in these initiatives, it is very unlikely that it will resolve its territorial claims with India. With an evident Sun Tzu approach to its border dispute with India, the simmering threat of conflict, albeit a localised one, is very real.

And, finally, there is the collusive threat from both these nations. While Pakistan most certainly may want to have a go against India, with China actively participating with it, this is fraught with disadvantages for China for several reasons. The main reason is that China does not want to go to war with any country if it can avoid it at this point in time as it would go against

55. Kevin McCauley, "Snapshot: China's Western Theatre Command", *China Brief*, vol 17, issue 1, January 13, 2017.

its *Zhongguo heping fazhan* policy. It would lose face internationally as any military aggression would be contrary to the carefully projected perception shaping efforts of a peaceful nation regaining its long lost glory. It would force the world to take sides, a situation it does not want to risk as yet. The Doklam incident, if anything, indicates that while it may have wanted to test the waters of military coercion against neighbouring Bhutan, a firm and resolute response by India, elicited face saving disengagement for the time being.⁵⁶ Next is that despite its military modernisation, and changes in its national security policies, it hasn't fought a full-fledged war in a long time. While it has started exposing its forces to training opportunities outside, its military's modern war-fighting model is still largely rooted in the concepts of the Soviet era. However, active training and exercising between the PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) are efforts at closing the gap.⁵⁷ Over the last two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has embarked on a series of transformations from a massive low tech force to a leaner and modern high tech one, capable of power projection and influence,⁵⁸ adapted on Western precepts—primarily the US. Being a long way off from achieving its desired capabilities and capacities, the Chinese military is still 'crossing the river carefully, feeling the stones'. And, finally, any major military confrontation with India would force it to open another front. Since thinning its vital west coast is not an option, an additional front would most certainly tie down the PLAAF, forcing it to spread thin its quality resources. The IAF, on the other hand, even with its present capabilities, can still prevail in air operations to shape the outcome of any localised surface conflict.

INCREASED ROLES, MISSIONS AND TASKS

The true capabilities of air power in the Indian context have not yet been realised. The IAF has been recognised as a significant contributor in wars, it is the keeper of India's 24x7 air defence, it plays a vital role in peace-

56. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-doklam-standoff-between-india-and-china-is-far-from-over/>

57. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/closing-gap-doctrinal-capability-appraisal-iaf-plaaf/>

58. Burke, et al., n. 19.

time logistic support to the Indian Army and it has been outstanding in HADR. Has India leveraged the strategic capabilities of this Service in serving our national interests? Not as much as it could have, and, more importantly, not as much as it can and should. According to Ashley Tellis, the “period between now and 2025 is one of strategic vulnerability for India”.⁵⁹ Arguably, this is also the period when China has involved itself on many fronts geopolitically. With its economy slowing down, unabated energy hunger, military modernisation and the ambitious OBOR initiative, it is unlikely to get embroiled in any direct military confrontation. Recent Indian foreign policy actions, especially in East and Southeast Asia, have certainly affected the Chinese strategic calculus. This presents India with a unique window to counter-balance some of the maritime initiatives by China in the Indian Ocean. China being tied down in the ECS and SCS where it is rapidly establishing its presence provides a window for India to accelerate its maritime strategy, with an air strategy strengthening it. It is time for India to firmly establish its credentials as a regional power and secure its rightful national interests while enabling security and growth for other Asian countries in the region. It is time for some ‘Kautilya’ to checkmate ‘Sun Tzu’! Kautilya’s ‘Circle of States’ foreign policy provides the apt counter-strategy for India to establish its credentials as a regional stabiliser and security provider.

The enemy, however strong he may be, becomes vulnerable to harassment and destruction when he is squeezed between the conqueror and his allies.

6.2.40 Kautilya,⁶⁰ *The Arthashastra*

Replacing ‘harassment and destruction’ with ‘show of intent and reach’ will countervail the beginnings of Chinese domination in the Asian waters, thus, providing the other countries or ‘allies’ in the region a stabilising alternative. This is where Indian air power can be a game changer. The IAF

59. Ashley J. Tellis and Travis Tanner, “China’s Military Challenge”, *Strategic Asia* 2012-13.

60. Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, L N Rangarajan (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992).

with its present and interim capabilities, presents an opportunity for our national strategy to be bolstered and made robust, with integration of air power as a dynamic tool of national interests. How can this be achieved? Some possible ways ahead are as follows:

- Expand IAF operations and presence over our island territories – Andaman and Nicobar in the east, and Lakshadweep Island territories in the west. The SU 30 fighters, tanker aircraft and AWACS, in combination with the Indian Navy's P-8i maritime aircraft, give India a significant and credible air power presence in the entire IOR which should be pursued till it becomes the new normal.
- Enhance IAF roles and missions integrated with the Indian Navy to enable air power to reinforce maritime power e.g. air policing, ADIZ enforcement in selected areas, show of reach and response over PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), joint international air force maritime exercises, Search and Rescue (SAR), anti-piracy missions—the list is only limited by vision. Unfortunately, all maritime strategic thought tends to ignore the tremendous capability that land-based air power brings to the table. Going with the prime minister's SAGAR strategy, the IAF can play a significant role in maintaining security and safeguarding India's national interests in the IOR. While the PLAN carries out extensive patrolling in the IOR, it is not supported by its air power. The IAF, with its long range fighters, AWACS and tankers can send strong signals of capability. Imagine, IAF aircraft flying past PLAN ships, exercising with the Indian Navy or other friendly navies, deep in the IOR or along our vital SLOCs. While these do not have to become regular missions, undertaking them periodically will in itself send strong strategic signals.
- Building air force-to-air force relationships by exercising and operating with countries on both the east and west, would enable Indian air power the additional reach and access to support the nation's objectives. Unlike the erstwhile US' strategy⁶¹ and of late, China's,⁶² air power does

61 Michael W. Pietrucha, "Making Places, Not Bases a Reality", March 28, 2016.

62. Daniel J. Kostecka *Places and Bases, The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean* (February 16, 2016).

not need to create 'bases', only access to 'places' in friendly countries. With its vast experience in long range international deployments, the IAF's professional goodwill, HADR image and strategic reach should be exploited. Greater interaction with the regional air forces—Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, South Korea and Australia needs to be encouraged. Interestingly, India has defence agreements with all these nations, including Brunei, Cambodia and Laos⁶³. While we have some level of interaction with Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, building security partnerships, if not relationships, by way of undertaking a wide range of interoperability and HADR exercises, military support and training exchanges, and goodwill actions with these air forces, is an unrealised strategic potential.

- Similarly, in the west, with Oman, UAE, Kenya and Tanzania, India already has good relations. Oman, especially, has been a historical pivot of the Arab trade links with 'Al Hind' or India⁶⁴. The IAF conducts air exercises with the UAE and Oman; it needs to build on this further. Building relations with Tanzania and Kenya—both nations with small air forces⁶⁵—by providing training and military support gives Indian air power access to the western edge of the IOR.
- The India supported air base in Tajikistan⁶⁶ must be utilised for expanding air power presence in the heart of the continental Asian region. The strategic significance of the base is enormous as it enables Indian power projection in the Central Asian Region (CAR) and also provides a strategic pincer to the Kashgar region and PoK. It also provides India the unique option to use air power for economic support, security and stability in the Afghanistan region.
- Enhanced air power presence during border violations, especially in the Ladakh and Arunachal sectors, with IAF fighters operating in own

63. MEA Annual Report, 2015-16.

64. Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon* (Random House, 2011), pp. 22-23.

65. Brahmand, *World Defence Update 2017* (Pentagon Press, 2017).

66. <http://defencenews.in/article/Tajik-Prez-visits-India,-Ayni-Airbase-may-be-leased-by-India-for-Military-Ops-159594>

territory close to the LoC, would send strong strategic signals that our surface forces have active air cover.

CONCLUSION

India today is at the cusp of economic growth, expanding its presence as a stable and strong nation, regionally and internationally. Its future growth depends significantly on peace and stability in the region. From a security perspective, its future trajectory is impacted by its two adversaries, both nuclear powers, which share extremely close relations with each other. India is landlocked to the west and north, denying it crucial energy and economic access to West and Central Asia. The security challenge of long land borders, with large tracts being disputed, effectively ties down India's land forces. The IOR is, therefore, its major lifeline for trade and commerce, and having recognised this, the Indian government has clearly articulated a maritime strategy. The strategy is important for our growth and, therefore, must be strengthened by exploiting air power as it brings a lot to the table, especially in the Indian context. Even with its present holdings, the IAF can contribute significantly towards stabilising the region with an increased 'aerial presence'. China has expanded its maritime envelope to support its strategic security and economic interests. With its Malacca dilemma and the geographical linking of the SCS with the IOR, China's maritime interests will increasingly clash with India's. While India is not in any sort of competition, both Asian giants, with their historical legacies, will inevitably be compared. With the recent Chinese hegemonic actions and stands, India must not lose the window of opportunity to project itself as the stabilising power – and air power is ideally suited to help realise this.

The IAF is an experienced, capable, credible and a mature force. Even in its present state of reduced numbers, the Service still has a vast array of soft and hard power capabilities with which it can contribute significantly towards India's present and future geopolitical trajectory. Indian air power provides that vital strategic asymmetry and agility that can offset the evident and ever increasing Chinese influence in the region. Since it is the only Asian

air force with the capability and reach across the entire IOR, increasing aerial presence will definitely fill the strategic spaces and influence. A structured and graduated approach of expanding the IAF's roles, missions and tasks, apace with its progress to a 45 combat squadron force, could significantly contribute towards peace, growth and stability in the region. This will also enhance India's regional and international credibility, moving it closer towards a deserved great power status.