

Iraq War 2003*

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The Iraq War which commenced on 19 March 2003 and concluded in three weeks, was the subject of a seminar organised on 12 and 13 July 2003 by the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi, to study the military-strategic dimensions of the war. The book under review is based on 11 papers presented by some of the well known military-strategic thinkers of the country apart from an overview by Shri KC Pant, former Defence Minister and keynote addresses by the three Service Chiefs.

A fundamental issue, which runs through many presentations and is raised in Air Commodore Jasjit Singh's well worded "Introduction", is the US's unilateralist approach to war under the doctrine of pre-emption. He points out that three reasons were advanced for launching this war; possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); being a home to Al Qaeda and the need to terminate the repressive regime of Saddam. As Shri Pant points out in his "Assessment", the Security Council debated these issues and demonstrated its unwillingness to authorise the use of force; preferring to press disarmament through the UN inspection and verification. Important as the political dimensions are, the seminar focused on the military-strategic aspects.

In this context, this war was, as observed by Shri Pant, "a totally unequal war". Admiral Madhvendra Singh, Chairman COSC, describes it as a war of annihilation which was short and swift. Rapid dominance of air power over Iraq was achieved permitting 'coalition forces' to operate with impunity. Precision stand off strikes with 75 per cent of all weapons released from the air being precision guided munitions (PGMs), which limited collateral damage. Ground forces were well equipped with Abrams tanks, thermal sights, Humvees and the infantry soldier with night vision devices and helmet mounted radios with individual Global Positioning System (GPS).

The Admiral also highlights 'jointness', integrated action by the Services and multiple combat power by joint operations. The address by the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General NC Vij, perforce has several common points. In addition he emphasises certain other aspects, US objective to decapacitate leadership, command and control set up as also

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strategic employment of Special Forces. He highlights air operations in support of ground forces; the support of attack helicopters as well as aircraft was available within minutes.

Apropos 'jointness', the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal S Krishnaswamy, makes an important point; jointness applies to the bureaucracy as well as the political leaders. Within the Services, it is based on understanding and mutual respect.

Strategically, the American vision of enforcement of its will to shape the world in its image as the unquestionable super power is a major point made by Air Vice Marshal Kapil Kak. He says that America's full spectrum of dominance and global supremacy is a reality to which other powers require to readjust. He adds that the US has never been able to do more than operate marginally in as far as the United Nations is concerned; that too because of its dependence on the Security Council and the USA's veto. These observations lend support to his deduction that the long term American objective is to re-engineer West Asia on democratic lines and install pro-US and moderate governments in all oil rich states.

Commander Kaushal's observations on the "Geopolitical Environment" point to regular polls in the USA, which indicate that the Americans take the view that can be described as "unilateral", if necessary, but "multilateral" if possible. He discusses Britain's support, the European imbroglio as well as the attitude of the Arab states, Turkey, Russia and China. He concludes that the USA would not indulge in another "regime change" or a pre-emptive strike for some time.

As to the military context of this war, Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal, Air Marshal Vinod Patney and Commander Vijay Sahuja cover the land, air and sea aspects commendably. Gurmeet points out that the centre of gravity of field formations is increasingly shifting towards "Reconnaissance, Surveillance, Target Acquisition (RSTA)" and C³I systems, long range fire delivery systems, logistic bases and lines of communications. The last two have, of course, always been among the crucial factors of successful military operations.

Vinod Patney outlines the concept of "Shock and Awe", which visualises the use of massive fire power from the air to enable reduced number of ground troops, which could also be lightly equipped and permitting rapid advance. This over powering combination attains war objective without having to resort to attrition warfare. The war strategy called for rapid movement of ground forces to effect occupation of Iraq and bring the war to a close.

Vijay Sakhija traces the "Shock and Awe" theory to a paper published by strategists Ullman and Wade in 1996. According to this paper, "Shock and Awe" seeks non nuclear impact equivalent to atomic weapons to achieve rapid dominance. The US Air Force and Naval aircraft dropped more than 14,000 precision guided bombs and fired more than 750 Tomahawk cruise missiles; much larger than the numbers dropped in the six-weeks long Gulf War in 1991. His paper also goes into 'carrier operations' and the part played by Tomahawks as well as the maritime forces as a whole.

General Raghavan's paper on the "Political-Military Lessons" makes the valid point that war termination is as important as war-waging and observes that the process of installing a new government and rebuilding of Iraq appears not to have been thoroughly planned.

Colonel Ajay Shukla observes that after 11 September 2001, America perceives itself as a wounded state. In his State of the Union Address in 2003, President Bush stated, "The course of this nation does not depend on the decision of others. Whatever action is necessary, I will defend freedom and security of the American people."

The last paper, "Some Points For Our Defence Policy" by Air Commodore Jasjit Singh is remarkable for its analysis of 'Fire Power-Mobility Synergy'. He observes that technology has merged the issues of firepower and mobility substantially independent of numbers: a couple of aircraft can now bring more firepower to bear more effectively on the target than a thousand bomber raids of World War II. He commends the US military's approach to strategy and doctrine, which permits wide debate by serving and retired military as well as the civilian strategic community; such airing of views benefits evolution.

The paper on "Special Operations" by Saikat Datta makes the point that Special Forces can be a strategic weapon also.

Wing Commander Sanjai Sharma's piece on "Technology in War" brings out the impact of technology and is very informative.

A valuable book which is a 'must read' for all those interested in keeping abreast with matters military and strategic.