



Exercise Gagan Shakti 2024: Enhancing Operational Preparedness



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Having finished Vayu Shakti earlier in February and Tarang Shakti, which is set for later in the year, the Indian Air Force (IAF) is now beginning 'Gagan Shakti', the second of the trio of exercises planned for this year. It is time to take stock of what these exercises involve. Gagan Shakti is a complex exercise that began, as scheduled, on April 1, 2024, and will continue round the clock, seven days a week, for the next 10 days. Vayu Shakti demonstrated the capabilities of the Indian Air Force to deliver firepower with precision, concentrated in time and space, over a defined area and pre-selected targets.

As part of the exercise, extensive planning and execution of activities across the country have been carried out to simulate the emergence of threats that might result from a conflict involving two fronts. During Exercise 'Gagan Shakti-2024', the IAF will mobilise all of its bases and equipment throughout the country. All of the key features of airpower, including precision, mass, flexibility, responsiveness, speed, versatility, and reach, are expected to be tested by this exercise, presenting a challenge for all stakeholders. The Indian Army will provide logistics assistance for the massive exercise. This support will facilitate a comprehensive pan-India movement of around 10,000 Indian Air Force personnel and ammunition. The purpose of this movement is to validate the aspects of the Indian Air Force's Operational Rail Mobilisation Plan (ORMP).¹

The latest edition of the IAF doctrine, released in 2022 and including several significant additions compared to the earlier version, will be put to the test during the exercise. One of the most critical aspects of the new doctrine is the connection between air power as a national instrument of military power and national security strategy in order to accomplish national aims and objectives in the context of the current geopolitical environment and technical difficulties.

1 | <https://capsindia.org/>

In light of the fact that the IAF has been grappling with a shortage of assets in terms of fighter aircraft, air-to-air refuellers, and airborne warning and control systems (AWACS), it is of the utmost importance that the IAF makes smart use of precious assets while maintaining centralised command and control. In the current environment of operations across multiple domains, it is a fact that neither the Army, Navy, nor the IAF can achieve victory on its own in the direction of the accomplishment of political objectives. Consequently, this is magnificently encapsulated in the conclusion of the IAF doctrine, which states that "the establishment of robust joint structures to enable right sizing, joint training and operations, while maintaining service specific core competencies"² is the recommended course of action. In a significant way, the upcoming Gagan Shakti exercise intends to accomplish all of these things and more with the active involvement of the Indian Army and the Indian Navy. The Indian Army has already begun to take action by aiding the Indian Air Force units in mobilising for the exercise in cooperation with the Indian Railways. Moreover, the Indian Navy will also be deploying its vessels for the purpose of the exercise.

When it comes to employing force by any service, whether by itself or in conjunction with other forces, doctrinal precepts serve as a guide and control strategy. However, it is training and operational employment that ultimately produce the desired results. Because of this, military professionals must undergo training that is realistic or very close to real operational scenarios. This enables them to refine their skills and acquire invaluable knowledge regarding the employment of force. It is anticipated that the Rafale fighter aircraft and Prachand helicopters, in addition to the S-400 air defence system, will be operated for the very first time during the current iteration of the Gagan Shakti exercise. During the exercise, the entire IAF, along with all of its operational bases, would be activated. The exercise aimed to test the IAF's readiness to carry out intense operations encompassing a wide range of operations, including counter-air, air defence, counter-surface force, electronic warfare, long-range strikes, and rapid deployment of forces from one theatre to another. Additionally, to test the various contingencies that could occur, operations would be carried out from civil airfields, and landings would be made from designated sections of national highways spread across the country.

Exercise Tarang Shakti, which is scheduled to take place in August 2024, is going to be the most extensive multilateral exercise that has ever been carried out in India. It is anticipated that aircraft from the Air Forces of Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, the United States of America, and Germany will take part in the war game. Additionally, the German Air Chief is planning to fly into the country in a fighter aircraft personally. Participants are expected to come from about

twelve different nations. This exercise will improve military cooperation and interoperability and highlight India as a nation that must be taken seriously. India now possesses the fourth-largest air force in the world, and this exercise will showcase India as a formidable competitor. The IAF participated in exercises abroad in the past year, in addition to other air forces from friendly foreign countries coming into India. This was one of the most significant events that took place. This pattern indicates that the IAF is becoming more widely acknowledged as a professional force, as well as the significance of the country as an emerging power in the area. The purpose of these exercises is to give a platform for various air forces to engage in the exchange of knowledge, the sharing of best practices, the accomplishment of joint training, and the formation of personal relationships, all of which serve as vital intangibles in the process of developing synergy during joint operations. These cooperation and multilateral exercises foster military diplomacy and go a long way towards guaranteeing regional security and stability by sending a strong message to any government with hostile and hegemonic intentions. India is the only regional air force that has participated in multilateral exercises on such a large scale.

With the completion of Vayu Shakti, the IAF is actively conducting an exercise, Gagan Shakti, on a national pan-air force level. The objective of Gaganshakti-2024 is to conduct an evaluation of integrated war-fighting techniques and tactics within the context of the Indian Army and the Indian Navy together. The last time an exercise of this magnitude was carried out was in 2018, when the IAF launched more than 11,000 sorties in preparation for a scenario involving two fronts.³ Since then, a lot of things have changed, including recent purchases made by the IAF, the current security situation in the region, which includes a border standoff with China that has been going on for the past four years, and the requirement to practise and train in a setting that is nearly as realistic as possible. Tarang Shakti is a multilateral air force exercise that will take place later this year, and the Indian Air Force is looking forward to participating in it, as well as preparing and directing it. The IAF is committed to leaving no stone unturned in its pursuit of national security, always striving to reach new heights and achieve glory in consonance with its motto of 'touching the sky with glory.'

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

NOTES:

¹ "IAF's 10-Day Mega Exercise 'Gagan Shakti' Set To Begin", *The DD News*, April 1, 2024, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/iafs-10-day-mega-exercise-gagan-shakti-set-to-begin/>. Accessed on April 1, 2024.

² "Preparing For The Future: A Road Map", *Doctrine Of the Indian Air Force*, Chapter:7, Page:84, 2022, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2MB.pdf#:~:text=Establishment%20of%20robust%20joint%20structures%20to%20enable,and%20operations%20while%20maintaining%20service%20specific%20core>. Accessed on April 1, 2024.

³ Huma Siddiqui, "Gaganshakti 2024: India's Show of Strength and Preparedness", *The Financial Times*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-gaganshakti-2024-indias-show-of-strength-and-preparedness-3437354/>. Accessed on April 1, 2024.

