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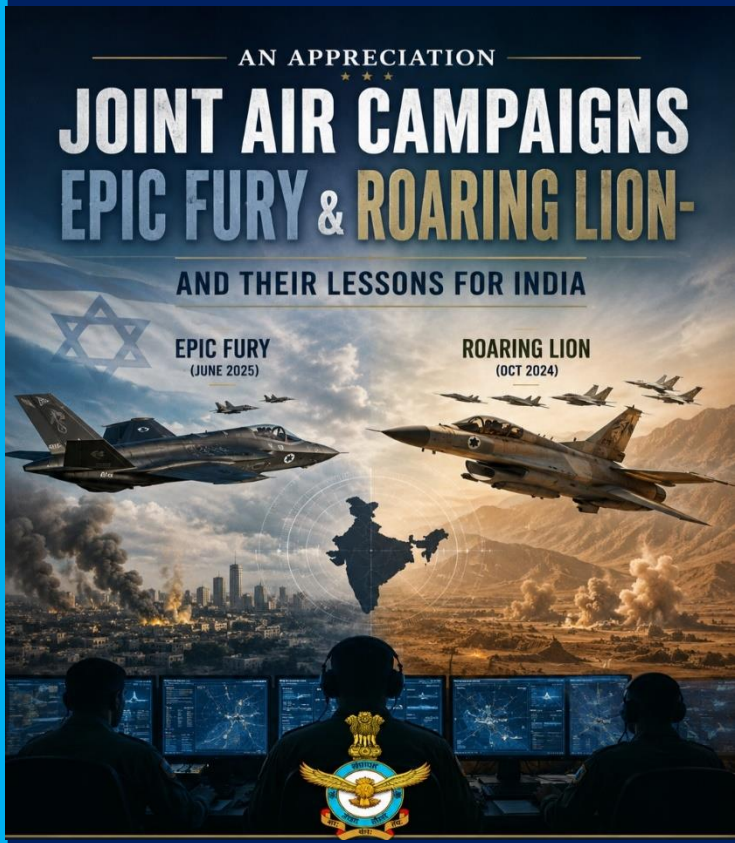

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About the Occasional Paper

This occasional paper examines the joint United States-Israel air campaigns-Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion-against Iran and analyses their strategic, operational, and doctrinal implications for contemporary warfare. The study explores the political and military objectives of the campaigns, the pursuit of air superiority through intelligence-led targeting, the role of integrated air and missile defence systems, and the increasing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in planning and execution. It assesses the effectiveness and limitations of air power, intelligence, and manned–unmanned teaming, while highlighting the evolving character of conflict in an era of multi-domain operations. Drawing lessons from the successes and shortcomings of all participants, this paper identifies critical implications for India's air defence architecture, command and control systems, intelligence integration, force protection, and theatre command structures. It argues that future military advantage will depend increasingly on networked systems, doctrinal coherence, AI-enabled decision support, and anticipatory adaptation.

Introduction

"For good or for ill, air mastery is today the supreme expression of military power and fleets and armies, however vital and important, must accept a subordinate rank".

- Winston Churchill[1]

The conduct of modern warfare is undergoing a profound transformation. Advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, space-based intelligence, and networked command architectures are reshaping the way military power is generated, projected, and sustained. Against this backdrop the joint United States (US)–Israel air campaigns against Iran—Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion—represent one of the most consequential demonstrations of contemporary air power in the 21st Century. These campaigns showcased the integration of intelligence, precision strike capabilities, AI-enabled decision support, and multi-domain operations on an unprecedented scale.

While the operations achieved significant tactical and operational successes, they also exposed enduring challenges associated with air superiority, integrated air and missile defence, intelligence assessments, strategic coherence, and campaign termination. Equally important is that the conflict also highlighted the growing role of low-cost drones, asymmetric retaliation, cyber-enabled warfare, and the vulnerability of critical economic infrastructure in an interconnected world.

This paper examines the political objectives, military strategies, operational conduct, and strategic outcomes of these campaigns. It analyses the role of intelligence, AI, Air Defence (AD), and manned–unmanned teaming in shaping the conflict and assesses their implications for the evolving character of war. Drawing lessons relevant to India, the paper seeks to identify doctrinal, organisational, and technological adaptations necessary for future military effectiveness.

Political and Military Objectives

The officially stated political objectives of the US and Israel in their military campaign against Iran were to decapitate the regime's senior leadership, effect regime change, and bring about the functional collapse of the Iranian state.[2] The decapitation of the leadership was not incidental but central to the campaign.[3]

To achieve these political objectives, the combined US-Israeli military objectives in the campaign against Iran were multi-pronged. They focused on neutralising Tehran's nuclear weapons and associated infrastructure. The aim was to demolish Iran's missile and drone capabilities, and to destroy its naval capacity to threaten shipping in the Gulf. The campaign also aimed at degrading Iran's security apparatus, destroying its asymmetric capabilities and to make any future regeneration of military capability arduous and prohibitively costly.

Air Strategies

The air campaign by the US and Israel was pre-emptive and multi-phased. It commenced with decapitation of senior political and military leadership of Iran. The opening blow was a masterpiece in operational flexibility, intensity, intelligence fusing, deception, and synchronisation. Israeli sources claimed that it had eliminated 40 individuals within 40 seconds.[4] Decapitation was followed immediately by 'Genesis', a massive strike package involving roughly 200 aircraft, dozens of refuelling planes, and Command and Control (C2) aircraft. The strike employed AI assistance, precision munitions, and was monitored in real time by the space domain. This was primarily Suppression of Enemy AD (SEAD) and Destruction of Enemy AD (DEAD) focused to achieve air superiority expeditiously. The achieved air superiority allowed all round targeting in a planned manner. The official statement released by the White House[5] on 08 Apr 26 stated that the US had flown a total of over 10,200 air sorties and struck 13,000 targets. Israel announced that it had approximately flown 5,700 combat sorties, striking 8,500 targets across the country.[6] Both countries sustained this offensive intensity while defending their own skies too. More than 90 per cent of projectiles launched at Gulf Cooperation Council nations and Israeli territory were intercepted, allowing preservation of strategic freedom of action.

Iran's strategy was focused on asymmetric attrition and economic pressure or coercion. Operation True Promise-IV7 was spread over more than 90 waves of saturation barrages of 6,000 missiles and drone salvos. The combined missiles and Kamikaze drones damaged at least 16 US installations across eight Arab nations8 and many other critical targets that symbolise the affluence of Arab nations. Following the loss of much of its central leadership, Iran focused on a decentralised 'Mosaic Defence' strategy9, whereby provincial commands of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxy groups launched independent waves of attacks to enhance resilience.

The air strategies of the US, Israel, and Iran reveal a fundamental doctrinal divergence i.e., 'Offensive Coercion' versus 'Asymmetric Attrition'. The US and Israel prosecuted a sequenced, multi-phased offensive campaign predicated on achieving air superiority through pre-emptive leadership decapitation, followed by systematic SEAD, DEAD, and mass precision strikes across Iran's strategic target sets. The US brought to bear the full spectrum of joint capabilities undergirded by AI-enabled intelligence fusion and space-based Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR). The strategy was characterised by doctrinal pre-emption and operational flexibility, rarely matched by any air force in the region. Iran struggled to contest air superiority and, therefore, adopted a strategy of asymmetric attrition. Iran sought to impose unsustainable cost-exchange ratios and threaten Gulf energy infrastructure. While this caused localised damage and highlighted interceptor sustainability

weaknesses, it failed to alter the strategic trajectory. The central lesson is stark: asymmetric mass, when employed without air superiority, may inflict significant costs on an adversary, but is unlikely to achieve decisive outcomes. Air campaigns that fail to establish sustained dominance in the air and related domains may achieve tactical success but are unlikely to produce decisive strategic outcomes.

Strategic and Operational Coherence

US Central Command (CENTCOM) briefings confirm that the air operations followed a phased approach—SEAD and leadership decapitation first, which secured air superiority, and systematic targeting thereafter. From Israel's official standpoint, it was a quintessential fight for 'Elimination of Existential Threats'.[10] Israel worked on the doctrinal precept of pre-emption and robust decision making. Subsequent phases maintained operational flexibility by exploiting real-time intelligence and AI to remain aligned with the strategic objective of eliminating existential threats.[11] The coordinated efforts of the US and Israel to dismantle Iran's military and strategic capabilities, and induce paralysis demonstrate strategic coherence.

The innumerable variables that define an armed conflict were equally applicable to this conflict, and it is here that the campaign's strategic coherence comes into question.

The Royal United Services Institute, in its commentary on this air campaign, points out that the operation was extremely successful in achieving its

immediate military objectives.[12] However, the failure to achieve the declared end-state—either regime collapse or 100 per cent destruction of missiles and drones or destruction of nuclear fissile material or all—have raised certain questions on strategy coherence. It needs to be questioned whether the multi-order effects of this war were adequately thought through, including the possibility of Iran deliberately striking critical economic and civilian infrastructure such as Bahrain's desalination plants, Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura refinery, facilities in the Shaybah oil field, Kuwait International Airport, and other high-value sites in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Bahrain[13], as well as the potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz. These constitute the true centres of gravity of the Gulf states.

The much-vaunted US-provided AD umbrella protecting the Arab states was penetrated by Iranian saturation attacks employing ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and low-cost kamikaze drones. The employment of AD in this war and its failures for both sides is significant as it offers several important lessons for India. In Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, air-led coercion without a politically sustainable strategy for post-conflict governance produced extremely adverse outcomes.[14] It is to be understood here that air power cannot occupy territory or address ideological or resilient foes. It power cannot bomb ideology.[15]

Air Defence

AD Set-up. The US CENTCOM provided a networked Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) architecture to its Gulf allies.[16] The assets employed included MIM-104 Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptors, as well as SM-2, SM-3, and SM-6 missiles launched from seven Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers for exo-atmospheric and mid-course intercepts. The architecture was supported by Link 16 and Joint Range Extension Applications Protocol networks for track sharing; the Middle East AD Cell at Al Udeid's Combined Air Operations Centre, which enabled AI-driven fusion of Arab, US, and Israeli sensor data to generate a theatre-wide operational picture; the region's first permanent IAMD Operations Centre; AI tools such as Claude and Palantir for threat prioritisation during saturation attacks; and MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial systems acting as forward sensors to cue interceptor engagements.

Israel's Integrated AD System (IADS) was equally technologically sophisticated with multi-layered, mobile, and networked system.[17] Modern Israeli defence strategy emphasises on 'Defending the Defenders'[18]—meaning the protection of military personnel and infrastructure, particularly AD systems, through hardening, mobility, and deception. The novel features are Iron Dome for short-range interception, David's Sling for mid-range interception, Arrow 2 (endo-atmospheric) and Arrow 3 for long-range interception. They were supported by US-

supplied Patriot, Barak-8 naval missiles; Super Green Pine, EL/M-2080 radars, and Eitam, an airborne warning and control system. Israel had AI-assisted battle management systems for real-time fusion of Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and satellites inputs, Link-16 interoperability to share tracks with THAAD or Patriots, and theatre-wide anti-missile defence with Gulf allies.

Iran's AD Force (IRIADF) during True Promise-IV was layered but static and unnetworked.[19] The system was characterised by S-300PMU2, Bavar-373, Sayyad-4, for long range interception; Khordad-15 (Sayyad-3) and S-200 for medium-range interception; and TOR-M1, 9K331 Tor, 3rd Khordad (Bavar-373 variant), and Pantsir-S1 for short-range interception. It also included the Arman anti-ballistic missile defence system.

Operational Shortcomings.

- **Inadequate Investment in Defence against Cheap Drone**. Iranian saturation raids exposed structural weaknesses in the coalition AD set-up. The US-provided AD architecture for the Arab states was not fully multi-layered, leaving gaps that were subsequently exploited by Iran. The highly sophisticated set-ups provided by the US were more inclined to engage high-altitude ballistic missiles and moderately expensive one-way drones. There were no soft-kill and low-cost kinetic effectors. High-end interceptors expended against the drones raised issues of

sustainability and cost-exchange ratio because the supply chain of these interceptors had never been tested.

- **Lack of a Shared Doctrine**. With the sophistication backing them, the coalition AD operators failed their training against multiple directional saturation salvos with variable heights and varying speeds. To add to this, radars and sensors deployed in various Arab nations followed their own standard operating procedures. This affected generation of a common air picture. Differences in national doctrines, rules of engagement and technical architectures left exploitable seams pointing towards planners not taking any cognisance of Ukraine's experience in defending against Russian missiles and drones.

Iran's Organisational, Doctrinal and Operational Issues. Although Iran possessed several capable AD assets, the causes of its AD failures were multidimensional. Iran's AD failure is analytically instructive precisely because it was not primarily a failure of hardware. The most significant Iranian failure was structural: its AD force operated as an independent service rather than as an integrated component of the Iranian Air Force. The lack of unified C2 architecture could not enforce learning iterative operational lessons from Ukraine or the 2019 Abqaiq-Khurais attack. Since the C2 was weak, there was no audit of doctrinal emphasis

on dispersal and mobility of available assets. Therefore, the static nodes were systematically dismantled. The sensor-to-shooter chain was fragmented. The radar data could not be efficiently correlated, and shooters could not be cued at machine speed against the coalition's simultaneous multi-axis attacks. The robustness of the cyber and electronic protection was poor. Another failure was in training. This was not amplified by any regular joint exercises or high-fidelity simulations under Electronic Warfare (EW) conditions. It can be said that Iran had the instruments of a viable IADS; what it lacked was the organisational architecture to make them function as one.[20]

Comparative Verdict

The IAMD system provided by the US to its Gulf allies was highly sophisticated and almost fully automated but remained fundamentally point-defence oriented, leaving exploitable seams vulnerable to low and slow drone swarms. Israel's IADS was most coherent layered architecture because it was mobile, networked, and AI-assisted for real-time battle management.

The IRIADF, by contrast, possessed capable platforms but the architecture was static, poorly networked, organisationally fragmented, and neither mobile enough to survive SEAD nor coherent enough to resist EW degradation. The comparative verdict is unambiguous: capability without mobility and network integration remains a target, and not a defence shield.

Artificial Intelligence in Air Warfare

From a historical perspective, the use of AI in warfare is not new. However, the Russia–Ukraine conflict was the first international aggression in which both sides actively developed and employed AI for military purposes.[21] The operational employment of AI-enabled tools during Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion—most notably the reported use of Anthropic's Claude for targeting support alongside Israel's Lavender and Gospel systems, first demonstrated during operations in Gaza—represents a doctrinal inflection point rather than merely a technological enhancement. AI demonstrably shortened the sensor-to-shooter cycle across thousands of simultaneous targets, enabled mid-mission re-tasking of manned aircraft, and fused heterogeneous intelligence streams into coherent commander's pictures at a tempo that a human analytical team could not have sustained. Admiral Brad Cooper, the CENTCOM commander, acknowledged that AI tools helped forces "Fight faster and smarter".[22] It reflects an institutional endorsement that carries significant implications for the future. The Maven System used cloud supply arrangement via Amazon Web Services (AWS). Subsequently, Iranian drone strikes targeted AWS data centres in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, marking a significant and direct attack on cloud infrastructure.

The air campaign demonstrated that AI and cyber capabilities have evolved from supporting functions to core structural components of campaign design. AI has

the potential to become the backbone of operational automation, enabling mission planning, strike package optimisation, time-sensitive targeting, dynamic in-flight re-tasking, and management of multi-layered air and missile defence engagements. The most dangerous downside is machine taking over the job of a human. AI must support decision making but not make the decisions. Employment of AI is a definitive shift in the character of modern warfare.

Future Trajectory and Risks.

- The first and most critical limitations of AI is algorithmic opacity.[23] When AI-generated targeting recommendations feed directly into strike decisions, the criteria by which the system weighs intelligence inputs, assesses collateral damage risk, or adjudicates between competing target profiles are not transparent to a commander approving the strike. This is as much a legal vulnerability as it is a C2 issue. Algorithmic bias, whether introduced through skewed data, flawed variables for threat classification, or inadequate contextualisation of cultural and geopolitical nuance, may produce systematic targeting errors. This gets compounded over high-tempo operations if there is no human-generated accountability.[24]
- The second concern is accountability dilution.[25] A major concern arises when a strike is

re-tasked mid-flight, based primarily on AI-generated recommendations rather than a deliberate decision by a human commander. The reported deployment of Claude by the US military planners—on the same day when the US government formally designated Anthropic a supply chain risk—illustrates how operational utility drove adoption faster than legal, ethical, and security review processes could assess it.[26] Iran's subsequent strikes on AWS data centres in the UAE and Bahrain demonstrated that cloud-hosted AI infrastructure now constitutes a targetable strategic node.

The Centrality of Intelligence

Intelligence: The Decisive Centre of Gravity.

- Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion were orchestrated based on years of penetrative Human Intelligence (HUMINT), SIGINT, and cyber operations by Israeli and US agencies. The agencies mapped excruciating details of Iranian leadership hideouts, their patterns, nuclear infrastructure, missile tunnels, AD layouts, and much more. They synchronised surveillance, cyber capabilities, and HUMINT assets to an extraordinary degree. [27]
- At the operational and tactical levels, real-time ISR—fed by satellites, high-altitude Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), manned ISR

aircraft, SIGINT platforms, and ground reports—fused by AI-enabled systems continuously refreshed target lists and allowed mid-mission re-tasking of aircraft and drones. Only a strong base of intelligence data could have supported the pace of the strikes and engagement of thousands of targets across multiple target systems. Therefore, intelligence that underwrote the unprecedented leadership decapitation achieved by air in the opening blows. It will not be wrong to say that intelligence has been arguably the true centre of gravity of the air operations.[28]

- Iran's intelligence, though tactical, played a key enabling role in over 90 waves of missile and drone retaliations to Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion. The targeting of 16 US bases, critical energy infrastructure, and iconic symbols of Gulf prosperity were entirely intelligence-driven.

Limitations of Intelligence.

- Despite possessing tactically superior intelligence, the coalition commanders were unable to reliably locate and neutralise deeply buried nuclear infrastructure as well as all missile and drone stockpiles. The persistence of Iranian missile salvos, despite coalition claims of having destroyed them, highlights the limitations of the US intelligence-based assessments of Iran's

concealed stockpiles and production resilience.[29] The high-quality intelligence available to Israel and the US could not fully anticipate Iran's adaptive responses and the regime's resolve. On both sides, technology-enhanced intelligence could neither predict the other side's escalation ladder nor overcome informational asymmetry.

- In all three operations, these contradictions are evident in overconfident battle damage assessments and competing claims regarding the extent of damage. There is also the issue of political ambivalence, which constrained the translation of military success into decisive strategic outcomes. There were several instances in which the US political leadership employed absolutist rhetoric of victory, while the realities on the ground reflected only partial and conditional success. After the ceasefire, the White House declared that in 38 days, Operatin Epic Fury had "Met Those Objectives", "Crushed Iranian Threat", and "Obliterated Iran's Nuclear Sites"[30], but the campaign did not eliminate underground infrastructure, residual fissile material, and Iran's scientific base.[31] An analysis of the Strait of Hormuz crisis concludes that Iran retained sufficient anti-ship missiles and proxy capabilities. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that Iran's C2 structure had been rendered ineffective and that the country was

being systematically decimated.[32] In reality, despite suffering heavy losses, Iran continued to engage Israel.

Manned Versus Unmanned

The Current Balance.

- The Russia-Ukraine conflict is five years in running and neither missiles nor drones have shown a way to terminate the conflict. It should be noted that the 2026 air war reaffirmed the evolving role of drones and missiles. Nevertheless, in this conflict, more than 13,000 sorties by manned fighters and bombers remained indispensable, primarily because dynamic, time-sensitive targeting required human judgement for target identification and verification under conditions of uncertainty. ISR missions required the flexibility provided by manned platforms, which one-way expendable drones could not offer. Drones were also incapable of carrying large bunker buster munitions required to engage hardened and deeply buried targets. Mid-air re-tasking was feasible only for manned fighters, as one way attack drones, once launched, could not be recalled or reassigned to new targets after expending themselves.

- Iranian manned fighters and bombers could not take to air against the overwhelming coalition air superiority over Iran. Therefore, Tehran's retaliation heavily relied on swarms of low-cost one-way attack UAVs, and ballistic and cruise missiles. Despite the destruction inflicted, it did not secure victory for Iran.

Future Direction. The decisive shaping of the battlespace—securing air superiority, executing time-sensitive strikes, striking hardened and underground targets, dynamically hunting mobile radars, missile launchers, C2 centres, etc—is still likely to be the forte of manned platforms. Human crews continue to be better at interpreting ambiguous information, exercising judgement under uncertainty, and managing complex escalatory dynamics.[33] The most plausible future of manned–unmanned is, therefore, teaming.

Lessons for India

Lessons for India from Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion must be read not as an inventory of equipment gaps, but as a test of doctrinal maturity. The campaigns exposed where integrated thinking, institutional coherence, and operational architecture determine outcomes as much as platform quality. India's two-front threat calculus, its reliance on a blend of legacy and modern systems, and its evolving theatre command

structure make these lessons directly applicable rather than merely instructive.

Tactical Level.

- **AD**. Iran's saturation raids exposed a conceptual failure in how the US-provided coalition IADS was structured. Designed around high-altitude ballistic intercepts, it was tactically blind to low, slow drone swarms. India faces a comparable risk. The Indian Air Force's (IAF) IADS must be designed as a genuinely layered, mobile, and centralised coordinated system. Greater emphasis is required on hardening, distribution, mobility, and redundancy across command, control, communications, computers, and ISR. Increased use of satellite-based sensing and de-platformed C2 are needed.[34] Fixed radars and C2 nodes can no longer be regarded as protected rear-area assets. The principle of deploying costly interceptors against cheap drones is a strategically unsustainable exchange. Soft-kill options and low-cost kinetic effectors must be integrated alongside high-end platforms, with doctrine governing interceptor conservation explicitly codified and exercised.
- **Resilient Architecture**. The coalition's networked architecture was also its greatest vulnerability.[35] Iran degrading key radar nodes had disproportionate ripple effect across the battle

management network. In the emerging scenario, India should think about autonomous sensor-shooter pairing at lower echelons. Hardened communication nodes must allow operations to continue coherently under network degradation. The lesson is to ensure the architecture is resilient.

- **AI and Intelligence**. The campaigns demonstrated that intelligence is a true centre of gravity of modern air operations. Years of painstaking HUMINT and SIGINT preparation underpinned the opening leadership decapitation strikes, while real-time AI-enabled data fusion sustained the tempo and precision of subsequent targeting operations. India's structurally fragmented intelligence architecture requires a joint, AI-assisted, all-source intelligence fusion at the operational level, combining machine-speed processing with human-verified decision-making. The risk of AI adoption—algorithmic opacity, accountability dilution, and the danger of treating machine recommendations as effectively determinative—must be explicitly addressed in doctrine before these tools are fielded.

Operational Level.

- **C2**. The operational coherence of the campaign rested on centralised C2 paired with distributed execution. India's evolution towards theatre commands must recognise that strategic

unity of effort requires a centrally empowered air component authority. The campaign reinforces the validity of the IAF's doctrine of centralised control and decentralised execution, particularly in the conduct of joint and multi-domain operations. What is now urgent is that this doctrine be translated into a redundant, joint C2 architecture, rather than remaining a planning assumption. The campaigns also validate that air superiority is a precondition, not a byproduct of campaign success. It requires deliberate sequencing, and not opportunistic engagement.

- **Base Defence and Logistics**. Iran's strikes on 16 US bases across eight nations demonstrated that a resilient adversary denied air superiority can redirect its efforts against fixed military infrastructure. For India, whose forward air bases in the western and northern sectors are well within Chinese and Pakistani missile range, this is not a theoretical risk. The campaign further demonstrated that even carrier strike groups are no longer sanctuaries. Satellite imagery and precision telemetry have collapsed the distinction between forward operating base and depth asset. Hardening, dispersal, undergrounding, and pre-planned alternate operating locations must be elevated from planning assumptions to exercised reality. The unequivocal logistics lesson is that high-tempo air war depletes precision munitions,

interceptors, and spare parts at rates that expose structural industrial capacity failures if stockpiles and supply chains are not sized for sustained conflict. India's defence–industrial base and strategic reserve policy must be benchmarked against the consumption rates observed in this 38-day campaign.

- **AD**. The operational lesson on IADS coherence is stark; Iran possessed the hardware of a capable AD but lacked the organisational architecture to make it function as an integrated system. Another lesson has been that whatever can be done to the enemy's AD shield can also be done to India. So, efforts must keep one's own defensive shield operational using mobility, deception, and redundancy, even when under sustained precision attack.[36] India must ensure that its own tri-service IADS does not replicate this structural failure. The integration of S-400, Barak-8, Akash, and legacy systems into a networked, AI-enabled layered architecture—with clear centralised authority, interoperable data links, and regular tri-service exercises—is an operational imperative.

Strategic Level.

- **Limits of Air Power as Strategic Instrument**. The most consequential strategic lesson of Operation Epic Fury is not a military

one. Despite 10,200 US sorties and Israel's 5,700 combat sorties, the declared political end-state—regime change, complete nuclear dismantlement, and strategic paralysis—was not achieved. Iran's ideological networks survived; its scientific base remained intact and its asymmetric proxies continued to function. For India, this validates the enduring IAF's doctrinal caution against conflating the capabilities of air power with the ability to occupy territory or extinguish ideology. Any Indian campaign design that assigns air power the role of achieving political outcomes without a coherent political strategy would be counterproductive.

- **Geographic Chokepoints as Strategic Leverage**. Iran's weaponisation of the Strait of Hormuz—undertaken despite severe conventional degradation—demonstrates that geographic leverage can outlast battlefield defeat. A state that could not contest the skies held the global energy economy hostage. The Malacca Strait, through which over 80 per cent of India's energy imports transit, is an analogous pressure point that an adversary could exploit independently of its conventional air or naval strength. India must have credible denial and deterrence plans for this chokepoint as a strategic variable, not merely as a maritime concern.

- **Multi-Domain Campaign Architecture and AI**. Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion were not air campaigns in the traditional sense. They were networked, multi-domain operations in which air, cyber, space, and EW were fused into a single operational architecture, with AI compressing the decision cycle at every level. India's campaign planning must make this transition. The current tendency to plan air, cyber, and space operations as parallel but separate efforts must give way to genuinely integrated architecture where effects across domains are synchronised in real time. This demands indigenous AI-enabled decision-support tools with transparent, human-auditable logic—tools designed to accelerate and enhance a commander's decision-making rather than substitute for it. Dependence on foreign AI platforms creates a targetable strategic vulnerability. Developing indigenous AI capabilities is, therefore, both an operational necessity and a strategic imperative for technological sovereignty.
- **Air Denial as Strategy**. Ukraine has denied air superiority to a larger and more technologically sophisticated Russian Air Force.[37] Air denial is not a consolation prize for a force that cannot achieve air superiority; it is a deliberate strategic choice that can shape escalation

thresholds, preserve decision space, and impose costs sufficient to complicate an adversary's campaign design. For India, a credible air denial posture is itself a powerful form of deterrence across its two active fronts.

Impact on Character of War

Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion have not merely validated doctrinal propositions about modern air war; they have altered the constitutive logic of armed conflict. Three transformations are particularly consequential:

- First, the compression of the decision cycle through AI-enabled intelligence fusion has effectively relocated the cognitive centre of gravity of warfare from a commander's judgement to an algorithm's output. When strikes are re-tasked mid-air based on real-time AI modelling, and if targeting packages are generated at machine speed, the traditional Clausewitzian model of war as a contest of wills mediated by friction and uncertainty is qualitatively altered.
- Second, the democratisation of mass firepower through inexpensive one-way attack drones has collapsed the traditional correlation between economic power and coercive military capacity. A USD 50,000 drone capable of destroying a USD 100 million aircraft represents more than a cost-exchange problem; it represents a structural challenge to the deterrence calculus on

which military investment decisions are based. States and non-state actors alike can now field operationally consequential mass at minimal cost. This significantly reduces the penalty for conventional inferiority.

- Third, the weaponisation of global chokepoints, as demonstrated by Iran's exploitation of the Strait of Hormuz, signals that geographic leverage has become a durable substitute for battlefield success. Iran could not contest air superiority; it could, however, hold the global energy economy at risk. The character of war has, thereby, extended its reach into economic infrastructure, financial markets, and supply chains in ways that traditional theories of victory and defeat inadequately capture. Conflict termination now requires not merely military decision but economic and political stabilisation of a systemic disruption whose reverberations outlast the last sortie.

Conclusion

Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion constitute a watershed in contemporary air warfare. They were high-tempo, AI-enabled, multi-domain campaigns that also underscored the enduring reality of global economic interdependence. The campaigns have inflicted severe damage on Iran's conventional and strategic capabilities and illustrated the importance of multi-layered,

networked, integrated air and missile defence, AI-driven planning, and manned–unmanned teaming. At the same time, they have exposed enduring vulnerabilities in base and force protection, the sustainability of AD, the challenges of campaign-to-strategy translation, and the indispensability of intelligence.

For the Indian Armed Forces and the strategic community, this air war should be treated as an early warning and a planning aid. It points toward a future in which the decisive contests will be waged as much between systems, data architectures, and doctrinal constructs as between individual aircraft or missile types. Integrating these insights into India's AD architecture, air operations doctrine, and theatre command design is not a matter of emulation, but of anticipatory adaptation.

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