

The Indian Air Force, Sub-Conventional Operations and Balakot: A Practitioner's Perspective

ARJUN SUBRAMANIAM

ABSTRACT India's employment of offensive air power in sub-conventional operations has evolved rather slowly for several reasons, primary of which is the quest for restraint in the application of force against internal fissures. There is also a popular reluctance to recognise the capabilities of air power in pursuing counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and counter-infiltration operations. This brief explores the evolution of a doctrinal clarity for the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the sub-conventional domain. It examines such shift in the context of the recent Balakot strikes and the consequent aerial engagement between the IAF and the Pakistani Air Force. The brief concludes with an outline of the key faultlines within the IAF, and the capability gaps that need to be filled for the force to stay relevant across its full spectrum of operations.

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INTRODUCTION

Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunwa is a mere 300 km to the northeast of the area where the Indian Air Force (IAF) first saw action against recalcitrant Afridi and Mahsud tribesmen in the mid-1930s. Flying out of Kohat airfield (near Peshawar) in their slow and lumbering Audaxes and Wapitis, No1 Squadron carried out effective strafing and bombing raids in the mountains of Waziristan in what today would have been termed as counter-insurgency operations.¹ It is thus ironic that although in the early years of the IAF it was employed extensively against insurgents and non-state entities, it would be almost eight decades before the Indian state would openly use air power in a less-than-war situation in the same area where it cut its teeth during its formative years.

In the decades after independence, the IAF actively supported the 8th Mountain Division in joint operations against insurgents in Nagaland, causing high attrition to the secessionist forces in the years prior to the 1962 war with China. After the 1965 war with Pakistan, the siege of the treasury at Aizwal by the Mizo National Front (MNF) was broken by a joint operation involving the landing of heliborne troops supported by offensive air power against rebels belonging to the MNF.² While these incidents may have led some

observers to construct a narrative that the IAF was used without thought and restraint, they must be analysed in the context of the Indian state's particular vulnerabilities on multiple fronts at that time. It was only when the threat of two concurrent insurgencies (i.e., Nagaland and Mizoram) showed visible signs of secessionist tendencies did the Indian state choose to employ offensive air power, and only selectively.

Over the decades that followed the Nagaland and Mizoram insurgencies, the Indian state continued to grapple with multiple other such movements.[@] The state exercised restraint in using air power against these insurgencies, such as the Left Wing Extremist movement and the covert war in J&K.[#]

Following its success in executing the entire range of conventional offensive air operations during the 1971 war, the IAF assessed that it was critical to embark on a doctrinal path that focused on building air capability for strategic effect in conventional warfighting scenarios. Propelling this was the need to stay relevant as a tool of national security in the shadow of an overwhelmingly powerful and dominant Indian Army. This doctrinal path gave little attention to building capability for sub-conventional operations; at that time, the concept of "Full Spectrum capability"^{\$} was still some years away in the horizon.

@ Some of the other insurgencies that challenged the Indian state emerged in the states of Jammu and Manipur, Tripura, Assam and across several states (West Bengal, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkand, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh) in the form of Left Wing Extremism (LWE).

The J&K insurgency gradually morphed into a covert war waged against India by the Pakistani Deep State comprising elements of the ISI, Pakistan Army and the Jihadi network of groups like the LeT and JeM.

\$ 'Full Spectrum Capability' refers to military capabilities that can concurrently address the entire spectrum of conflict from nuclear conflict to sub-conventional operations and even less-than-war situations that may warrant the use of force.

TURBULENT TIMES

The 1980s saw a significant application of air power in the operations carried out by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka, to help end the civil war between the country's military forces and the militant organisation, LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). However, those offensive air operations were restricted to "search and destroy" missions by Mi-25 Attack Helicopters.³ The absence of hard intelligence resulted in sub-optimal operational outcomes though the LTTE was petrified of the 'Mudhalais' ("alligator" in Tamil), as they called the Mi-25s.⁴

The early 1990s saw a significant increase in incidents of cross-border infiltration into J&K involving jihadis from Pakistan, and the build-up of training camps along the Line of Control (LoC). By then, IAF's fighter jets and attack helicopters had acquired fair proficiency in targeting, and many within the air force saw a window for supporting "hot pursuit" operations that the Indian Army was advocating as part of a declaratory punitive policy. However, the proposition that air power was always going to be escalatory in sub-conventional operations had permeated through the strategic establishment. It was a given that the Indian Army would handle the operations on their own, be it in the northeast or in J&K.

In a conversation with this author, Air Chief Marshal Tipnis recalls that when he was Air-Officer-Commanding of J&K Area as an Air Vice Marshal during the peak of the

cross-border infiltration in the early 1990s, he made an attempt to reach out to divisional commanders and the corps commander in the region to find out how the IAF could support the Indian Army in the emerging scenario.⁵ He says the Army was reluctant to share plans and discuss the possibility of infusing air power into the counter-insurgency, counter-infiltration and counter-terrorist campaign that was unfolding. From this author's own recollections of the time, there was insufficient doctrinal clarity within the IAF, nor was there inter-service synergy in terms of supporting such complex operations through interdiction by attack helicopters and fighters, or heliborne insertion of Special Forces by day and night along known infiltration routes that existed in under-populated and forested areas like Lolab, Handwara or the Pir Panjal and Rajwar mountain ranges.⁶ To be sure, capability existed for strikes on static targets across the LoC, but it was never exercised for the reasons explained earlier.

During the Kargil conflict of 1999, the IAF was not initially prepared to conduct "restricted" air operations against the intruders without crossing the LoC or the International Boundary (IB) and few plans existed as part of "limited response" strategies. Air Marshal Patney, the commander-in-control of the IAF's Western Air Command (WAC), wanted to open a wider front and hit logistics nodes at places like Gultari (a prominent Pakistan Army base a few kilometres north of the LoC opposite the Dras Sector) and airfields at Gilgit and Skardu in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) to choke the intruders.⁶ Then Prime Minister Atal Bihari

% While the Pir Panjal ranges separate the Kashmir Valley from the Jammu region, the Rajwar mountain range is a subsidiary Himalayan range that lies to the east of the district of Kupwara, a terrorist and insurgency ridden district of J&K.

Vajpayee, however, had taken a decision that all military operations in response to the Kargil infiltrations would not violate the sanctity of the LoC and the IB. Consequently, the aerial attacks on Tiger Hill, the Muntha Dalo logistics camp and numerous mountain-top defences occupied by Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry during the Kargil conflict heralded the ability of the Air Force to influence the course of a battle in terrain and circumstances that were unconventional and not conducive to air operations.⁷

While the conflict is considered a watershed in contemporary Indian military history in the realm of limited conflicts under a nuclear overhang, it did not immediately precipitate a shift in doctrinal focus of the IAF to sub-conventional operations owing to three reasons. First, both the IAF and the larger strategic establishment were reluctant to accept and understand that air power would not always be escalatory and that it was imperative to raise the costs on Pakistan for its continued support of cross-border terrorism.

Second, there was a lack of precision and real-time Intelligence, Surveillance and Recce (ISR) capability. Third, there was only a sub-optimal understanding within the army and the air force of what was jointly possible in counter-infiltration, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorist operations: as a result, the Army and the Central Armed Paramilitary Force (CAPF) conducted operations on their own for almost three decades, until Balakot happened. To be fair, there was also a significant constituency within the IAF which argued that getting into sub-conventional operations would be the beginning of a gradual subjugation of the IAF into a subordinate arm of the overwhelmingly powerful Indian Army.⁸

Following the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, India's armed forces mobilised in a year-long face-off with Pakistan, called Operation Parakram. Though the IAF was ready for limited strikes across the LoC and presented plans to PM Vajpayee and Defence Minister George Fernandes days after the attack,⁹ they were not executed, supposedly because there was not enough support from other stakeholders.¹⁰ However, air power was used during the face-off in July 2002 when Mirage fighters were employed in a stealthy operation that the author recalls as being called 'Kargil 2' to evict Pakistani regulars of the Special Services Group (SSG) from their position inside the LOC in the Machil-Neelum-Gurez Sector of J&K. It was later confirmed in Parliament in November 2002 by India's defence minister.¹¹ Similar recommendations were offered after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, but then PM Manmohan Singh eschewed any punitive action.¹²

EMERGING DOCTRINAL CLARITY

Until recently, air forces across the world were largely configured, trained and wired for conventional conflict and as a critical component of nuclear deterrence. While flexibility, no doubt, remains one of the enduring characteristics of air power, it was mainly looked at within the narrow prism of adaptability of a single platform to multiple missions and roles within the conventional spectrum of conflict. "Flexibility" as far as air power strategists and operational practitioners were concerned, meant that Platform A could be used in the morning for a Combat Air Patrol mission and configured to carry air defence weapons like short-, medium- and long-range air-to-air missiles. It could then be configured in the afternoon with suitable air-to-ground weaponry like rockets and cluster bombs to

attack armoured formations in the Tactical Battle Area (TBA). At sun-down, the same aircraft could be converted into a lethal and destructive platform to attack a strategically important target in the enemy's depth areas with anywhere between five and ten tonnes of High Explosive (HE) bombs. It is only after the end of the Cold war in 1991 that air power emerged as a possible option for forcing conflict *termination* (not conflict *resolution*) at the lower end of the conflict spectrum.

For India, by 2012, the IAF had a clear vision of how it could contribute to sub-conventional operations, of which counter-terrorism is a clearly defined mission. That year, a small team of practitioners led by this author brought out the first doctrinal document issued by the IAF that was available for public scrutiny called, *Basic Doctrine of the Indian Air Force-IAP 2000-12*.¹³ Chapter 8 of that doctrine clearly indicates that the IAF leadership of the time was confident of contributing to the increasingly complicated flavour of contemporary warfare. Recognising the scepticism that prevailed within the strategic establishment about the escalatory nature of offensive air power, the IAF rightly focused on the non-offensive and enabling characteristics of air power such as air mobility to transport forces speedily from one conflict zone to another; helicopter support for special forces operations; and casualty evacuation and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).

However, what was prescient was the reference to "the rapidly changing nature of warfare and air power as a powerful tool that the state could employ in the war against non-state actors." The opening paragraph declares: "The proliferation of terrorism and the designs of non-state actors along with their ability to target the soft underbelly of democratic

nations have created an asymmetry of alarming proportions. In such a scenario, it is important to review the roles, missions and capabilities of air power to tackle sub-conventional threats from insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists and extremists who threaten national security."¹⁴ The chapter calls for "ingenuity as a prerequisite for exploiting air power in sub-conventional operations." The doctrine clearly articulates the pivotal role of technology in tracking terrorist and insurgent activities and identifying operating bases, training bases and supply nodes. It places the onus on the political leadership to order punitive strikes with precision and discrimination by multi-role combat aircraft in a proxy war situation. The same chapter discusses the issues of political will; joint operations and integration; Intelligence, Surveillance & Recce (ISR); targeting & collateral damage; escalation; training; night and all-weather capability; and media alertness and engagement.¹⁵

BALAKOT AND OPERATIONAL NARRATIVES

In the early hours of the morning of 26 February 2019, the IAF conducted strikes over Juba Top against a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) training camp near the town of Balakot in the Khyber Pakhtunwa province of Pakistan. The operation was driven by reliable intelligence that confirmed the presence of hundreds of Jihadis at the camp and ongoing preparations for another terrorist attack against India. Of great significance was that this was the first time since the 1971 War that India had taken military action against any kind of threats in mainland Pakistan.

The following morning, an aerial engagement between the IAF and PAF took

place across a large frontage in the Naushera and Jammu sectors wherein an alert IAF air defence network comprising radars and fighters thwarted a retaliatory strike launched by the PAF against Indian military targets.¹⁶ Following the two incidents, several Indian and western commentators have accepted as 'probable' truth, Pakistan's narrative[&] regarding the efficacy of the Balakot strikes and the air defence counter to the response of the Pakistani Air Force.¹⁷ This shows such analysts' failure in understanding the broader post-combat dynamics that came into play in the 'grey zone' of a less-than-war situation that is Balakot.

After the IAF struck Balakot, claimed to have downed a PAF F-16 the following morning, and prevented more critical damage on Indian Army targets,¹⁸ there were reports that local villagers in POK attacked and hurt the pilot of the fallen F-16, mistaking him to be an IAF pilot. The Pakistani media and the public refrained from criticising the PAF and the government for not being able to deal with a more assertive Indian security posture that was willing to take punitive action against Pakistan-sponsored terror groups even if it meant violating Pakistani air space. This perhaps reflects the control on security narratives being exercised by the Pakistan Army through its media wing, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

Critics of New Delhi's national security posture¹⁹ are scrambling to claim ownership of a narrative questioning the IAF's claims. This,

despite compelling evidence, some of which are corroborated by multiple inputs from the IAF leadership* and highlighted in the following paragraphs.

- The credibility of the ISPR has been repeatedly called to question since the crisis unfolded. For example, they first announced that there were three captured Indian pilots, only to eventually change the number to one. Then there were supposed videos of the fallen IAF aircraft, which would later turn out to be old footage. They also said there was no use of F-16s, only to later admit that they were indeed used. There is also the question of why ISPR would wait a full 42 days before taking a group of international media practitioners for a visit to Juba Top, and only to show them the mosque that was never hit, in the first place. The European Space Agency's satellite images of the complex, shown to this author on a high-resolution display, reveal clear projectile entry points on the northern-most building, some distance away from the mosque.
- Francesca Marino, an Italian journalist and author who covers South Asia extensively has offered the most compelling narrative that supports the IAF's claims that it had caused extensive damage to the Balakot training camp. She writes: "Based on the different inputs gathered over the last several weeks through my contact, it can be safely said that the immediate impact of the strike killed a large number of JeM cadres.

& Pakistan's narrative is based on numerous contradictory statements and flimsy evidence offered by the DG ISPR, Major General Ghaffor, that dispute the Indian claim of having struck the Balakot camp and shot down a PAF F-16 the following morning.

* Based on the author's conversation with several frontline operational commanders involved in the planning and execution of the Balakot strike and the ensuing air defence response.

The numbers estimated ranged from 130-170 including those who have died during treatment. Those killed included 11 trainers ranging from bomb makers to those imparting weapons training. To prevent news of fatalities leaking through statements, a group of JeM members also visited the families of those killed and handed over cash compensation to them. Some locals have noticed vehicles dumping rubble in the Kunhar River during the night after the strike.²⁰

- The IAF was on full air defence alert since 3:30 am of 26 February, which is why it could thwart the PAF attack the following day. Professional air forces will not drop bombs for signalling at distances of 150-500 metres from the target to avoid unintended consequences. The distances considered “safe” for the kinds of weapons dropped in that strike are in the region of two km and farther. If military signalling was the aim of the PAF riposte on 27 February, a single bomb on a critical target would have sufficed.
- It was creditable that two Mirage-2000s, two Sukhoi-30 MKIs and four MiG-21 Bisons managed to deter a much larger package that comprised 11 F-16s and 13 other fighters (possibly a combination of JF-17s, Mirage Vs & Mirage-IIIs). Despite the strong claim, supported by evidence, of shooting down a PAF F-16 by an IAF MiG-21 Bison in exchange for the loss of the latter,²¹ it is important to note why the IAF was hesitant to commit more Air Superiority Fighters (ASFs) to shrink the numerical disadvantage. The IAF was expecting a riposte from the morning of 26 February and the sheer lack of numbers meant that there would be windows of

recycling airborne assets, which the PAF seems to have exploited.²² It is also possible that the inherent superiority of the AIM-120 AMRAAM carried by the F-16 as compared to the Beyond Visual Range (BVR) missiles carried by the SU-30 MKI and Mirage-2000s kept the IAF fighters from manoeuvring more aggressively. Despite these systemic limitations, some aggressive flying by Wing Commander Abhinandan allowed him to exploit a fleeting opportunity and press-on with a Close Combat Missile launch on an F-16 that appeared in his visual bubble. Unfortunately, his pursuit took him across the Line of Control and after having launched his R-73 and turning east to head for home, he was likely to have been shot down by an AMRAAM fired from an F-16 that could have been loitering in depth.²³

- Deception was an intrinsic element of both IAF and PAF strategies during the Balakot strike and the aerial engagement the next morning.²⁴ However, the IAF deception plan on 26 February was operationally more effective as it drew out PAF interceptors in the wrong direction and masked the actual strike package heading for Balakot.
- Speculation of an IAF Mi-17 being downed by friendly fire cannot but be of grave concern to the IAF leadership.²⁵ There can be no greater tragedy in combat operations than to see comrades go down following errors of judgement. For example, reports say that during the 1991 Gulf War, 24 percent of the 148 battle deaths were due to “friendly fire”.²⁶ When informally queried, the IAF leadership has indicated that relevant aspects of the findings of

the Court of Inquiry (COI) would be declassified once it is completed and that maintaining credibility is extremely important for the force.²⁷ The failure to locate the “black box” of the crashed Mi-17,²⁸ supposedly retrieved by local villagers, is unlikely to hold up the COI beyond a point.²⁹ Nor will sensationalising the accident improve synergies between the services and media in the long term.

INSTITUTIONAL INTROSPECTION

In the backdrop of the Balakot air strikes and the subsequent aerial engagements in what can classically be termed as a less-than-war crisis, the Indian strategic establishment has entered uncharted territory.³⁰ This brief does not intend to engage in advocacy for air power or the IAF. It is, in fact, an attempt to place on the table some hard imperatives that make it necessary for India to explore possibilities and opportunities to sharpen its air power to combat, not only the covert war waged by Pakistan's Deep State using terrorism and jihad as tools, but also other security challenges across multiple fronts and the entire spectrum of conflict.

- The Balakot operation has provided an opportunity for subsequent intelligence-driven punitive operations that exploit the reach, flexibility and precision offered by offensive air power. These operations, however, will have to be carefully calibrated and executed with restraint. Joint operations would demand capabilities more enabling than just offensive air power and include the entire range of special operations missions like insertion, fire support, and Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) missions.


- The current operational landscape reveals that despite severe constraints in capability, the IAF has worked hard to reinvent itself according to the emerging requirements of the times, fusing every new acquisition, capability or upgrade into its operational processes. The opportunity to train with partner air forces like the USAF, French Air Force (FAF), Royal Air Force (RAF), Singapore Air Force (SAF) and learn from their experiences have no doubt added value. The missions that were flown during Exercise Gagan Shakti in April 2018³¹ have prepared the IAF for high-tempo combat operations in limited conflicts and diverse operational environments across the spectrum of conflict. In that context, it is not hard to comprehend Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to go with air strikes as the preferred option for punitive action following the Pulwama terror attack.
- Could the IAF response have been better? This viewpoint has already come out in a preliminary post-combat review. One hopes that the mistakes made and lessons learnt from the recent less-than-war aerial engagements will translate into improved Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs). The IAF would also do well to streamline and strengthen its PR and communications structures to back professional execution with sophisticated narrative building.
- To suggest that the IAF is functioning perfectly is to flirt with disaster. For starters, the IAF's flight safety record has been inconsistent, hampered as it is by ageing fighter platforms and excessively diverse inventories. There is an urgent need to phase out legacy platforms and

maintain a maximum mix of four or five types of swing/multi-role combat aircraft.

- On the capability front, if the IAF is to emerge as a credible instrument of deterrence at the lower end of the spectrum of conflict, certain issues need immediate attention. The Rafales may be coming, but what is equally important are the 110 follow-on platforms and regular flow of 'fully suited' Tejas. Better integrated weapons and electronic suites with an emphasis on weapons with discriminatory, precision and greater stand-off capability (both air-air and air-ground) are as important as improved data links, secure communications and satellite-based ISR and damage assessment, a capability that India sorely missed during the Balakot crisis.
- Finally, there is need for better integration of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities between the Indian Army and IAF in fighting the counter-infiltration battle along the Line of Control, as well as the counter-terrorist operations in the country's semi-urban and sparsely populated terrains. The immediate operationalisation of the Chinook and Apache helicopters will only hasten this endeavour. It would be delusionary to imagine that in the Indian context, offensive air power will be a deciding factor in sub-conventional operations; boots on ground have historically, and will continue to decide final outcomes.

CONCLUSION

There is a silver lining for inter-service synergy: Although Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval may have been enthused by the air chief's confidence, they would not have been able to assure PM Modi that air strikes were the most viable punitive action had the army and naval chiefs not supported the plan. The strategic leadership was reassured by their confidence at managing any magnitude of escalation that was likely to follow. All of India's strategic partners have been unequivocally supportive of the 'big picture' created by the strike and India's right to respond in a manner and place of its own choosing. A new normal has been established by calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff and hitting Pakistan-backed terrorists in their own backyard.

The full strategic impact of the Balakot strikes will unfold only after the Indian general elections and an operational evaluation of cross-border infiltrations is conducted as the winter snows melt in the mountains along the LoC. Yet, the UN blacklisting of Maulana Masood Azhar is an early indicator of the responsiveness of the larger global community to India's security concerns.³² The credibility of India's intent, resolve and consistency in resorting to coercive, punitive, preventive or pre-emptive use of force in crisis situations, particularly involving Pakistan and terror networks, will now be watched closely by India's strategic partners and adversaries as a measure of the effectiveness of Indian statecraft. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Air Vice Marshal (Dr) Arjun Subramaniam is a retired fighter pilot of the IAF, a military historian, strategic & air power analyst and Visiting Professor at Ashoka and Jindal Universities. He is also a former Visiting Professor at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000 Fax : +91-11-35332005
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