

Is the IAF A Tactical Air Force?

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INTRODUCTION

Born of the fragmentation of the erstwhile Royal Indian Air Force at the time of partition, the IAF was weaned on conflict and in just over four decades of independence has served the nation in four bloody conflicts and numerous low-intensity high risk situations. From its very inception, the IAF has often been referred to and subjected to applications as 'an extension of the artillery'. Such an uninitiated approach not only curbs the potential use of the force but also subjects it to unproductive and frivolous applications. Because of our inheritance in terms of aircraft and weaponry and the erst-while national approach to regional issues, the major utilisation of the IAF has largely been tactical. The strategic tasks undertaken have been ignored or played down, sadly enough due to incomprehension of the dividing line.

The extent of our military involvement in the region in the recent past has been unprecedented in our history. The current defensive posture is vital to regional stability and as changes occur, we would have to address these changes or permit events to rule us. Some of the critical areas of tension are in our neighbourhood. In economic, cultural and political terms we are becoming increasingly involved with SAARC. It therefore becomes imperative that we match these ties with the military capability to protect our interests and honour our obligations to friends in the region. The IAF here becomes a decisive element. But an unambiguous comprehension of tactical and strategic application is first necessary. Persistent myths and incomprehension of the terms 'tactical' and 'strategic' have clouded the distinction between the two. These terms must be dispassionately viewed to get a clear definition of tactical and strategic operations and thereby fit the IAF into an appropriate category.

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL APPLICATIONS

A tactical Air Force, by classical definition, limits its use 'in support of surface forces'. Since surface forces can physically show a piece of land/sea under their control, the abstract nature of air, precludes an immediate understanding of its vastness and the effect that air power would exercise.

A number of recent developments in the region have increased the importance of the capabilities of the IAF. These developments include a growing incidence and intensity of regional conflicts and an impetus towards power projection by India, as a regional influence, if not a regional power.

The deep-penetration, long range aircraft of the IAF, which include fighters and transports, provide an existing asset which can significantly add to the nation's capability to conduct regional operations. Although a persistent view associates these aircraft strictly with tactical missions, the reality is that they can be tasked with strategic responsibilities. Their present-day capabilities to carry out these responsibilities, are substantial, and this potential is expanding even more dramatically with technological advances.

Several factors which dictate the requirement for a Strategic Air Force are as follows:-

- (a) The requirement for prompt power projection in the region, in response to crises, eg Gajraj airlift to Sri Lanka and Maldivé Islands.
- (b) The need for long-range strike capability, eg. Shamsher and Vajra aircraft.
- (c) The urgent inter-theatre requirement of assistance by forces possessing long-range, quickly-reactive and massive fire-power.
- (d) The tightening constraints on defence budgets which place a premium on versatile weapon systems and on the need to derive maximum capability from existing forces.

All these factors accentuate the need for a more comprehensive consideration than in the past, of the role of the IAF in regional operations. Any such examination however, must come to grips with some prevalent myths regarding strategic operations.

WHAT ARE STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

Among the pervasive myths associated with strategic operations a few stand out. These myths are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Their combined effect has been to block an understanding of the multifaceted nature and versatility of modern airpower, such as that possessed by the IAF.

The first myth is that strategic operations relate only to superpowers and are inter-continental in nature. Strategic aspirations of each nation dictate the nature of strategic targets in wartime. The bombing of the Sui gas plant and Karachi harbour in 1971, stand out amongst others as two eloquent examples of the strategic role of the IAF. The airlift to Sri Lanka and Maldivé Islands in more recent times, are further examples.

A second and related misconception is that 'strategic' equals 'nuclear'. Underlying this fallacy is the assumption that 'long range' (strategic) missions

means exclusively 'nuclear' missions. The suitability of a particular munition delivered is a function of the given mission and its objectives. In fact, the broadening dimensions of modern warfare underscore the importance of conventional munitions delivered by long-range, heavy-payload weapon systems. We possess such systems for the strategic targets that we have designated. Our aircraft have the ability to project massive conventional fire-power, not only within a theatre, but well across it, deep into enemy territory.

Another grey area is that theatre warfare is strictly the province of tactical fighter aircraft. In fact, the terms 'strategic' and 'tactical' describe actions, not weapons, and it is incorrect to associate these actions with specific types of aircraft.

Commanders employ military weapon systems based fundamentally on the assessed capability of the system to accomplish a specific military requirement. The inherent flexibility of airpower allows different types of aircraft to be employed in a variety of roles. The type of system employed is of far less consequence than the results anticipated from its intended use. In fact the system should be best used to accomplish the action at hand, regardless of how the aircraft is 'labelled'.

STRATEGIC POTENTIAL OF THE IAF

While technology is enhancing the multi-mission capability of aircraft, operational requirements are rendering it essential. The role of the heavy lift transport aircraft is uncontroversial. However, the strategic strike potential of the IAF can be further enhanced by the following capabilities:-

- (a) In-flight refuelling.
- (b) Avionics.
- (c) Munitions.
- (d) Training.

In-Flight Refuelling: The range of strike aircraft can be further enhanced by inflight refuelling. The benefit accrued extends to the pay-load as well. This will require minor modifications to the existing fleet, but calls for a fleet of tankers and necessary training to use them by day or night. While this concept is undisputed, more attention to its speedy implementation is necessary.

Avionics: The Jaguar (DARIN)* and Mirage-2000, already possess avionics that incorporate the state-of-the-art technology. However, several update packages are available, which if incorporated into the existing fleet of other

*Smiths Industries navigation and attack system

fighter aircraft, would lend an additional credence to their ability. Such moves, which are apparent, and are being mooted at various levels, would also increase the versatility of the fleet for years to come.

Munitions: Present munitions support land and sea attacks by gravity delivery, mine-laying at sea and stand-off attacks. A wide range of installations can be attacked by using General Purpose (GP) bombs or Cluster Bomb Units (CBUs). Use of Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) will optimise on the lethality of weapon systems possessed by us. While current munitions and delivery platforms provide a significant capability, several improvements will soon be available. Advances in sensors, computers, propulsion, guidance and 'smart' munitions could provide our aircraft with even more effective weaponry in the near future. The key to effective employment is to develop systems that will allow us to exploit the inherent advantages of long-range aircraft without exposing them to undue risks. Stand-off weapons provide a viable answer.

Training: This area is possibly the most difficult to implement since it calls for an attitudinal shift of perceptions. The first step requires a clear-cut understanding of the distinction between strategic and tactical operations and the role of the IAF. Thereafter starts the arduous, though routine task of training air crew. However, unless policy makers and staff officers comprehend the term 'strategic', training directives would either be half-baked or orientated in the wrong direction.

CONCLUSION

The principal objective of strategic forces - to deter the enemy, remains unchanged. Yet, in an era of essential equivalence, credible conventional deterrence is dependant upon convincing potential adversaries that we can respond effectively across the entire spectrum of conflict. In this context, the potential versatility of the IAF today, is tremendous.

Targeting the enemy's homeland remains an important mission of strategic air power. Yet technological advances in warfare, weapons accuracy, munitions variety and capability, in the speed, range and carrying capacity of delivery platforms, in ECM and a host of other measures - increases the combat effectiveness of the IAF, clarifying the traditional distinction between 'strategic' and 'tactical' missions.

Therefore with the latent potential that has always existed, we now need an integrated approach to determine our strategic future. It must account for our legitimate defence requirements and also be tempered with our psyche, mental-

ity and historical choices. The over-riding guideline for the future is that the IAF must provide us the maximum utility and capability in the regional arena. This requires versatility in terms of military missions. It implies that forces dedicated to static defence can be readily and speedily switched to roles of offence and mobility. The IAF possesses this capability which needs to be exploited whenever required. The IAF, I submit, has long come of age.

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