

NATIONAL DEFENCE AND AEROSPACE POWER

FALI HOMI MAJOR

INTRODUCTION

Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, General Shankar Roychowdhury, Lieutenant Gen Nambiar, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, eminent scholars, guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. It is indeed an honour to be amidst such a learned audience, to present some of my views, at the inauguration of the 5th Subroto Mukherjee Seminar on “**National Defence and Aerospace Power**”.

Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee, besides being the first Indian commander-in-chief and Chief of the Air Staff of the Indian Air Force, was a man with immense foresight and vision. His experiences during World War II, and during the early years of the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF), had given him privileged insights into long-term planning and strategic decision-making. Not only did he lay down firm foundations for a balanced force, he also encouraged the development of strategic thought and future doctrines. I think that he was very conscious of the role that the Indian Air Force (IAF) would play in the future of independent India.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

National defence is an all encompassing concept. It lies in the fundamental character of the nation-state itself. Today, we live in a world where traditional concepts and beliefs are under threat of being turned on their head, giving way to radical and new arrangements. The concept of Westphalian national sovereignty itself stands under threat of becoming irrelevant, with the emergence of conglomerations like the European Union and other such alliances. Mutually symbiotic relationships, pragmatism and convenience dictate the form of the new world order. In such an uncertain environment, it would be worthwhile to critically examine our specific context and unique requirements. An analysis and understanding of these imperatives is essential, before we determine the role that aerospace power will play in national defence.

INDIAN IMPERATIVES

Our traditional environment has remained largely unaltered over the past decades. It is also very different from the environments of other countries; say, for example, New Zealand or Luxemburg. For us, the protection of territory and its geographical borders, you will agree, will continue to retain primacy. The present resurgence, economic prowess and increasing zone of influence has made us revisit our appreciation of national defence. It will obviously have to include the protection of our exclusive economic zones, our lines of communication and our assets, which may be located beyond our geographical boundaries.

I also place before you the proposition that the ambit of national defence must also include the protection of elements of soft power, which I daresay, include the intangible elements of reputation, credibility and honour. Within this enlarged purview lie our collective responsibilities.

It is essential that we, as a nation, must have a comprehensive strategy, which is coordinated at the highest level, encompassing all elements of national power. Our military capability must be able to influence events to our advantage when required. We need to demonstrate credible capability

and international presence, so that we are able to exert widespread influence, and smoothen our way to permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

INFLUENCE OF AEROSPACE POWER

To this learned audience, I need not emphasise the profound influence that aerospace power has had in shaping the modern world. Aerospace power today, perhaps, holds the key to the practical demonstration of national military capability and will continue to remain the centerpiece of national force.

I say this with confidence because the effect of aerospace power is inherently strategic in nature. Every action or even inaction, presence or posture, has strategic implication.

Take for example, the strategic airlift of Berlin at the end of World War II, which is a classic case of achievement of an objective, without firing a shot! The use of air power in Kargil, though in our own territory, immediately altered the nature of the conflict and international perception. Consider the excitement created in the media and in strategic circles, by the simple activation of two of our advanced landing grounds (ALGs) at DBO and Fukche, recently. These are Our ALGs, in Our territory and we have activated them in accordance with Our requirements, to develop alternative logistic and supply routes. But that action by itself initiated a flurry of diplomatic activity. And I would like you to note that these are not even offensive combat assets!

It is **this** nature of aerospace power that needs understanding. Simple presence, backed by professional credibility, can sometimes achieve national objectives. It must be used in this manner, and why not? Military power does not always imply destruction and delivery of firepower alone. When at the bargaining table, the presence of power and capability in the background, adds great value to one's position.

A force in being demonstrates purpose and intent, and accordingly has to be considered with due gravity. The IAF carries out a number of operational-level exercises. These exercises, both national and international,

besides the obvious reasons of learning lessons of tactical value, are very important indicators of own capability. Performance during these exercises is monitored very carefully and demonstrates the potential of the air force, and ultimately the nation, creating credibility. This, coupled with posture, can sometimes broadcast intent, and often that alone is sufficient to achieve the desired objectives.

FUTURE APPLICATIONS OF AIR POWER

The years to come will perhaps see the use of aerospace power in many unconventional models. The possibility of conventional conflict, with one nation declaring war on another legally, seems remote today. The primary focus, I feel, will be towards domination of the battlespace. This control will remain an essential prerequisite for the success of any kind of operation, be it land, sea or air.

Besides the existing conventional roles and capability, the Indian Air Force will have to prepare for new roles and imaginative methods of application. I anticipate that aerospace power will take on a more intrusive role in the future. Surveillance and persistence may be the new requirements, with increasing relevance of space-based and unmanned platforms. Routine tasks are set to become more automated with elements of artificial intelligence looking after basic analysis.

As recent events indicate, threats from non-state actors would possibly increase, in the form of irregular warfare with diffused forces in urban terrains. Such a scenario redefines the envelope within which operations would have to take place, with the associated issues of restrictive rules of engagement and collateral damage. In such a context, it seems inevitable that the kind of weapons to be used may see a revolutionary change. The induction and use of non-lethal and non-kinetic weapons may soon become inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Our region is unlikely to achieve a degree of stability in the near future. Practically speaking, there will always be social, political and economic

turmoil, at least for some time to come. Such a situation remains conducive to all forms of unrest and violence. The natural implication is that there would always be unforeseen emergent situations. I think that aerospace power is the only instrument that possesses the required speed and flexibility, when military intervention would be required.

The fact that aerospace power is the prime element of national defence, is not in question. The question is, how well do we truly understand the capabilities and principles of application of air power? The nature of future conflict will be far from the conventional, and will require flexibility of response. Aerospace power, by its inherently strategic nature, is a very powerful expression of national capability and intent, and must be used as such. National defence is a function of national capability and will. We will have to learn to combine them.

JAI HIND!