

Offensive Use of Air Power in No War No Peace Situation

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The absence of war is not peace.

- Harry S Truman

Abstract

In Feb 2019, post a devastating suicide car bombing attack on an armed police convoy in the Kashmir Valley, India selected the Indian Air Force to hit back at terrorist training camp at Balakot in Pakistan. India used air power as a strategic signalling tool — in a less than war scenario — crossing the Line of Control (LoC) on an offensive attack mission inside Pakistan for the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pak war. This intelligence driven counter-terror strike against a terror camp highlighted the flexibility of air power to be used in a No War No Peace situation. In future a potent aerospace force has to be ready to deliver decisive blows at very short notice with precision and minimal collateral. In such a scenario, Artificial Intelligence, high-speed weapons (hypersonic) and space-based sensors and network tools will have a significant impact. Besides imbibing new technologies, innovation in use of existing capability and training needs reorientation.

There are no absolute rules of conduct, either in peace or war. Everything depends on circumstances.

- Leon Trotsky

Introduction

War is defined as a state of usually open and declared armed

hostile conflict between states or nations with the aim of achieving an objective through the use of force. In olden days, war was straightforward with the opposing forces in contact, facing each other and battling it out. Historically, over the years the nature of warfare has undergone a lot of change. Even conventional wars are no longer fought in the classic old way. Over the years, terms like sub conventional warfare, Low intensity Conflict Operations (LICO), Military Response Short of War (MRSOW), Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), hybrid warfare and irregular war have been coined to define prevailing hostile conditions. Each of these terms, while defining the state and degree of hostility, encompass specific set of actions by the inimical states, nations or groups. No War No Peace (NWNP) is another term describing some of the prevailing hostile conditions across the globe.

History is replete with instances where Air Power has been used in non-conventional hostile situations categorised above. Internationally, use of air power by the British in Malaysia in 1948-60, French in Algeria in 1954-62, Russia in Chechnya in 1994-96, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Kosovo in 1998 and Israel on Hezbollah are some such examples. Closer home, India also used air power in operation Cactus in Maldives and Op Pawan in Sri Lanka. The Kargil conflict is another example where the air power, in spite of entering the fray late and fighting with one hand tied behind the back due to self-imposed restrictions, had a decisive effect on the outcome. Air power in these operations was used in varying roles and tasks. In recent times, trend of offensive use of air power in NWNP scenario is increasing. The US drone attack on the Commanding General of Iran's Elite Quds Force, General Qasem Soliemani, in Baghdad and air strikes by Indian Air Force on terrorist training camp at Balakot are some of the recent examples of offensive use of air power in NWNP situation.

NWNP and Air Power

NWNP. Character of war, over a period of time, has changed in myriad and confusing ways.¹ Components of different forms of warfare, like conventional warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare and subversion etc., have blended. This has blurred the formal distinction between war and peace. Peace does not mean a lack of conflict and war does not imply a full-fledged struggle.² All it means is that there is no continuous, long term, direct conflict or engagement. There are a range of activities which do not fall in the purview of state of war or peace. These activities are above the level of peaceful co-existence and below the threshold of war. They are generally characterised by constraints of weaponry, tactics and a certain level of acceptable violence. At times, devious means are adopted with open option for deniability or ownership. This type of strategy is adopted generally by weaker nations, often employing non-state actors with covert or overt support from the sponsoring nation / states. Terrorism and terrorist attacks have elements of both, Proxy war (armed conflict between two states or non-state actors acting on the instigation and/or behalf of other party) and Asymmetric warfare (between belligerents whose relative military power and tactics differs significantly) — embedded in them. NWNP situation is prevalent in many parts of the world. Dealing with these situations throws up variety of challenges depending upon circumstances. In our context, our westerly neighbour Pakistan has adopted the policy of 'Bleed India through thousand cuts'. India would be in a 'NWNP' scenario for the foreseeable future.

Air Power. Even in NWNP situations the nation states have to utilise all possible resources at their disposal to deal with developing situations. Air power resources are an effective tool for deterrence, coercion and ultimately war fighting. Air power, being a military tool of statecraft, is best suited for offensive action characterised by flexibility, lethality, reach, rapid response and creation of shock and awe by effect-based ops. Air power is dynamic in its application and its effects can be switched on or off at ease. Air forces can easily and rapidly concentrate forces to meet the objectives even in a NWNP

environment. It can be used to attack depth targets beyond the reach of surface forces, like in-depth terrorist training camps. In dealing with hostile situations in NWNP scenario, decision makers are generally faced with the dilemma of how much force to apply and availability of options. Air power can provide large number of options with 'rap on the knuckle' on one end to 'slap on the face or punch on the nose' on the other end of the scale. The shades of available options would depend on selection of type of targets, their numbers, area of application of force (disputed or multiple sectors) and weight of attack. Offensive employment of air power in NWNP environment is a highly preferred option. Delivery of armament from a fighter aircraft is not the only option for offensive application of air power. There are numerous other offensive applications of air power. Offensive or kinetic use of air power could be defined as 'any air operation that directly or indirectly leads to force application on to the adversary'.

Balakot. On 14 Feb 2019, 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldiers were martyred in a terror strike at Pulwama. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) took the ownership of this terror act. In retaliation, India selected the Indian Air Force to hit back at terrorist training camp at Balakot in Pakistan. India used air power as a strategic signalling tool — in a less than war scenario — crossing the Line of Control (LoC) on an offensive attack mission inside Pakistan for the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pak War.³ Air power was used in an offensive manner in NWNP environment. The air strike was labelled as intelligence driven counter-terror strike against a terror camp and conveyed the basic message that terrorist attacks on India's soil will not be acceptable and would be responded to appropriately. Speaking at a seminar, India's Defence Minister conveyed that India had been seen as a country that did not respond adequately to terrorism despite grave provocations.⁴ Balakot air strikes changed that perception. These air strikes were not only resolute military strikes against terrorism, and terror supporting elements, but also conveyed a strong and unequivocal message and reflected India's approach against employment of terrorism as a low-cost option. It also indicated that terrorists, terrorist infra-structure and terrorist training facilities in areas

beyond LoC and International Border (IB), when employed against India, will no longer be safe havens.

Offensive Use of Air Power in NWNP

There are various aspects related to offensive use of air power. These have been elaborated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Political Decision and Will. Option of offensive use of air power always exists however, it is a political decision. The decision needs to be backed by political will to give a free hand to its use. Imposing limitations make the task more difficult. Self-imposed rule of not crossing the LoC during Kargil ops is one such example. While deciding on its offensive use, the message to be conveyed and extent of punitive action to be taken also needs to be spelt out. Subsequent planning depends upon these two factors. During Balakot strike, it was clearly directed that the action is to be against terrorism and message to be conveyed must also be clear that, in future, acts of terrorism will not be tolerated and will be responded appropriately.

Legitimacy / Acceptability. Offensive action should have a high degree of legitimacy and acceptability in the world. There are several factors related to this aspect. The air action would be invariably in response to a trigger event. The response should be within a reasonable time and, to some extent, within reasonable proportion. Diplomatic efforts to shape the world opinion are necessary. Proof of involvement of state and non-state actors needs to be presented with valid evidence. Air action by India after the Pulwama incident had a high degree of acceptability in the world. It was mainly because the strike was labelled as terror preventive strike on terrorist camp. Further, the target was carefully selected as an isolated terror camp with no chance of collateral damage.

Post-Strike Readiness. One of the very important aspects related to planning of air action is readiness for subsequent response by the target state. The readiness has to be for the worst case scenario i.e. for a full-fledged war. The sister services also need to be fully prepared. The challenge is

to be ready without any tell-tale visible action which could result in loss of tactical surprise. The guard needs to go up immediately after the attack. The readiness has to be in multi domain including even cyber domain. Further, the air action needs to be followed up with diplomatic efforts.

Escalation Control. The employment of air power is often perceived as being escalatory with uncontrolled consequences. This perception is generally prevalent in our context. Historically, there has been no record of escalation and elsewhere in the world, air action is often resorted to, but ground action is considered as an act of invasion and hence escalatory. Escalation attached to air power is overstated and control is possible by subsequent actions and narrations. In a seminar on the subject, Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), IAF brought out that Balakot demonstrated that there exists a space below the conventional conflict boundaries where air power can be utilised with due escalation control.⁵ In this case the message was delivered and de-escalation achieved. Addressing a seminar, Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) endorsed that, “Balakot demonstrated that if you play the escalatory game with skill, military ascendancy can be established in short cycles of conduct that do not necessarily lead to war”.⁶ The Balakot air strikes, according to him, were an example of playing the “escalatory game” with skill.

Follow-up. Any air action would be followed by a prolonged period of tension and hostility. The degree of hostility would keep varying with both sides posturing and sort of shadow boxing. The enemy may retaliate and in case that happens, the aim should be to inflict maximum damage. To do that, it is important to maintain technological asymmetry in terms of platforms with better Airborne Interception (AI) radars, Beyond Visual Range (BVR) missiles and electronic systems. If it does escalate into a war, it would be characterised as short, limited, swift, intense and lethal with no decisive outcome and no measure of success. Like a boxing match with no knock out but outcome depending on points. In such a scenario, aim should be to inflict max damage while protecting own assets with more emphasis on air defence and strategic strikes.

Nuclear Sabre Rattling. The fear that use of air power in a nuclear overhang would amount to brinkmanship is a myth often proven wrong. Even in our context, our westerly neighbour often resorts to nuclear sabre rattling. Balakot strike has proven that space does exist for air action even in nuclear environment. However, a good assessment of nuclear threshold is required. Factors that need consideration in this respect would be stated nuclear policy, nuclear red lines, and prevailing domestic, regional and global circumstances.

Media Effect. In olden days when modern technology tools and AI were not available, it was said that winning air combat was not enough without winning the combat debrief. Similarly, in this information age, any air action, however successful, has to be 'won' in the media as well. Call it a perception war or any other name but it is very important aspect. The COAS, speaking at a seminar, expressed that that, "Balakot air strike, was a short, intense, escalatory cycles of military activity, in *full media glare, where sophisticated information narratives played an equally important role*".⁷ Even for the air action at Balakot, which was considered as a bold and a very well executed plan, the question remains, did we lose the perception war?⁸ It is essential not only for countering enemy propaganda but also for providing legitimacy to the actions. Regular and timely narratives need to be provided in the form of official briefs conducted by a team of all stake holders. The narratives need to be backed by proof of evidence.

Tactical Aspects. Some of the tactical aspects are very essential for the success of offensive air power missions. First of all is the element of surprise. The IAF strikes at Balakot completely surprised the Pakistani military establishment.⁹ Tactical surprise can be achieved in spite of enemy being ready and expecting some action. This is possible by secrecy and need to know basis information flow and continuing with normal activities and business as usual. Second, the most important aspect is actionable intelligence. Air power and intelligence are opposite sides of the same coin.¹⁰ If the latter fails, the former is likely to fail also. For that reason, accurate, timely, and comprehensive information about an enemy and his military

assets is a crucial enabler for allowing air power to produce pivotal results. Intelligence is very important for planning of the mission. Information regarding target system, its location, layout and surroundings is vital. Post attack damage assessment is equally important. In case of taking on a dynamic target of opportunity, like US drone attack on General Soleimani, live intelligence is required which can be provided by surveillance capability to track and monitor in real time. Standoff capability with precision is another vital aspect. This would add to the surprise and increase the survivability of the attacking platforms. The weapon systems need to be fire and forget type with smart and multiple guidance systems to give them a high success rate. Precision is important to avoid collateral damage. Force application and weight of attack also do need consideration. These aspects would depend upon the effect desired and the message to be conveyed. Based on these decisions, the number of platforms, number of weapons and the size of warheads can be planned. Desired platform to be used would depend upon the mission objectives. It is not necessary that a fighter aircraft be used every time. Actually drones, like unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), with smart standoff weapons would be a highly preferred option. Special operations capable aircraft like C-130 or appropriate Attack / Armed helicopter can also be used in an offensive role. These missions need support of combat support elements like Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and In-flight refuelling (IFR) aircraft. On board survival systems are absolute must. These combined with appropriate tactics would enhance the success rate manifold.

Lessons / Capability Enhancement

Worldwide air power is being used very often in NWNP environment. India is likely to be in NWNP situation for a long time in future. Precedence has been set for offensive use of air power in such environment. The aerospace power will invariably be the weapon of choice.¹¹ Capability enhancement is required for it to deliver and succeed in future. All weather day and night capability in a networked environment is essential. A potent aerospace force has to be ready to deliver decisive blows at

very short notice, with precision and minimal collateral damage. In such a scenario, artificial intelligence, high-speed weapons (hypersonic), and space-based sensors and tools will have a significant impact. Besides imbibing new technologies, innovation in use of existing capability would be the need of the hour. The training needs reorientation to meet the challenges that this type of warfare has brought.

These type of missions need to be planned beforehand and not after the occurrence of a trigger event. The planning process needs to include all the stake holders and elements of national security. The plans need to generate and provide various options to the decision maker. These plans need to be reviewed and refined periodically with changes in circumstances and fresh intelligence inputs. Coordination between sister services and various stake holders is absolutely vital.

The focus areas for aerospace power, in the coming decades, ought to be to enhance battle space transparency by keeping greater area under multiple sensor surveillance with better resolution. Aerial vehicles, surface movements, maritime domain, communications and electronic signals need monitoring and all inputs amalgamated to produce a comprehensive battle space picture. Intelligence and surveillance capabilities need to be enhanced across the spectrum starting from human intelligence (humint) to space based surveillance. Artificial intelligence needs to be embedded in the analysis systems. Real time monitoring may be required to take on dynamic targets of opportunity.

Standoff and precision capability enhancement is a continuous process. Greater the standoff better it is. Weapons need to be smart, fire and forget type, with multiple guidance systems. Capability to take on multiple targets within a target system is also desirable. Variety in type and extent of warhead provides more options in terms of effect generated. Delivery platform is also important. UCAV capability is most suitable and essential. Role of other platforms need to be earmarked and defined so as for them to be suitably equipped and trained.

Media engagement plan and organisational structure needs to be in place for perception management and giving out the narrative. While creating structures individually to provide the information in desired format, all stake holders need to work collectively in sync with each other.

Conclusion

India will be in NWNP situation for a long time. NWNP is not a tension free scenario. It requires a constant sense of readiness. Offensive use of airpower in NWNP is feasible even under a nuclear overhang. Mind-set about its use needs a change. There is going to be a shift in the characteristics of utilisation of forces in general and air power in particular. The Services and Air Force must be prepared to tackle any surprise and unpredictability, besides inflicting the same on the adversary. Extensive and elaborate planning and refinement of plans is essential and so is focussed capability building and training.

Endnotes

¹ Lt Gen Ghanshyam Singh Katoch, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), "Hybrid War: Liger or Mule?", *USI Strategic Perspectives*, Apr-Jun 2020. Accessed Jun 04, 2020 from <https://usiofindia.org/publication/cs3-strategic-perspectives/hybrid-war-liger-or-mule/>

² Sachin Kumar, "Effects of Offensive Application of Air Power on Low-Intensity Conflicts", *Liberal Studies*. Vol(3), No1 (2018) Accessed Jun 06, 2020 from <https://ojs.indrastra.com/index.php/liberalstudies/article/view/216>

³ Sameer Joshi, "How Pakistan planned to hit India back for Balakot — the mission, the fighters, the tactics" *The Print*, Sept 14, 2019 . Accessed Jun 08, 2020 from

⁴ Address by Shri Rajnath Singh, Raksha Mantri during CAPS' *Seminar on Air Power in No War No Peace Scenario*, New Delhi on 28 Feb 20 <https://theprint.in/defence/how-pakistan-planned-to-hit-india-back-for-balakot-the-mission-the-fighters-the-tactics/291522/>

⁵ CAPS' *Seminar on Air Power in No War No Peace Scenario*, New Delhi 28 February 2020

⁶ ET Bureau, "Escalatory game does not always lead to war, says Army Chief Naravane", *Economic Times*, Mar 05, 2020 . Accessed Jun 06, 2020 from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/escalatory-game-does-not-always-lead-to-war-says-army-chief-naravane/articleshow/74486103.cms?from=mdr>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ CAPS' Seminar on op cit.

⁹ Sameer Joshi, op sit.

¹⁰ Benjamin S. Lambeth, "The Unseen War Allied Air Power and the Takedown of Saddam Hussein", (RAND, Santa Monica CA, 2013).

¹¹ Kishore Kumar Khera : Kargil to Balakot: The Tumultuous Journey of Indian Air Power, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 2019, pp. 87-113

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