

➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

Three important global hotspots remain in conflict. The Ukraine conflict has completed two years. There is a near stalemate like situation. Russia has occupied nearly 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory. Two Ukrainian counter-offensive attempts have failed. Another one is not on the cards. There is an anti-funding public opinion building up in the US. Also the US Presidential election campaign has its dynamics. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Headquarters continues to request for more funding and support for the war effort. Some European countries have promised greater support. Russian President Putin has been suggesting some form of negotiations and ceasefire, but the West has not seen any takers. Meanwhile, through continued increasing trade, India, China and West Asia have made the Western sanctions against Russia considerably less punishing.

Meanwhile, Putin's interview with the former Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson has gone viral. Especially his comment on his preference of Biden over Trump, being "more experienced, predictable, an old-school politician", ruffled some feathers. "We will work with any US president who the American people have confidence in," he later clarified. Some say this was Putin's decoy statement. Trump termed Putin's statement as an endorsement. Carlson is known for his anti-Ukraine stance, and was criticised by many in the West for the lack of tough questions. Interestingly, at a rally, Trump said that he would encourage Russia to invade countries that did not meet their NATO obligations, sending shockwaves through the ranks of European leaders.

There is no end in sight in the Israel-Hamas War. As of February 2024, over 30,000 people (over 28,000 of them Palestinians) had been killed. These included 88 journalists (mostly Palestinian), and nearly 135 United

Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) aid workers. While there is considerable international pressure, and also from the USA, Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu remains aggressive on the unfinished job of eliminating Hamas. The USA continues to support Israel with funds and military hardware. Israel has not been able to starve Hamas of cash. Hezbollah and the Houthi offensive actions are also supporting Hamas. Ultimately, some form of two-state solution would have to evolve.

The Red Sea Crisis 2024 is a spillover from the Israel-Hamas War and the complex dynamics in Yemen. The Yemen-based Houthis continue attacks on commercial shipping in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The general area encompassing the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Aqaba, Southern Israel, and the air space of Saudi Arabia and Egypt is directly affected. This disruption has led to the interference in international maritime trade in the Red Sea. In response, the US, supported by many of its Western and Asian allies, launched Operation Prosperity Guardian. There has been significant targeted killing of the Houthi and Iranian leadership. The Somali pirates have been taking advantage and attacking shipping. The Indian Navy has become very active to defend Indian and international shipping from such attacks. Meanwhile, some Chinese shipping companies have stopped taking cargo for Israel. The Houthis have said they will not attack Russian and Chinese ships passing through the Red Sea, thus, creating divisions and foraying into international geopolitics.

China continues to be aggressive in the Taiwan Strait, including flying fighter jets near the island. Tensions are rising. The Democratic Progressive Party, which favours independence, won a third consecutive term in 2024. Some analysts fear the United States and China could go to war over Taiwan.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted its triennial Exercise Vayu Shakti-24 showcasing India's air power and depth of indigenisation. Held at the Pokhran air-to-ground range, near Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, on February 17, it was a day and night fascinating demonstration of the offensive and defensive capabilities of the IAF. It was a showcase of the IAF's assets and combat equipment, and the capabilities of the crew who operate them. It

also demonstrated joint operations with the Indian Army. The 2024 exercise carried the tagline 'lightning strike from the sky'. The IAF is now getting set for two more major exercises. The pan India Exercise "Gagan Shakti" will test the IAF's multi-front capabilities, and Exercise "Tarang Shakti" will have nearly 12 countries participating.

This issue of *Air Power Journal (APJ)* looks at many contemporary issues. Swarm drones have been having increasing employability in both offensive and defensive operations. They can do multiple tasks in the same mission, from decoy, Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD), attacks on surface and aerial targets, electronic warfare support, act as communications relays, and do battle damage assessment, among others. When combined with manned systems in teaming mode, they could have phenomenal combat power.

Space is clearly the new frontier. Space-based platforms are increasing rapidly in number. To accommodate more, the separation is being reduced. Many abandoned satellites are also in orbit. There is a large quantity of other space debris. There is high risk of collisions. While the world has been looking at Space Situational Awareness (SSA), the time has come to manage traffic in space.

Civil aviation is a booming sector. This requires a large number of aircraft and also many more airports. Developing a Greenfield airport or expanding an existing one is a complex exercise which involves ecological and environmental issues. Airports have to cater for high density traffic and large footfalls. There has to be an ecosystem to support arrivals from the neighbourhood by road and rail. There are issues related to noise, waste disposal management, and security. There is, thus, a need to carry out a comprehensive strategic analysis before building a new airport.

One thing that worries most militaries is "Blue on Blue", fratricide during operations. The Ukraine conflict has seen many such cases. History too is replete with incidents of aircraft shot by own ground-based weapons. With such a large number of aerial platforms, including unmanned flying, and many other lethal projectiles being launched in the Tactical Battle Area

(TBA), air space management has assumed high importance. This requires both direct and procedural control.

The battle in Ukraine has reached a near stalemate. The Ukrainian counter-offensive failed for many reasons. One significant role was played by the Russian Aerospace Forces. Lastly, we look at Australia's rare earth natural wealth and capability to process this. Rare earth and critical minerals are required for most electronic systems. A monopoly by a few nations has held the rest to ransom. This is a subject that is being increasingly studied and analysed globally.

In every issue of the APJ, we look at contemporary issues. The journal is painstakingly put through and has a wide reach, and is read by many uniformed personnel and civilian readers. We, at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), try and inculcate book-reading as a habit for intellectual stimulation and increasing overall knowledge.

Happy Reading
Jai Hind!

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