

EMPLOYMENT OF AEROSPACE POWER: REGIONAL IMPERATIVES FOR CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, Air Chief Marshal Mehra, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, Director, Centre for Air Power Studies; eminent Air Warriors; Ladies and Gentlemen. As always, it is a great pleasure to stand in front of such a distinguished and learned audience and share a few of my thoughts on the “**Regional Imperatives for Change in the Employment of Aerospace Power**”.

There has been a dramatic shift in the manner in which conflict is being waged all over the world and especially in our region. Trained and well equipped, faceless transnational actors wage war against unarmed civilians in high visibility locations, with the singular objective of inspiring terror and disrupting normal life.

Neighbours remain not-so-friendly, and do not miss an opportunity to score, whenever we are seen to let our guard down. It is, therefore, very essential for us to carefully analyse the developing trends and take a cold, hard, practical

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look at the emerging environment. We must then reevaluate our options, so that we can create the required set of capabilities, in consonance with existing realities. The Indian Air Force (IAF), is after all, the ultimate instrument of aerospace power, and, therefore, its structure and capability must accurately reflect the prevalent circumstances.

That is why this is a particularly relevant topic to discuss. The magnitude of the problem demands that we shake off our existing mindsets and contemplate on the future shape and role of the Indian Air Force.

REGIONAL PECULIARITIES

Firstly, the many peculiarities of our region. Contemporary rhetoric the world over would seem to suggest that the concept of the nation-state as we know it today, is to be a thing of the past and that economic and social reconstruction would soon make geographical boundaries irrelevant. The example of the European Union and some others is often quoted in this context.

Whilst I do recognise that the manner and mode of intercourse between nations has definitely changed over the years, I do not really feel that it is indicative of the way things will be in our subcontinent.

We have our own set of idiosyncrasies, and notwithstanding the changes elsewhere, our region in the foreseeable future will continue to be associated with a strong feeling of nationalism, almost akin to tribal loyalties, with the associated inviolability of territories, borders and even reputations. The depth of sentiment and fierceness of emotional response, while seemingly irrational, is, in fact, the cold truth of our region.

But would such an environment result in conventional conflict? My reading is that such a development seems highly unlikely. There are a number of factors that in my view, preclude such an event. The first is that nations no longer go for large scale massed wars any more. The costs—economic, social, human and otherwise—are simply prohibitive. Victory, if any, can rarely be decisive since the victor is also hurt in equal measure. I know that similar sentiments were echoed after World War I, but massed conventional armies with large scale mobilisation, slugging it out face-to-face, does seem a bit

unlikely in today's context. On the contrary, I think that if ever there is a state sanctioned conflict in the future, it would be localised in time and space, with limited objectives.

The possession of nuclear weapons in our region also manifests itself in many peculiar ways. It creates a paradox wherein the weaker nation begins to carry out small scale activities against the stronger nation. It does so emboldened by the belief that the stronger nation would hesitate to initiate a response, apprehensive of possible escalation. Post-1971, you would recall that there was a long spell of relative peace and it was only after the covert nuclear tests at Lop Nor in China and Chagai in 1998, that Pakistan was emboldened enough to indulge in sub-conventional and low intensity adventurism against India.

Dealing with such events now requires military intervention and even the application of precise and overwhelming force. Consider the events over the past few years. Kargil, Kaluchak, the attack on our Parliament and, more recently, in Mumbai. Also recall the organisation and scale of effort that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could muster. We must also consider and acknowledge the cancerous spread of Naxalism and its consequent effect on our sovereignty. The number of such challenges only seems to be increasing.

ROLE OF THE IAF

The question now emerges as to what role the Indian Air Force would play in the future. As it appears, we will have to continue to maintain a credible conventional war-fighting capability that remains capable of dominating the conduct of operations. This is absolutely essential, because it is only credible and demonstrable capability which will ensure stability in our region. There is simply no alternative in the maintenance of a strong and capable air force, despite the knowledge that it may rarely be used in its classical role. But that is the premium we will have to pay.

The Indian Air Force, therefore, is faced with an unenviable paradox, where, on the one hand, we cannot afford to let our conventional guard down

while, on the other hand, we will probably face an increased frequency of sub-conventional situations.

The IAF recognises this paradigm shift and as a first step, it has already shifted its focus from being adversary-centric to become a capability-based force. The basic premise is to develop a set of capabilities that in various combinations, can be used to address most conflict situations.

Our present plans are focussed towards dealing with threat scenarios, as conventionally envisaged. We rarely plan or cater to sub-conventional contingencies, except as an aside. Any emergent situation is usually dealt with as a crisis, and the best possible course of action with the available assets is employed. It is this aspect that needs a change.

The task before us, therefore, is to develop specific capabilities that allow us to deal with low intensity and sub-conventional conflict situations. This requires us to change our mindsets and the way we have viewed things till now. We need to recognise the new order of priorities and create capabilities accordingly.

To begin with, aerospace power already has an advantage. Most of our modern combat assets have multi-role capability and can be used in a multitude of roles. The inherent potential, therefore, exists, but we specifically have to acquire the requisite systems, weapons and expertise to develop capabilities in this field. To achieve this desired end-state, we will have to take a look at our acquisition plans, training, allocation of resources and development of doctrines so as to effect a change in the prevalent mindset. This effort has commenced, but will take a while to fine-tune and be viable.

In the light of the fact that we now consider sub-conventional scenarios to be as important as conventional threats, our planning and resource allocation will have to be equally meticulous. The kind of response that we seek to develop is akin to that of our air defence system reacting to an air space violation.

The response to a sub-conventional situation will obviously involve many different agencies, and, therefore, the operation will have to be “joint”. We must develop the capability to plug into the local command and control set-

up and participate *ab-initio* in the formulation of the operational plan. On our part, we will have to put in place a robust and responsive command and control structure, that enables the Air Component Commander to requisition and employ the required air assets in a manner as thought operationally appropriate.

As can be visualised, such a scenario requires an entirely different set of equipment, training and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The equipment list would perhaps include airborne command posts, inter-operable communications, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), helicopters, appropriate weapons for urban terrain, night capability, intrusive surveillance and any other required asset. Surveillance and intelligence gathering would be the primary objectives and, therefore, specialist equipment, that is able to penetrate and provide data and analysis in urban and difficult terrains is to be procured.

It is obvious that neutralising the terrorists without any form of collateral damage will be a challenge. The limitations of ground forces could be offset by intelligent use of air power. This will, however, require us to employ a very different class of weapons. We will need low-yield, directed-energy weapons, capable of precise targeting and controlled destruction. We will have to explore the possibilities of acquiring non-kinetic and non-lethal weapon systems. Acquisition of such weapons, their consequent mating to the delivery platforms, and training are the essential next steps.

The conduct of such an operation will require very robust SOPs and a well rehearsed organisational structure. This calls for realistic inter-agency training and coordination, alongside knowledge and competence in the application of aerospace power in sub-conventional scenarios. Flexibility and quick decision-making will hold the key to the success of operations. Therefore, this aspect will have to take the highest priority in all our considerations.

We will have to become leaner, flexible and comprehensively networked. It is only then that a quick and effective response can be provided. It also implies that we will no longer have the luxury of time for building up forces or positioning of stores and material, as we have done in the past. We will

have to find more efficient ways to facilitate this approach.

I also foresee that we will have to develop some kind of a composite group with expeditionary capability. Not that we have any designs on other territories, but this capability is essential to cater for the vastness of our territory. With most of our combat assets concentrated solely on our western and northeastern borders, it is sometimes difficult to marshal the requisite assets to mount an immediate response.

Let me elaborate. Sub-conventional situations, like I mentioned earlier, will require the comprehensive application of all components of aerospace power. Aerospace power can be effective only when utilised properly. If used randomly, in bits and pieces, it can be grossly inefficient. Therefore, we need to possess the potential wherein, at very short notice, we can transport an all inclusive combination of assets, command and control infrastructure, and trained operators to the required location, in a state of readiness, so that we can hit the ground running. We should not have to waste time and effort, in the allocation of assets, coordinating moves and putting them together. I wish to reemphasise that we will not have the luxury of time, and windows of opportunity will be extremely limited. Our effectiveness in the future will be determined by the speed of our response and if it is not timely, we stand the danger of being ineffective.

SUMMARY

Till now, I have only spoken about the role of aerospace power in responding to this form of conflict. But I do not even for a moment claim that the IAF will be able to operate alone. Effective capability will emerge from implementing a three-pronged approach. The first and the most important is at the strategic level. We need to incorporate joint planning, coordination and synergy among all national agencies, so as to create a comprehensive and effective response.

At the operational level, we must acquire the appropriate wherewithal, and create a viable mechanism to wage such an operation.

And, lastly, at the tactical level, we must train and develop the requisite in-house expertise, so as to translate this capability into action. In the future, I

visualise a more assertive role for the IAF, using the capabilities of aerospace power to address this form of conflict.

Therefore, our aspirations to be a globally strategic force will have to accommodate the compulsions of our regional imperatives. Budgets, as always, will be tight and resources scarce. Considering the very wide diversity of demands and the intense competition for resources, carrying out a balancing act will be a very complicated proposition. But priorities will have to be redefined and some hard decisions taken at all levels.

There is no doubt in my mind that the IAF will incorporate and assimilate these changes and continue to remain on top. Many steps to do just that have already been taken. In my 42-odd years in this Service, I have seen the Indian Air Force change a great deal indeed. From a small, tactical force, with very limited assets, it has grown into the formidable and capable Air Force of today. Many of you here today, in this audience, have been a part of this growth, and we acknowledge the vision, courage and pioneering efforts of our predecessors.

CONCLUSION

Today, circumstances have indeed changed and many compulsions and variables dictate the complex interactions between nations. Our security environment has taken on a different complexion altogether, posing new and different forms of threat. Recognising these developments and preparing for them well in time, is of the essence.

It was in this context that I felt it appropriate to highlight the changing nature of our security environment and the steps the IAF needs to take in order to provide the requisite set of response options to our national leadership. The most important factor for us is the recognition of the problem and reshaping our perceptions; the rest will automatically fall in place.

In the end, I thank you for this opportunity. The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) has indeed evolved into a highly respected think-tank, furthering the understanding of the concepts of aerospace power. I compliment

Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, AVM Kapil Kak and the many other stalwarts, for their sterling work over the years.

Lastly, it is my proud privilege to have served in the IAF for more than four decades. It has been a very exciting and eventful career and as I get ready to hang up my uniform in a few days from now, I want to tell you that it has been a great journey. God speed and best wishes to all of you in the CAPS fraternity.

JAI HIND!