

Recalling Air Power in the Indian Context

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With the announcement of the proposed theaterisation of the existing structure of the armed forces, there have been numerous exchanges of ideas, formal and informal discourses, official and unofficial exchange of views and perspectives in recent months. During such exchanges, a standpoint of equating the Air Force of a nation with the Artillery has emerged and it requires to be put in a proper perspective. Indian military history has unfortunately not highlighted the lethality and importance of air power, which is the root cause for incorrect understanding of air power. Therefore, the problem remains that despite being the most potent and lethal way of modern warfighting in the contemporary technological era, air power has been least understood. Such contradictory remarks clearly indicate the requirement of putting a proper perspective on matters like air power, theaterisation, integrated command Headquarters (HQs) and, most importantly, jointmanship. In an attempt towards that, the article will bring out the efficacy of air power citing examples from the wars and conflict on Indian soil. The article will also bring out the missing link of a proper perspective on the role of the Air Force, and analyse the importance of Air Force and air power as tools of modern warfighting and as the preferred choice of instrument for the national leadership. The lethality of air power cannot be discarded in the present technological era as it has been quite significant and decisive in numerous wars and conflicts. Air power is strategic in nature, capable of effect-based operations and parallel operations. Air forces around the world are transitioning from air to aerospace power in order to prepare for the future.

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Regardless of our respective ranks and positions, we must execute to the best of our abilities and we must do it right the first time because the application of airpower is serious business where half-hearted efforts and playing for second place are not options.

– **General Charles Q. Brown, Jr.**
22d Chief of Staff, United States Air Force

BACKGROUND

The foundation of the Indian Air Force (IAF) was laid in 1932 by the British. Youngest of the three defence services in India, the IAF has always been more lethal, effective and war winning. Be it the airborne landing by Dakota in 1947, making the decisive blow over Dhaka in 1971, executing Operation (Op) Cactus in the Maldives, precision strike in the mountains during Op Vijay or the showcasing of a new dimension of targeting over Balakot in 2019. World over, militaries, thinkers and researchers have unequivocally given due credit to the efficacy of air power in such operations, campaigns and wars. However, recent comments by the then Chief of Defence Staff, late General Bipin Rawat, equating the Air Force with 'Artillery' indicate that the fundamentals of air power probably have been misinterpreted at many levels. Though the statement was rebutted by the Chief of Air Staff and the essential characteristics of air power are constantly espoused at all levels, in reality realising and practising proper employment of air power is lacking.

The year 2022 marks the platinum jubilee of India's Independence and the completion of nine decades of the Air Force in India. The Indian Armed Forces are moving towards the theaterisation of India. The study of joint operations amongst the three Services is quite old and has been advocated by all military leaders, thinkers and strategists. The concept of integrated operations in complete harmony and finally emerging victorious in India's wars and conflict has been highlighted and narrated in military history lessons. However, the art of warfighting, keeping all mediums of conflict synergised is a big and complex challenge for the planners and executioners of war. Hence, there is a requirement to critically analyse the core issues that can be further improved to have the desired outcome of stated objectives. Therefore, it would be prudent to recall the efficacy of air power, especially in the Indian context, to keep the topic alive towards the much-talked-about integration of the armed forces.

Some may argue that unfurling the national flag on an occupied territory is the only thing that matters and makes one a victor. It is the end that matters rather than the ways and means. However, a mature analysis in its entirety suggests that one cannot simply achieve the ends without having gone through the ways and means. The Air Force and air power employ assured and accurate targeting to pave the way for land forces to occupy territory, and this cannot be termed as a support role. Imposing casualties on the ground in a way can easily be shaped by firing adequate munitions from the medium of air without incurring any own casualty. Therefore, shaping the battlefield or battlespace by land or air power will dictate the outcome of the campaign or operations.

It is unfortunate that despite such extensive and continuous employment through the last 75 years in India, and for over a century elsewhere, as well as the realisation that air power was destined to play a decisive role in any modern conflict, even well-informed people, including civilian and military experts, do not openly acknowledge or readily accept the role that air power plays in national defence. As Karl P. Mueller of RAND Corporation puts it: 'Its (air power's) use and effects are an increasingly important matter of study in international security scholarship; although it is fair to say that land and sea power, with their long histories and somewhat greater stability of characteristics, remain more familiar to most scholarly observers'.¹

WHAT IS AIR POWER?

The fundamental doctrine of the IAF has been stating the importance of air power since 1995. IAP 2000–12 identifies two significant factors to define air power. First, it mentions that 'Air Power is the ability to project military force by or from a platform in the third dimension above the surface of the earth'.² It further amplifies a very pertinent point that the medium of air as a 'third dimension is not merely a medium of transit like the bullet or an artillery shell but also for manoeuvre, surprise, concealment and deployment'.³ Somehow this aspect has been missed out, and therefore, the idea of equating the Air Force with Artillery has taken birth and is discussed quite loosely at times.

Second, it defines air power as the capacity to 'deliver cargo, people, destructive missiles and war-making potential through the air to a described destination to accomplish the desired purpose'.⁴ The existing basic doctrine of the IAF explains it as 'Airpower, in a classic sense, is defined as the total ability of a nation to assert its will through the medium

of air'.⁵ While analysing the doctrines of well-established Air Forces of the world, it is evident that the views, opinions and understanding of air power remain almost the same as nothing much can be in variance except on the issues of rapid revolution in technological advancements.

CONTRIBUTORS OF AIR POWER

As the IAF doctrine defines air power as the ability of a nation to assert its will through the medium of air, it becomes imperative to understand the sources or constituents of air power. Often, the Air Force is mistaken as the nation's air power. This incorrect understanding leads to confusion amongst both land and air warriors. The current IAF doctrine goes a step further to include the logistics, infrastructure and personnel related to aviation in air power's gamut. It says that 'Air Power comprises national aviation assets usually described as air forces, air arms and civil aviation, and their associated organisations, infrastructure, logistics and personnel. The use of space, either independently or in support of air power, is on the rise, and consequently the term "aerospace power" is coming increasingly into vogue'.⁶

CHARACTERISTICS OF AIR POWER

Globally, all Air Forces have defined the characteristics of air power as the most flexible, lethal, rapid and responsive tool beyond borders. It can circumvent the hindrances posed by the enemy and strike hard on the Centre of Gravity (CoG) of the adversary with utter surprise and precision. A strike on the Osirak nuclear plant and Op Neptune Spear are two specific global examples to have a clear understanding of the efficacy of air power. Air power can exploit the vertical dimension as a medium of transit for three-dimensional manoeuvring and concealment, along with rapidity and surprise. The core attributes of air power provide an alliance with a highly flexible and scalable set of responses to threats and crises. Its use is obvious and is frequently the kinetic weapon of first choice. It is also often the first military element to be deployed to deter potential adversaries or to reassure allies. At heart, the employment of air power sends messages that have substantial repercussions on the subsequent courses of action.⁷ Contemporary air power with its technologically advanced aircraft and munitions can '*strike farthest, strike hardest and strike deepest*' inside enemy territory, without having to first engage or neutralise the enemy's ground or naval forces. This capability makes air

power an attractive instrument for national leaders⁸ and the preferred instrument of choice.

AIR POWER IN COMBAT ROLE IN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

The well-laid doctrine of the IAF aptly covers the nuances of air power in the proper perspective. Change is a permanent thing in the contemporary global environment. Military power is an essential constituent of comprehensive national power. Thus, it is imperative to have a clear and unambiguous understanding of the attributes, limitations and potential of air power to enable its optimum exploitation for furthering national objectives in an ever-changing and dynamic environment.⁹

The varied roles played by air power have been demonstratively proven in the recent past. The aerospace medium has enabled nations vastly removed in distance and time to exercise their power and influence across continents with astonishing rapidity.¹⁰ Unless the unique attributes and limitations of air power are understood in right earnest, its sub-optimal utilisation will continue. History is replete with such instances, primarily because air power is the youngest form of military power. It has not been able to establish its might in an environment where the primacy of land battle is ingrained in people's minds from early years of education. Surprisingly, air power's relevance and application are yet to be wholly comprehended by military strategists and practitioners of operational art. It is particularly applicable in our unique context. It is historically proven that for thousands of years empires were entirely dependent on their armies and navies for survival. Moreover, armies and navies have traditionally been visible manifestations of sovereign might and capability. Thus, a generic appreciation regarding the utility of armies and maritime power is inherent in most national psyches to a large extent.

Being the youngest form of military power, air power only arrived in the last century, and its optimum exploitation has only begun in the past few decades. Hence, its relevance, potential and applicability are yet to be fully absorbed into our nation's consciousness. The IAF doctrine spells out that air power as a 'powerful and flexible tool of national security, statecraft and overall development is yet to be comprehended in full measure, leading to continued instances of its sub-optimal utilisation'.¹¹ The full-scale utilisation of the IAF during conventional wars like the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars, its non-utilisation during the 1962 Sino-India war and its restricted use during the 1999 Kargil conflict illustrate

the point. The most recent Balakot strike has reiterated its efficacy and lethality and also added the dimension of political signalling to adversaries and the world in the current geopolitics in the region. This amply reassures that air power is very effective in any spectrum of conflict.

Dakota Landings at Srinagar in 1947

A delayed call of political leadership to deploy soldiers on foot in the Kashmir valley gave a chance to the IAF to showcase the speed and transportation capability of air power for the first time in independent India. It was also a typical example of how air assets of all resources such as military and civil can be combined to project air power in its entirety. The limited resources of a few Dakota DC-3 twin-engine transport aircraft and a few private and commercial operators' aircraft successfully airlifted a brigade of the Indian Army to Srinagar air base on 27 October 1947. It was only the correct and timely usage of air power that saved the present-day Kashmir from going out of our hands.

There is a viewpoint that the *Air Landed Operations* carried out by the Air Force in this case did not just support the land forces, but was a core *element* of the overall operations. This kind of operation is part of the doctrine of the Air Forces and joint doctrines worldwide. There is nothing to support the land forces in this case. Wars are not fought by only one form of the military. Land forces may have all the reasons to be euphoric of the operation, but ignoring or subduing air power has got on the wrong side of military history, which requires to be corrected. Even though air power can fight and mop up the enemy's will, it always advocates synergised operations. Since this first operation, the IAF has always risen to the occasion, both in combat and non-combat roles.

Dakota Landings at Leh in 1948

The much-celebrated and successful employment of the Air Force in Leh was the most significant contributor to saving Ladakh from raiders. In early March 1948, intelligence sources indicated the presence of a large group of raiders and porters advancing towards Drass, Kargil and Leh after circumventing Skardu. The Indian Army was stretched to the limit of its logistic capability, requiring immediate reinforcement. So was the case with the augmentation of troops to thwart any attempts by the raiders who were on a spree to capture Leh at the earliest.

The medium of air was the only option left, Major General Thimayya and Air Commodore Baba Mehar Singh jointly worked out a plan to

land at Leh with immediate reinforcements that the army leaders in the field at Leh were frantically asking for. Arjun Subramaniam, in his book, narrates that 'Finally, on 24 May 1948, Mehar Singh with Thimmaya on board, landed at Leh in what was a red-letter day for military aviation in India. This feat opened the air bridge to Leh, and despite spells of bad weather Mehar Singh himself repeatedly led missions of four and six aircraft into Leh for the next two weeks inducting a company of 2/4 Gorkha rifles'.¹²

Despite the success of these missions, correct lessons will be missed by terming this Air Force act as a support mission for the land forces. One cannot simply wish away the necessity of air power delivering the strategic effects due to a myopic understanding of air power. In this entire episode, the Air Force's tactical airlifting of soldiers on foot led to a lasting strategic impact. Had the Air Force been kept out of the operations, Leh would have been wiped off India's map. The use of air power by the joint planning between the inspirational leadership of Major General Thimayya and Air Commodore Baba Mehar Singh is an example that needs to be repeatedly recounted to military practitioners at all levels. The jointmanship and efficacy of air power realised way back in 1948 is still thriving in these mountains, but unfortunately it dies down the moment practitioners come down from the icy heights and rarefied atmosphere to the plains.

Air Power in 1962

It is important that there are some incidents that generate maximum lessons and learning for future generations about how not to do things. Of all the wars, conflicts, combat or non-combat operations of India, there cannot be a better example of a black demonstration than the Sino-India War of 1962. Unlike in 1947, the political leadership in 1962 acted in utter disguise to face the humiliating defeat by the Chinese on all fronts. On top of that, many official actions, rather than inactions, were not even recorded in the official archives to hide the incompetence and ignorance of national security affairs. Many authors¹³ and military historians¹⁴ have written adequately on this subject that the conflict witnessed many wrong acts like big egos, personality clashes, political and individual biases, referrals and associations taking front seat than the merit and so on.

The military leadership were either not firm enough to counter these wrong beliefs or were kept out of the crucial decision-making meetings

and brainstorming sessions due to the probable 'mistrust or trust deficit' between the political, bureaucratic and military trio. India paid very dearly to this collective failure. Fear of the political leadership in Bengal that China would attack Calcutta if India used its Air Force was also one of the contributing factors for the non-utilisation of the Air Force in the War. Though the IAF had deployed all its air assets in Punjab and the eastern sector to meet any eventuality, the IAF was never given a chance to participate in the War offensively except for airlifting and reconnaissance missions. Fate or the course of action would have been in India's favour had the leadership correctly and timely utilised the Air Force. If not winning the War, India would have at least retained the status-quo, and history would have registered a more positive trajectory.

The IAF did not get the chance to employ its fighters, but the unsung heroes of helicopter and transport fleets played an exceptional role in undertaking air transport and logistical and casualty evacuation (Cas-Evac) operations at both fronts in Ladakh and North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) borders. The most important were the tireless reconnaissance missions over the enemy territory by trusted Canberra aircraft. However, it was unfortunate that invaluable photographic evidence of Chinese activity, especially on the Aksai Chin Road, and its army positions in the mountains was neither utilised in the joint planning of operations nor admitted by the political leadership.¹⁵ There were also ample indications that the military build-up along the McMahon line was likely to cause strong Chinese reactions. But the country's highest leadership did not pay adequate heed to it and were almost convinced that China would not commit any misadventure against India.

Military history literature does indicate that the joint Army–Air Force coordination structures in the form of Forward Area Controllers (FAC) were in place to undertake joint tactical operations through the medium of air, especially since photographic evidence of Chinese build-up was available for zeroing in the precise coordinates for the timely bombing of the targets. But it was never utilised in our favour. Attrition on the Chinese side would have been phenomenal and chaotic had the Air Force bombed over the heavy troops concentrated across Thagla Ridge in the North-Eastern sector.

Throughout the War, IAF carried out massive airlifting of troops and material, especially Heli lifting, exemplifying the characteristics of reach, rapidity and flexibility for effective joint air operations. The IAF helicopters carried out 'audacious and gallant air operations, for

over two months for providing sustained logistical supply to the land forces in Galwan Valley'.¹⁶ Similarly, in the far east, in the Walong sector too, 'the IAF flew tirelessly to support the forward deployment of land forces at Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) of around 3000 to 4000 feet from which Dakotas and DH-3C otters operated. A detachment of Mi4s at Walong lifted almost 16000 pounds of load daily for the forward locations of Kibithoo and other posts'.¹⁷ The IAF's transport fleet played a significant role in the airlift of troops at short notice from the western theatre to the east and rose to the occasion to fly much beyond its normal capability.¹⁸

Air Power in 1965

At the time of the 1965 Indo-Pak war, nothing substantial had changed since the defeat of 1962 in the politico-diplomatic, politico-military and interservice coordination. Titan clashes of egos and fight for self-created supremacy continued to a large extent until the beginning of the war and persisted at a lesser scale throughout the war. Many historians have narrated that General JN Chaudhuri, the then Chief of Army Staff, barged into the office of the Defence Minister YB Chavan on the afternoon of 1 September 1965, seeking immediate air support to stabilise the situation in the Chhamb sector where the Indian Army was under immense pressure. The IAF was already ready to react to the situation from Pathankot airbase, the closest to the Chhamb sector.¹⁹ In less than 45 minutes, the IAF succeeded in halting the Pakistani armour.²⁰ The Air Force helped save the situation in the Chhamb–Jaurian sector, the loss of which would have threatened India's only access to the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The IAF was employed in all its classical roles during this 22-day war and won the nation's high praise and appreciation.

An important lesson learnt was that in an effort to halt the Pakistani armour, the IAF lost three pilots and four Vampires in air encounters with the Pakistani Sabres. While the IAF claimed some ten enemy tanks and several guns and other vehicles, it also caused damage to its own forces. Such fratricide was inevitable as there was little briefing and/or prior planning for targeting the enemy locations.²¹ Air power being called at the eleventh hour as a 'crisis solver' with not much intelligence input available on the enemy defences would obviously lead to own losses either on ground or air through attrition or fratricide, whatsoever the case may be.

Air Power in 1971

India and Bangladesh are proudly commemorating Bangladesh's 50 years of liberation from Pakistan. Amidst various lacunae and lessons, especially in the western sector, there are plenty of reasons for one to be proud of the outcome of the war. The political leadership at the apex took well-informed and firm decisions, exploiting optimal diplomatic options. The strong leadership of the commanders at the field level and at the highest HQs of the Services was in synchronisation during the planning and execution phase of the war. This was evident throughout the period, at least in the East Pakistan sector, barring a few hiccups.

The Air Force played a decisive role in the 14-day long war in East Pakistan. The Indian Army kept on achieving its objectives with well-crafted manoeuvre warfare. But this would not have been feasible if the Air Force had not pressed its assets into service. Despite two fronts open for the Air Force, it ensured meeting the prime objective of the liberation of Bangladesh. A few significant and much-talked-about turning points of the war in India's favour were crossing the Meghna river by Heli bridging, the Tangail airdrop and hitting the bulls' eye with the attack on Government House in Dhaka. It is rare that any Air Force achieves command of the air when faced with a symmetrical adversary. It was nothing but the decisive blow on the central leadership (CoG) by the Air Force that led to the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers. The Air Force also maintained a dominant posture across the western sector and carried out exclusive operations to shape the battlefield for the land forces to advance without hindrance from the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The famous Battle of Longewala would have taken a different course had the Hunters of the IAF not been put in the offensive role.

The pinpoint targeting of oil tanks at Keamari oil refinery in Karachi harbour is another operation that has not found its right place in the 1971 war discourse. The air power employed once again displayed all its characteristics and deliverables to break the will of the enemy. The effect of the Karachi bombing was so vast and devastating that the target was ablaze for nearly a week. With a fleet of dependable Canberra bombers, the IAF spearheaded a strong counterattack on several Pakistani targets throughout the war. It gave no respite to the enemy, even at night, with its persistent raids on numerous targets.

Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha, while recalling this incident, had said:

While surface-to-surface missile attack on Karachi harbour by OSA missile boats in conjunction with IAF Bomber/Fighter attacks over

land targets was a fine example of joint warfighting, it also validated this important principle of war. This attack also provided the army with a somewhat confident entry into West Pakistan by breaching their defences. The navy destroyed and crippled many Pakistan Navy ships and merchant vessels and virtually blockaded the Karachi harbour and denied passage of oil tankers to East Pakistan which would have helped sustain their warfighting abilities.²²

The effect of air power was such that the Air Commodore Rais Rafi of PAF wrote in his book: 'Most of our families were at Mauripur. The base had received a hard pounding from the Indian Air Force that night and suffered quite a bit of damage. The huge oil storage fire at Karachi harbour due to enemy air action was quite demoralising to the families at Mauripur'.²³

The writings of military history do mention these operations by the IAF, but the operations by the land forces have overshadowed them to this date. The idea that final victory is measured only by soldiers on foot is overhyped. This misconception is deeply rooted in the ideology of land warriors at varying levels, and needs to be looked at from air perspective. This is why the continuing thought process of the Air Force as a support arm to land forces is the biggest dent at the strategic, operational and tactical level.

Kargil War in 1999

It is pertinent to note that air power is escalatory in nature. But why forget that it is the bigger tool of de-escalation and deterrence if correctly employed and preceded by accurate intelligence. Unfortunately, in the Indian context, the Air Force has often been forced to be a mute spectator on the pretext of its employment being escalatory in nature. The role of air power during the 1999 Kargil War is another example of the underutilisation of the Air Force. The IAF was only cleared to participate in India's effort on 26 May 1999, with an increased degree of difficulty in carrying out offensive action against the intruders with stringent Rules of Engagement (RoE) of not crossing the Line of Control (LoC). Indian Mirage squadrons carried out several reconnaissance and combat missions to neutralise the enemy's logistics and ammunition depots and troop concentrations, paving the way for the Indian Army to progress further and occupy greater heights.

The narration of air war in print and electronic media reveals that the initial missions were flown using dumb bombs only on Point 5140 near

Tololing in the Drass sector. As a result, the Indian Army re-took this position after fighting in tandem with continuous IAF strikes. The IAF carried out approximately 200-plus air attack missions on Muntho Dhalo, Tiger Hill and Point 4388 in the Drass sector. The Mirages effectively struck the enemy supply depot at Muntho Dhalo in the Batalik sector. This camp was the major re-supply base in the Batalik sector, and this devastating attack left over a hundred dead and 50 structures destroyed. Similarly, the enemy battalion HQ on Tiger Hill was hit by a Mirage 2000 employing the 'PAVEWAY' Laser Guided Bomb (LGB). This was the first operational use on an LGB by the IAF. This strike proved to be particularly effective, causing severe damage to the enemy.²⁴

It needs to be realised that the IAF air power, even though applied late, carried out an exemplary task in softening and neutralising enemy defences, which were in the form of bunkers, launch pads and targets in hills, so that own land forces could advance further to the objective area. Had the IAF been part of all ground plans, the targeting of enemy locations could have happened much earlier. Military literature often downplays the massive loss of 550 plus soldiers. However, it is to be understood in right earnest that the loss of lives could have been phenomenally lower had the IAF been part of all the ground plans and in the know of ground targets right from the beginning. It is well known that lessons learned from the Kargil War resulted in high-powered review committees suggesting various reform measures in the military and higher defence organisations.

Balakot Air Strike in 2019

The supposedly fourth pillar of democracy, the media, has brought the national narrative of the Balakot air strike to every home in the country. The official archives are too early to be made public as nothing much of politico-diplomatic-cum-military stance has changed since then. However, numerous lessons can be learnt from this skirmish. The air action in Balakot by the IAF and counter riposte by the PAF is the most recent example of a nation's deterrent posture towards the adversary. India's action of carrying out air strikes on non-military targets in Balakot was both a punitive action on the terror hub and a political signal through deterrence. Since Pakistan too had to convince its populace that no country can pose or wage war against them as per its choice of time and place, it undertook a riposte strike near LoC in the Jammu sector the next day.

While analysing, one can assume that Pakistan also sent counter political signalling by tasking the PAF 'to carry out a well-measured strike off the military targets', as reported in the print media. Also, the Pakistani government officially announced that 'The Pakistan Air Force and government have repeatedly claimed Operation Swift Retort was meant to be a measured response to the attack on Balakot, and hence it caused negligible damage'.²⁵ An analysis of this skirmish of less than 30 minutes from each side can be considered as an indication that both countries cannot afford a full-fledged war due to their economic conditions. And that Pakistan would further mess up its position and stance in the prevailing geopolitical scenario. At the same time, if the other side forces upon it, it would respond well. Both India and Pakistan succeeded in exercising 'maximum restraint' and carried out face-saving actions by acknowledging the likely repercussions incurred due to the escalatory nature of air power and preference to maintain the military status quo.

FEEL (ABSENCE) OF AIR POWER

India has a vast geographical limit ranging from the plains to deserts, mountainous regions, high altitudes, coastal areas and remote islands. The Indian military is almost omnipresent at all locations, especially in inaccessible and inhospitable terrains. The best examples of jointness and feel of air power can be experienced at locations like the high altitude areas of the Ladakh region and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. At these locations, the synergy, bonhomie, camaraderie, and feelings for one another are best acknowledged and practised every day. And one of the main reasons apart from facing the vagaries of weather is the constant of Air Power. Tasks undertaken by the IAF in air maintenance roles, communication duties, scheduled flights, casualty evacuation, etc., signify the feel of air power by non-Air Force personnel. *The relevance of air power can be best felt when it is absent.* An imaginary situation of non-availability of air assets for air maintenance for a few days can cause paralysis of the day-to-day functioning and needs of the troops on ground. It is often repeated that air power can be best utilised or employed with joint planning, synergy and understanding of its phenomenal effects during peace and war.

CONCLUSION

Technological revolution in air warfare and the precise and punitive capability of modern air power demands a change in the thought process

of even strong proponents of air power that 'air power may not win a war by itself alone'. It is a fact that without air power, no major or modern war can be won, but vice versa may be true at all times. It is extremely important to consider what is perceived as success in battle. Somehow, the perception that the amount of enemy land acquired defines this success is given too much importance in our country. Ultimately, the infantry captures land and keeps it, which shows the important part it plays.²⁶ It is imperative that we possess credible and demonstrable capability to deter any adversary, protect our assets and interests, and mete out unacceptable punishment when required. We must be able to project air power wherever and whenever needed within our area of interest and be able to provide peacetime assistance at home or elsewhere in times of need. India has recently witnessed how the nation's air power's capability and efficacy was a lifesaver during the COVID-19 pandemic when tons of cryogenic oxygen were airlifted and COVID vaccines delivered to several countries across the globe as part of the nation's diplomatic endeavour. The amazing versatility with which a single type of combat asset or platform performs many roles in line with the requirements, scale of conflicts and desired effects, is a reality today.

Air power is a facet of comprehensive national power not prevalent only in wartime but in peacetime as well. Understanding air power is not a difficult proposition at all. It just requires a bit of open-mindedness, giving due to its merit and recognising the technological revolution in military affairs in the contemporary geopolitical equations globally and regionally. One must not equate one's own primacy with the might of another, which is unscalable and immeasurable. The age-old myths and misnomers deeply entrenched in military beliefs and ideology must be changed as per the demands of present-day warfare.

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