

The Third Dimension : Air Power in Combating the Maoist Insurgency*

Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)[®]

The debate on the use of air power in counter-insurgency operations in India drew the media attention when the then Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal PV Naik, PVSM, VSM sought government clearance for helicopters involved in support of para military forces in Maoist-infested areas to retaliate when attacked by the Maoists. While the Government did not clear the proposal, the demand for air support to the para military forces is increasing day by day. It is in this context that Group Captain AK Aggarwal's book is timely.

The author has discussed use of air power in insurgencies in Algeria and Malaya before taking on the Indian situation. It must be remembered that these insurgencies were being tackled in foreign countries. India also used offensive air power with armed helicopters against the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Would France, Britain or for that matter the United States use air power against their own citizens within their own countries? It is extremely doubtful. One just wishes that the author had discussed use of air power in domestic counter-insurgency operations.

The author has dealt with the lessons learnt in these insurgencies in depth and in most lucid manner. The main limitations of air power is that it cannot distinguish between friend or foe and thus has to be used with greater caution than any other element of force as there are both human rights and public relations issues that can have disastrous effects on the overall counter-insurgency campaign. Any counter-insurgency campaign is a war to win the support of a population and demands engagement with the people – an engagement that air power simply cannot provide. Air policing had demonstrable merit in the imperial period for suppressing

* **The Third Dimension : Air Power in Combating the Maoist Insurgency.** By AK Agarwal, (New Delhi : Vij Books, 2013), pp..181, Price Rs 795.00 ISBN 9789382652168.

[®] **Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force in December 1959 and retired from the service as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command in 1997. Presently, he is the Chairman of CAFHR, USI Board of Management.

recalcitrant natives, but against modern, fanatical non-state actors who operate within the civilian population in an era of unrestrained media reporting, heightened legal scrutiny and different economic circumstances the imperial experience is of dubious value. The author has brought out these points very well and needs to be commended.

Coming to India, air power was extensively used by the British in the North West Frontier Province – initially it was Royal Air Force followed by the Indian Air Force. It was to the credit of air power that it was able to contain the insurgency and not let it go out of hand – the basic causes of insurgency have to be tackled by political and social actions and not by use of air force. Another important political decision taken by Indian National Congress in 1945 was that (offensive) air power would not be used against Indian citizens – a policy which the Indian Government follows till date barring two major exceptions, one against Nagas in early 1960s and in Mizoram in 1966. A major shortcoming of the book is that it does not cover this major facet of Indian Air Force's history. The author has covered Naga and Mizo insurgencies but he could have-given a lot more details regarding: What forced the Indian Government to take this drastic step? He could have also given more details of air operations in these two cases and lessons learnt from them could have been brought out. These are some of the areas which are not very well-known to even those in uniform.

The chapter '*The Maoist Insurgency*' is detailed and covers almost all the relevant aspects. The history of the movement is detailed as is the description of its organisational structure and tactics. It sheds light on the methodology that one needs to adopt to counter the same.

The chapter on the '*Use of Air Power against the Insurgency*' is the meat of the book and has been covered in detail. The author has painstakingly gone through all relevant aspects on the use of air power and its implications and thus needs to be congratulated. He has covered the terrain and weather aspects that influence the use of air power for various regions affected with Maoist insurgency.

The author has covered all possible legal aspects including rules of engagement. The problem that needs to be addressed is – since armed action is inevitable in most cases and use of air

power is an exception, one wants to know how to counter the human right activists and the media relations policy that the Air Force needs to follow in such cases. One possible method can be moulding of public opinion against the Maoists and educating the population beforehand about the inevitability of the use of air force in certain situations. Such an approach would be useful in two ways; firstly, the adverse reaction to the use of air power would be less and secondly, it may serve as a deterrent as far as Maoists are concerned. On the other hand, this may lead the Maoists to acquire anti-aircraft weaponry and thus up the ante. This aspect needs to be debated.

The author has rightly brought out that any counter-insurgency operation has to be based on a strong political will, aggressive anti-guerrilla tactics and economic and social development of affected areas to regain the confidence of the people. It has to be an all-inclusive approach which unfortunately has been lacking in most of our counter-insurgency operations.

All in all, a well-researched treatise on the use of air power against the Maoist insurgency operations in India.