



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

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### IAF in a VUCA World

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*“Much of a state’s defence planning is obliged to proceed on the basis of anticipation, hope, expectation, and possibly confident beliefs about the future which cannot be tested for their accuracy.”*

- Colin Gray<sup>1</sup>

A mere glance at any newspaper these days would reveal the extent of the current nature of world affairs, often described as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous). From facing a pandemic to the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, the range of threats surrounding mankind is ever-increasing. Despite tremendous advances in intelligence and communication, not many could forecast the significant events of recent years with satisfactory accuracy. Right from the Chinese actions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Russia-Ukraine war or the Hamas attack on Israel, not many people could predict such an event with reasonable accuracy till it finally occurred. If there is one thing that can be said with certainty about wars, it is that no one has ever accurately predicted them. Whether it was Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of the UK, dismissing the possibility of war with Germany in 1938, or the now-deleted press release from President Zelensky of Ukraine on February 22, 2022, which downplayed the chances of a full-scale Russian invasion, both were proven wrong within a short time.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, economies across the globe were stressed. To address these stresses, countries evolved different strategies. Some worked, while others did not. In places where they didn’t work, political parties/leaders exploited social fissures/used illegal means to win elections, leading to significant turmoil. The entire neighbourhood of India experienced this (Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, etc.). Whether it was the Israel-Hamas war or the turmoil in the neighbourhood, all happened without any serious warning. In these cases, a response is required to be formulated and delivered in a short time. Whether it involves striking targets to prevent further offensive action, mobilising resources to strengthen a sector or even moving people out of a conflict zone, time is of the essence. When time is of the essence, air power becomes the dominant instrument of choice. This is explained by Sanu Kainikara as, “rapid responsiveness of a modern military force is almost completely dependent on air power’s core competencies that are derived from its inherent primary characteristics—flexibility, responsiveness, speed, reach, penetration, precision, discrimination and lethality.”<sup>3</sup>

With the evolution of missiles, a significant role of the air forces has shifted from manned aircraft to missiles. Whether for weapon delivery or establishing air defence, missiles have been

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increasingly preferred. When nuclear weapons were miniaturised to be able to fit in missiles, aircraft appeared to be losing their relevance for strategic operations. In recent times, drones have started becoming an alternative to missiles. The low cost, minimal launch infrastructure, and near-perfect accuracy of some drones, especially the FPV (first-person view) camera-guided ones, have gained traction. These drones and surface-to-surface missiles are usually operated by the land forces. An undeclared acknowledgement of this evolution is the steady decline in the number of manned combat aircraft worldwide in recent years. Therefore, with a decrease in reliance on combat aircraft, can we say that there is a decreasing role of the air forces? Recent experiences suggest a different picture.

In the ongoing war in the Middle East, the first barrage of Iranian missiles and drones, fired in retaliation for the killing of Ismail Haniyeh in April 2024, was said to have been intercepted at nearly 99 per cent. In the second significant strike by Iran, involving close to 200 ballistic missiles, nothing of crucial value was claimed to be lost by Israel.<sup>4</sup> The claim has some merits as per one Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) observer as well.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, while missiles work during trials and demonstrations (in the absence of the enemy), the results during war tell an entirely different story. Therefore, the countries with large missile inventories are likely to be in for a surprise in a war. Martin Van Creveld, one of the air power theorists of contemporary times, remarked, “With every passing day, the steadily declining number of combat aircraft means that the “core” mission of air forces everywhere is being eroded. Those ignoring this process do so at their own peril.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, there are two opposing forces in action. One is the volatile nature of contemporary world affairs, which creates a demand for enhanced use of air power. Another factor is the peacetime perception that air forces are losing relevance since their roles can be performed by missiles and drones. India is also affected by this dilemma. On one side, there is a continuous decline in the strength of combat aircraft. On the other hand, IAF operations have only been expanding in terms of frequency and complexity. Thus, there is a mismatch between the demand and supply. This gap can be offset to a certain extent by improving the human capital. The same was highlighted by former IAF Chief, Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari (Retd), on his Air Force day address on October 08, 2023, when he said, “the need to redefine, reimagine and recalibrate ourselves”.<sup>7</sup> However, a more comprehensive solution is required to make good the shortfall.

Whispers in the corridors suggest that alternate solutions to this capability mismatch are emerging in the form of a proposal for a separate missile force. The arguments in favour of such a force seem to resonate with the theme of ‘*Atmanirbharta*’. There is no denying that India can indigenously produce missiles and can form a missile force at a rate faster than developing indigenous fighter squadrons. However, what needs to be validated is their utility on the battlefield.

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The recent global experiences aren't encouraging enough to merit the development of such a force. This is all the more applicable in India, where both Pakistan and China have good air defence systems that further limit the employability of a missile/rocket force.

So what's the solution? It is two-fold. The first step is to recognise the need for an increase in air power capability. This is a long-drawn process and is dependent on the country's industrial capacity and the training of the air warriors. The second is to test their training in crisis. There is adequate room for employment in humanitarian crises arising out of conflicts. Air power can deliver essential aid with force against the wishes of any of the parties in conflict. IAF did it in Sri Lanka on June 04, 1987, when five An-32s, escorted by Mirage-2000s, air-dropped 24 tonnes of relief material against the wishes of the warring parties.<sup>8</sup> Such actions can demonstrate both the capability and resolve of India and strengthen its case for securing a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Given the numerous global crises, it is time to take the initiative and back it with competence. The 92<sup>nd</sup> IAF Day is an opportunity to once again take the resolve and demonstrate the willingness to defend the values of the IAF and India in the global landscape.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Colin S Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The latest on the Ukraine-Russia Crisis. CNN. 22 Feb 2022. Accessed at <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-21-22/index.html> on October 07, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Sanu Kainikara, *Seven Perennial Challenges to Air Forces* (Canberra, Australia: Air Power Development Centre, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> David Gritten, Matt Murphy and Patrick Jackson, "What we know about Iran's attack on Israel", *BBC*, October 03, 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c70w1j0l488o>. Accessed on October 06, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Decker Eveleth, "IMINT: Iran's Strike on Nevatim Airbase", *Hors D'oeuvres of Battle*, October 04, 2024, at <https://horsdoeuvresofbattle.blog/2024/10/04/imint-irans-strike-on-nevatim-airbase/>. Accessed on October 06, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Olsen A John, ed., *A History of Air Warfare* (Potomac Books, 2010), P. 370.

<sup>7</sup> "Address By CAS On 91st Anniversary Of IAF", *SP's Aviation*, October 08, 2023, at <https://www.sps-aviation.com/story/?id=3371>. Accessed on October 06, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "Operation Poomalai", *Bharat Rakshak*, October 12, 2006, at <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/army/history/1987ipkf/operation-poomalai/>. Accessed on October 07, 2024.