



IAF PARTICIPATION IN EXERCISE PITCH BLACK-2022

Air Commodore Savinder Pal Singh

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



Exercise Pitch Black, a multinational air exercise conducted by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), is being conducted from August 19 to September 8 2022, in Darwin, Australia.¹ An Indian Air Force (IAF) contingent led by Group Captain YPS Negi, comprising of four state-of-the-art Su-30 MKI fighters along with two strategic lift C-17 aircraft, with about 100 air warriors, landed at Darwin airbase to take part in the exercise. The last schedule was for the year 2020,

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but it was cancelled due to the Covid pandemic. However, with the health situation returning to normalcy across the globe, this year's exercise is expected to have a much larger participation of over 100 aircrafts and about 2500 air warriors from 17 different air forces, around the world, including the IAF. The IAF contingent, is expected to undertake modern-day warfare multi-domain air combat missions while operating in a very complex multinational environment to not only gain from the best practices of different professional air forces but also prove their competence at the world forum.²

Background and Indo-Australia Defence Cooperation

Exercise Pitch Black is a biennial, multilateral air combat training exercise that is conducted for a period of three weeks at the RAAF air bases in Darwin and Tindal. The exercise is normally conducted at the RAAF's Bradshaw Field Training Area and Delamere Air Weapons Range, one of the largest training airspaces in the world. However, due to larger air component participation, this year Base Amberley will also be used. Exercise Pitch Black 2022 is the RAAF's largest international engagement activity, involving forces

from a wide range of partners and developing allies and strengthening military ties at all levels. Exercises like these are key to ensuring that the Air Force is ready to respond whenever the Australian government requires it. The formation and integration of forces that occur during this exercise directly support the Air Force's ability to conduct operations. Exercise Pitch Black presents a range of realistic simulated threats that can be found in the modern battlefield space environment and is an opportunity to test and improve the forces' ability by integrating with participating air forces.

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The aim of the exercise is to practise for multiple missions involving Offensive Counter Air (OCA) and Defensive Counter Air (DCA) combat missions. All such missions would be flown in a simulated operational war scenario. The traditional concept of a 'blue team' and a 'red team', operating from separate locations, with one launching missions against the other, is the basic scenario practised in the exercise. The first Pitch Black exercise took place in June 1981 between different RAAF units, with no international participation.³ In 1990, the Republic of Singapore Air Force, Royal Malaysian Air Force, French Air Force, and Royal Air Force (RAF) from the UK participated in the first international Pitch Black exercise. In subsequent exercises, the number of participating countries kept increasing, with the IAF taking part for the first time in 2018. That year, about 131 aircrafts were involved and more than 4,000 personnel from the US, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Indonesia, Netherlands, Thailand Malaysia and India participated.

Defence cooperation between India and Australia is based on various memorandums signed bilaterally. The most notable of these are: Memorandum on Defence Cooperation 2006, the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation 2009, and the Bilateral Framework for Security Cooperation 2014.⁴ India and Australia have enhanced maritime cooperation too and have had a Joint Australia India Exercise (AUSINDEX)⁵ since 2015. India and Australia, both being the members of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), have a shared interest in the maintenance of freedom of navigation and trade in the Indo-Pacific Zone as well as rule-based governance in the area. This common interest has led to the recent rise in mutual cooperation between the two democratic nations in almost every field, including defence cooperation. Activities such as Exercise Pitch Black recognise Australia's strong relationships and the high value we place on regional security and fostering closer ties throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Exercise Pitch Black 2022 will continue the tradition of providing a flypast and handling display at Mindil Beach, and an Open Day at RAAF Base Darwin where the Northern Territory community will have the chance to observe, first-hand, some of the participating Air Forces' capabilities.

IAF Participation in Multilateral Air Exercises

In this era of emerging strategic alliances and partnerships amongst nations with common interests, the IAF emerges as the major force in projecting the diplomatic strength of rising India on the world map. In the past decade, India has emerged not only as the most stable democracy in the region but also as a nation with whom most countries in the world today desire to build a strategic partnership. Defence cooperation is an important part of such alliances and the IAF has surged forward in ensuring projection through participation in various bilateral and multilateral air exercises with nations of similar ideology and values, extending timely support to neighbouring countries and beyond in the event of various natural calamities or disaster situations by way of launching Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions, airlift of stranded citizens in various war zones like Afghanistan, etc. across the globe, and the most recent unparalleled airlift of vaccines to many countries during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶

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The IAF has extended its reach well beyond the Indian Ocean and has been actively taking part in various international air exercises with countries like the US, Russia, UK, France, Israel, UAE, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, and Australia. Exercises like 'Cope-Thunder', 'Cope-India', 'Red Flag' with the US, 'Indradhanush' with the UK, 'Ex-Garuda' with France, 'Desert Eagle' with the UAE, and regular exercise 'Sindex' with Singapore, to name a few, have not only allowed our air warriors to learn the best practises of air operations from different nations, but also have worked towards enhancing the bonding and diplomatic ties between the participating nations. Even though the IAF has had only a single occasion of participating in Pitch Black until now, the lasting impact created by the members of the IAF contingent, as professionals as well as ambassadors of India, has strengthened the ties between Australia and India on multiple forums. This year, the French Air & Space Force provided the enroute aerial refuelling support and the Indian External Affairs Ministry conveyed its gratitude and appreciation at the diplomatic level.

The IAF, during Pitch Black 2022, with its four SU-30s and two C-17s, is likely to participate in various strategic and tactical operations under a dense Air Defence (AD), Electronic Warfare (EW) and Information Warfare (IW) environment under the joint operation concept. On August 16, 2022, just a few days prior to flying out for Exercise Pitch Black, the IAF had also taken part in 'Ex-Udarashakti'⁷ with the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF). A traditional closing ceremony was hosted by RMAF that was marked with a joint 7 aircraft formation flypast by both the Air Forces and an exchange of mementos between the contingent leaders. The successful execution of the first

edition of this bilateral exercise is testimony to the professional capabilities, mutual understanding, and shared commitment of the two Air Forces.

Way Ahead for the IAF

In order to build our capacities to deal with existing and emerging geopolitical engagements in the international arena, defence cooperation plays a pivotal role.⁸ Therefore, international military exercises are an effective tool for involving partner countries and strengthening current partnerships. Along with additional elements including military training, port visits, delegation visits, and combat equipment assistance, these exercises actively support military diplomacy. Such exercises help to measure our capabilities against global norms, in addition to projecting Indian strengths and facilitating the required doctrinal changes.

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The IAF, with its modernisation plan and vision to be a formidable arm of the defence of India, is surging ahead at a good pace. Participation in various international exercise and HADR missions to assist friendly nations send the right signal in order to enhance our diplomatic ties with the friendly nations. The fast-changing strategic environment around the Indo-Pacific has raised the need for larger cooperation and integration of resources, including the military, especially air power, amongst the friendly nations. Such a requirement, obviously, cannot be met without joint exercises and sharing of best practises in an environment of mutual trust. The IAF, therefore, needs to continue to increase its participation in such joint exercises. Even though there is a continuous effort toward enhancing the 360-degree capability, the IAF must continue to strive to become a truly 'Atmanirbhar' force in terms of its aircraft, weapons, and support systems. The IAF must therefore continue to not only enhance its capability but also improve its professional expertise through such opportunities for joint exercises with friendly nations. The Indian Armed Forces in general and the IAF in particular must continue to hold international military exercises in India and also participate in similar exercises held in other countries. Germany, Myanmar, Vietnam, Egypt, and Iran stand out as significant omissions from the list. This is despite the fact that the number of nations India has worked with (13 as of now) in the past five is quite sufficient, considering the two years of non-activity due to the pandemic. Additionally, due to the strong likelihood that the IAF will always be taking a lead in the HADR missions in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Nepal, the scope of engagement with our South Asian neighbours also needs to be revised. There is definitely a need to re-visit our engagement policy and, if required, even at the cost of reducing the frequency of military exercises with most preferred countries, we may initiate a certain level of military engagement with neighbouring countries on priority. We may also extend such engagements to include many more countries, rather

than limiting ourselves to only a few. The benefits to be gained from engaging different countries, especially in the neighbourhood, will far outweigh the repeated interactions with the same partners. Gradually, larger multi-service and multinational exercises should be held in India to make the whole process of military engagement more effective

Notes:

¹ Ministry of Defence, “IAF Participation In Exercise Pitch Black 2022 At Darwin, Australia”, PIB, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1853181>. Accessed on August 20, 2022.

² “Indian Air Force reaches Australia to participate in Exercise Pitch Black 2022”, *The Print*, August 21, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/indian-air-force-reaches-australia-to-participate-in-exercise-pitch-black-2022/1090562/>. Accessed on August 21, 2022.

³ Dion Makowski, “Pitch Black 2016, Part 1”, *Photorecon*, August 13, 2016, <http://photorecon.net/pitch-black-2016-part-1/>. Accessed on August 21, 2022.

⁴ “Australia India Defence Relationship”, Australian High Commission, New Delhi, <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/defencerelationship27012021.html>. Accessed on August 21, 2022.

⁵ “Indian Navy and RAN begin fourth edition of AUSINDEX exercise”, *Naval Technology*, September 06, 2021, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/indian-navy-ran-begin-ausindex-exercise/>. Accessed on August 21, 2022.

⁶ “Indian Air Force presses 50 transport aircraft and 20 helicopters in COVID pandemic duty”, *New Indian Express*, May 01, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/may/01/indian-air-force-presses-50-transport-aircraft-and-20-helicopters-in-covid-pandemic-duty-2297015.html>. Accessed on August 21, 2022.

⁷ “India, Malaysia begin four-day air exercise Udarashakti”, *The Hindu*, August 12, 2022, at [https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-malaysia-begin-four-day-air-exercise-udarashakti/article65762024.ece#:~:text=An%20Indian%20Air%20Force%20\(IAF,with%20South%20East%20Asian%20countries](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-malaysia-begin-four-day-air-exercise-udarashakti/article65762024.ece#:~:text=An%20Indian%20Air%20Force%20(IAF,with%20South%20East%20Asian%20countries). Accessed on August 23, 2022.

⁸ Kishore Kumar Khera , “International Military Exercises An Indian Perspective”, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 July-September 2017, pp. 17-40, https://idsa.in/system/files/jds/jds_11_3_2017_international-military-exercises.pdf. Accessed on August 23, 2022.



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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Dr Anu Sharma, Ms Mahima Duggal and Mr Rohit Singh

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