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Effects of Offensive Application of Air Power on Low-Intensity Conflicts

Abstract

Combat air power is best suited for limited conflict. Primacy must be given to 'air power' and 'naval power' especially in a limited war over projection of 'land power' resources. In fact, during most of the low-intensity conflicts, aerial reconnaissance missions are launched much before the first contact battle. Air power with its unique traits and modern day weapons can target the intended jugular vein of the enemy with pinpoint accuracy without any large-scale collateral damage. With careful selection of targets, weapons and platform, low-intensity conflict operations can be terminated early by using offensive air power.

In the Indian context, since the inception of the IAF, air power has been utilised in all low-intensity as well as full scale wars barring the exception of the 1962 Sino-India conflict. From counter insurgency operations in Waziristan to the Kargil operation, air power has proved its efficacy beyond any doubts. Meanwhile, one can notice that there was no escalation of the scale of battle, solely because of the use of air power. Though there is a school of thought in India, which believes that the use of offensive elements of air power escalates the scale of battle, there is very less factual, historical or statistical information behind it. Air power, being the most suited force for rapid action, has to be a part of the response in limited conflicts. The Indian doctrine on low-intensity conflict can be drawn around the primacy of offensive air power.

Introduction

'War' and 'Peace' are the two most widely used, as well as the most misunderstood terms in the parlance of statecraft. Peace does not mean an abject

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lack of conflict and war does not imply a full-fledged struggle. There are a range of activities in which countries engage, which do not always generate a declaration of a 'state of war', but which would hardly qualify for the designation of 'state of peace'. Such activities may be defined under the broad heads of limited war and low-intensity conflict. Whenever a state engages in low-intensity conflict with another state or non-state actors, it utilises all elements of National Power to force its will on the enemy. Air power, though a late entrant in warfare domain, has matured over the years to provide resolute options in any conflict.

The influential role of Air Power in conventional wars has been accepted since World War II. Most military doctrines profess that without the control of air, surface battles will not/cannot culminate in desired time frames. Air Power possesses unique characteristics like speed, reach, flexibility, responsiveness and shock effect, which can make a significant contribution in low-intensity conflicts. Air Power, being a military tool of statecraft, is best suited for offensive action, though there is an ostensible escalation attached to its use. While being on the offensive in a combat, it is imperative to avoid collateral damage, more so, in low-intensity conflicts. Towards this end result, certain basic requirements for using the offensive elements of Air Power in limited conflicts are: accurate intelligence, low calibre weapons and Precision Guided Munitions. They serve as primary catalysts to avoid escalation along with certain other measures.¹

Since its inception, the Indian Air Force is performing assigned tasks meticulously including operations in limited conflicts. The Air Force, like other instruments of our national power, has been used in low-intensity conflicts. Historically, there has been no record of escalation of any low-intensity battle, primarily because of these air actions, yet there exists a lot of apprehension in application of offensive air power. This hesitation in employment of air power is clearly visible in the conduct of our military operations and in many or almost all of our strategic doctrines.

Basic doctrine of the Indian Air Force (IAF) spells out its vision and mission statement as "to acquire strategic reach and capabilities across the spectrum of conflict" and "to be a modern, flexible and professional aerospace power with full spectrum capability."² The IAF also recognises that it is more than likely that it will be the first to enter the fray. The ability to more readily ratchet up or down the intensity of conflict make IAF the prime service to effect deterrence and coercion.³

Kargil was perhaps the last limited conflict that India fought in recent times. In this instance, the IAF had a delayed entry into the battle because of various reasons, the primary one being the concern of escalation. Severe restrictions

were imposed on the use of offensive elements, yet the result was out of proportions for air strikes. Though it was employed late, Air Power had a profound and a very decisive effect on the battle. Not just in the Indian Sub-continent, Air Power has been a success in limited conflicts across the globe. It is imperative to study the effect of offensive application of Air Power in various low-intensity conflicts and determine the intimidation factor of escalation.

Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC) and Application of Air Power

Low-Intensity Conflicts

Low-intensity Conflict is generally defined as an armed conflict that is above the level of peaceful co-existence and below the threshold of war. It is a ‘miniature’ politico-military struggle to achieve political, socio-economic or psychological objectives. Various kinds of low-intensity conflicts include proxy war, acts of terrorism and insurgencies. Border skirmishes also fall within this category. Few theorists include sub-conventional threats in the list. A low-intensity conflict is generally confined by geographic limits and traditionally characterised by constraints of weaponry, tactics and a certain level of acceptable violence. A state can be involved in low-intensity conflict against a state or against non-state actors or even with its own citizens.⁴

A pictorial representation of various conflicts is depicted in the figure bellow.

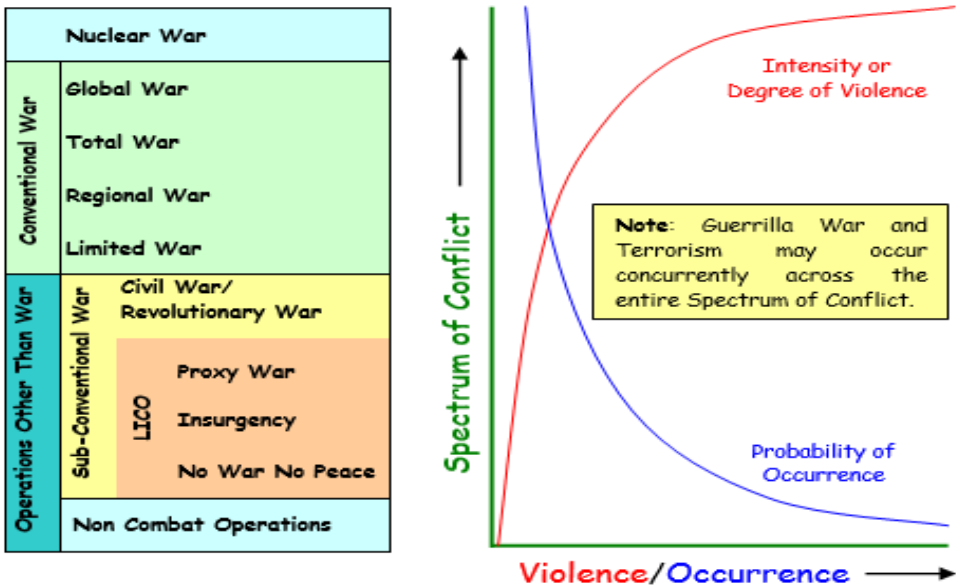


Fig. 1: Scale of Conflicts⁵

Redefining Low-Intensity Conflicts

For the purpose of this study a fairly broad definition of low-intensity conflict is considered, *Low-Intensity Conflict is a military confrontation between states or state and non-state actors below the threshold of conventional war and above that of routine peaceful competition.*

Defining Offensive Air Action

There is a general understanding that a planned drop of air-to-ground armament from a fighter aircraft is the only or the most suitable option that is exercised as offensive application of Air Power. There are numerous other offensive applications of Air Power in low-intensity conflict operations. Few illustrations to amplify the ambit of offensive application are the following:

- (a) A wide body transport aircraft using its tail mounted gun to fire on ground during an assault landing.
- (b) An armed or attack helicopter firing to defend the escorted package, like on a special heli-borne mission on escort duty to a casualty evacuation.
- (c) An armed drone on a search and strike mission using stand-off precision munitions.

Academicians deliberate that it is the intent, which defines aggressiveness and not the physical damage. Some scholars further drag the definition of offensive application to an ethical level, wherein they say that insertion of combat ready troops by means of an aircraft into an objective area is also an offensive application of Air Power. For the purpose of research, offensive or kinetic use of Air Power is defined as “any air operation that directly or indirectly leads to force application on to the adversary”.

Relevance of Low-Intensity Conflicts

India is geographically located in a hostile neighbourhood. There are several internal disturbances, these in turn, fuelled by its neighbours and various other non-state actors who are actively involved in undermining the sovereignty and tranquillity of the country. In fact, its immediate western neighbour openly talks of a low-intensity protracted war with India. In April 1990, the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, speaking in Larkhana in the Sind province, declared that Pakistan was embarking on a 1,000-year war to wrest Kashmir from India.⁶

Today three of the five nuclear states of Asia – China, India and Pakistan, are in the South Asian region. India shares land borders and maritime interests

with the other two. The presence of nuclear weapons in this region has not ruled out conflicts. Routine ceasefire violations⁷ and various border standoffs⁸ are testimony to the fact. Immediately after India and Pakistan carried out nuclear tests, Kargil happened in 1999. Both countries confronted each other again in 2001-02, but none of the events spiralled into a full-fledged war. These bear testimony to the fact that the possession of nuclear weapons does not make wars obsolete, it only limits war to some extent between two nuclear adversaries.⁹

Low-Intensity Conflicts and Air Power

All the conventional wars fought by India have begun with amassing of force and escalation if any was gradual in nature. There were intensified tensions, diplomatic posturing, and mobilisation of troops, border skirmishes and even airspace violations before the conflict. This process is however absent in low-intensity conflicts. Surface forces consume considerable time to mobilise and assemble. The IAF, nevertheless, is generally available for immediate action. In fact, during most of the low-intensity conflicts, aerial reconnaissance missions are launched much before the first contact battle. Offensive action is not permitted at the beginning of any conflict due to 'perceived escalation' and the effect of enemy air retaliation on our mobilisation. As seen in various campaigns (of low-intensity conflicts), against any state or non-state actors, air power is best suited to punish the enemy. It circumvents the fielded forces and attacks at a place that hurts the enemy the most when it is the most vulnerable.¹⁰

Combat air power is best suited for limited conflict¹¹. Primacy must be given to 'air power' and 'naval power' in a limited war over projection of 'land power' resources.¹² Many of the strategists believe that deterrence can be achieved through denial or through punishment (or combining both). All three services are capable of providing deterrence through denial. However, in the punishment dimension that the individual services have different capabilities and roles, Air Power is most suited for deterrence by punishment and hence is better equipped to face challenges posed by low-intensity conflict operations situation.

The world over, air forces have been utilised in offensive operations in low-intensity conflicts. The list is big; few of the well-known examples are Malaysia (1948-60), Algeria (1954-62), attacks on Hezbollah by Israel (various timelines), Russian action on Chechnya (1994-96), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) air attacks for Kosovo (1998) and Pakistan Air Force action on insurgent groups with in Pakistan (various timelines). Air Power has also been used in counter insurgency operations, which prevented the insurgency from developing into a limited war. There is no doubt that ground forces alone would have been able to defeat the insurgency. However, if integrated with the use of Air Power,

the insurgency will be defeated in a shorter period, with comparatively lesser loss of life and with a saving of resources.¹³ Since independence, the Indian Air Force has used Air Power offensively in action against Hyderabad (September 1948), Liberation of Goa (December 1961), Operation for Diu (December 1961), Naga insurgency operations (1960-61), Mizo rebellion operations (March 1966), Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations in Sri Lanka (1987-90) and during Kargil conflict (May-July 1999).

Capability and Employability of Air Power in LIC

Flexibility and versatility, mobility, responsiveness, shock effect, concentration, offensive action and reach are listed as the main characteristics of air power in the 'Basic Doctrine' of the IAF.¹⁴ In a conflict scenario, military instruments achieve limited success if they do not utilise their complete offensive potential. The same holds good for air power. Hence, even with all its characteristics, Air Power may not be able to provide desired results if there is no offensive application. Offensive action of air power in a 'low-intensity conflict operation' situation is often assumed to be 'fighter strikes'. However, it means all air operations with an offensive intent. Mission could be carried out by fighters, helicopters and transport aircraft.

Today, air operations are reliable, accurate, focused and flexible. It (air power) is most conducive to retaining escalation dominance and can set the stage for a Limited War, designed to steeply raise costs for the Aggressor and seriously degrade his operational and Strategic reserves preferably in his own territory.¹⁵ Traditionally during low-intensity conflict operations in India, air power has mostly been used only in support of ground operations. Air Power has to be used not only in sustenance operations but also and more importantly in offensive operations. Military scientists give arguments against strategic restraint war. Clausewitz, offers wise advice on the impending consequences of strategic restraint: "Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst...it would be futile – even wrong – to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality."¹⁶

Offensive elements of air power can be used in low-intensity conflict operations to target not only enemy's positions but also their supply lines and strategic reserves by a parallel application of force. There is an intrinsic mobilisation delay in amassing land forces and they can be interdicted by enemy

forces during this period. This will lead to either delayed application or reduced thrust in the battlefield. Hence, one can argue that Air Power is more suited as the 'first responder' to degrade the enemy potential. Use of precision weapons (along with hard intelligence) can provide 'out of proportions' result in limited conflicts. Rather than just the direct attacks, offensive elements can be utilised in 'Effect Based Operations' wherein the results are both direct and indirect. However, it should also be understood that use of Air Power with (prohibitive) restraints provides lesser than desired results. There are historic examples of this aspect from Vietnam to Kargil.

Air power can be successfully employed at any level of conflict including low-intensity conflict operations but the understanding of its effective employment has to be there among both the surface forces and air forces. When Major James Loden of 3 para, based in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, spluttered in a September 2006 email that the Royal Air Force was "utterly, utterly useless" at providing British Army soldiers with adequate close air support, he created a national furore...this flash-in-the-pan controversy actually reveals the persistence of the longest-lasting misunderstanding between air forces and armies...soldiers ideally want aircraft above them in cab-rank virtually every minute of the day, loitering until they call them down to accurately strike the enemy with whom they are in contact but without any fratricide.¹⁷ This is not one 'out of the blue'/ unexpected incident; it could be assumed as merely the tip of the iceberg. Till such a time that there is complete understanding of characteristics and limitations of Air Power, its employability (and reputation, perhaps) will keep suffering.

In a land battle, a ground can be captured and held either by fire or by boots on ground.¹⁸ This is applicable both in defensive as well as offensive operations. While carrying out future operations, Indian Armed Forces should accept the 'holding by fire power' concept. Holding by fire power, though not permanent, is more efficient in terms of asset utilisation and casualty control, for own forces as compared to 'holding by man power'. The perception of holding ground by fire power here does not mean that an aircraft is an extension to artillery. The tenets of Air Power are applicable across the entire spectrum of limited conflict. To gain control of air, counter-air missions need to be carried out. To deny mobility and counter-mobility, counter surface operations will have to take place. Air interdiction will be carried to degrade or isolate enemy strategic reserves or its logistics infrastructure. All of these operations other than Battlefield Air Strike (close air support) missions in all probable cases will not be visible, yet will have a profound impact. For our country, wherein we do not have any

territorial ambitions, a ground being held by fire for the duration of limited conflict can also provide similar albeit faster results.

Utilisation of Offensive Air Power in LIC Operations

The Indian Air Force has successfully applied offensive air power in various conflicts from NWFP in 1920s to Kargil in 1998. During ‘Kargil operations’, air operations, though restrictive, were not considered escalatory by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). Air Commander Kaiser Tufail (retd.) of the PAF writes in his blog, “By 16th of June, the Indian Air Force was able to open up the laser-guided bombing campaign with the help of Jaguars and Mirage-2000.¹⁹ Daily photo-reconnaissance long the Line of Control (LOC) by Jaguars escorted by Mirage-2000s, which had continued from the beginning of operations, proved crucial to both the aerial bombing campaign as well as to the Indian artillery.... While the photo-reconnaissance missions typically did not involve deliberate border violations, there were a total of 37 ‘technical violations’. Typically, these averaged to a depth of five nautical miles, except on one occasion when the IAF fighters apparently cocked-a-snoot at the PAF (Pakistan Air Force) and came in 13 miles deep.... To sum it up, the PAF found it expedient not to worry too much about minor border violations and instead, conserved resources for the larger conflagration that was looming.”²⁰

The world over, air forces have been utilised in varied offensive operations in low-intensity conflicts. The list is large and operations are spread across the globe. In some of the campaigns, there is a mention of certain precautions that were undertaken to avoid escalation into a full-fledged battle, while in some the campaign commanders talk of overwhelming force to subdue escalatory enemy retaliation. In any case, there is no reported escalation that took place because the offensive air action was allowed. In the recent history of warfare, there are two conflicts which are worthy case studies, since they were primarily air campaigns in a limited environment with negligible ground force action. They are the US led NATO’s Kosovo campaign²¹ and the Israel Air Force action against Hezbollah in 2006:²²

- (a) The US Air Force claims Kosovo as a successful air campaign.²³ Though the war was won, the real story was actually quite different and unduly exaggerated. Milosevic agreed to the demands of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) led allied force, but, the actual destruction to his forces was very low and not as it was falsely portrayed by him. There were false claims of target neutralisation and the figures were highly inflated.²⁴ The public announcement made by the US President that there shall be no involvement of ground and the lack of intelligence

proved to be disaster. The air campaign protracted primarily because of these two reasons. Later, when Milosevic was threatened of an overwhelming ground offensive, he succumbed to the NATO pressure. So, the Kosovo campaign reminds us that in India's case, it is very clear that Air Power alone, cannot win a war.²⁵

- (b) A good precedent for an air campaign in low-intensity conflict operations can be drawn from the Israeli Air Force's action in Lebanon to neutralise Hezbollah. In 2006, Israel fought an intense, month-long war with Hezbollah, the first sustained air campaign conducted by a country other than the USA. In the campaign, the stage was set for air-land battle with both physical and psychological effects in place. Israel achieved most of the objectives assigned to its Air Force; however, since no overt ground action was carried out, Hezbollah survived. Hence, it can be clearly ascertained that modern day Air Power is capable of achieving all allocated tasks; however, achievement of a successful conflict termination is faster and much better in joint operations rather than solo air campaigns.

“Every modern war has a complicated and controversial narrative....The 1999 war over Kosovo was the first war ‘won’ by airpower alone. But some argue, this can be considered a reality only if one ignores the fact that the threat of a ground war convinced Slobodan Milosevic to give in to NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) demands....The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict, on the other hand hardly disappoints us in its competing narratives. Hezbollah labels its endurance and survival in face of the Israeli attack.... The Israeli government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert equally asserts that the 2006 war was one of the country's greatest military and political victories ever.”²⁶

Other than the physical effects of air power, the psychological effects also determine the success of offensive application in low-intensity conflict operations. More than battle stress and anxiety it is the fear of an air attack which demoralises ground forces. In Afghanistan, Air Power has been used extensively in targeting the Taliban....As one Afghan fighter told the *New York Times* “we pray to Allah that we have American soldiers to kill, as these bombs from sky we cannot fight.”²⁷

Air Power and Associated Matrix

Escalation

Escalation can be defined as an increase in the intensity or increase in the scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more

of the participants.²⁸ The escalation of battle in low-intensity conflicts can also be considered as a prohibitive factor. Any escalation will intensify the rate of attrition and one or all involved belligerents may not want that. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that fighting a battle with a premise that use of one particular way of force application is escalatory will definitely undermine the use of that force. In most cases, the retaliatory escalation will be limited to the equivalence of force or equipment level. For example, in case fighter sorties are utilised for any interdiction mission in low-intensity conflict operations, the escalation expected from other side is fighter sorties (either for air defence or counter strike). An air force is an offensive arm and offensive action is its metier. Yet, it has the important role of inhibiting, if not prohibiting, offensive action by the other side; a mission, hence given the title of air defence.²⁹ Any enemy action in terms of retaliatory strike has to face a stiff air defence. This should not be considered as escalation.

In limited conflicts, escalation is poor if only land forces are employed.³⁰ Ground forces have to physically assemble together or deploy the weapon platforms at a designated location before launching any offensive. On the other hand, Air power can bring in concentrated fire power onto the target area, easily while operating from dispersed locations and without any mobilisation. This actually makes it difficult for the enemy forces to respond in situ. So, with air power, in a low-intensity conflict operations situation, the enemy can be prosecuted, their offensive capability degraded and their will to fight subdued without having to resort to physical mobilisation of large number of troops, which would be time-consuming, expensive and cumbersome.

Offensive air missions can be launched as a calculated response and called off the moment the politico-military aim is achieved. Even without carrying out any mission, akin to ground forces, aircraft concentration at forward locations builds up pressure on enemy. This concentration can be achieved faster as compared to ground forces. To ease off the pressure, in the same way, this concentration of air power can just as easily be dispersed back to in-depth locations. The American bombing of Libyan targets in Operation El Dorado Canyon in 1986, the US missile strikes against suspected Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998 and the IAF air-drop from An-32 aircraft on to the Tamil population in Northern Jaffna in 1987 are some examples of such offensive missions.

Any escalation in a battle is likely to drag the battle further. Long drawn battles are suited to certain states and are an existential threat to many others. Moreover, in case any of the belligerents decide to increase the intensity of the

battle, he will find ways, means and an alibi to do so. That alibi may or may not be air action. One of the adversaries may escalate the battle to 'punish' the other party since it can absorb a higher degree of attrition. In any case, there is an inherent risk involved in escalation with or without the use of kinetic air power. That is why military strategists weigh all the possibilities before planning and executing any response.

Offensive Air Power is Escalatory?

Few military scholars argue that kinetic application of air power can turn tides in limited conflicts and can hasten the conflict termination. While there is a school of thought in India that believes that any introduction of offensive elements of Air Force in a low-intensity conflict is likely to escalate the situation. The IAF doctrine states that the use of offensive elements of air power may lead to escalation of battle in sub conventional scenarios.³¹ Though there is no mention of such escalation when using the same offensive elements in low-intensity conflict operations, the tenor of the document proposes the same for low-intensity conflict operations. Various authors including Air Marshal A. Subramanian (retd.), Major General G.D. Bakshi (retd.), AVM A.K. Tiwari (retd.), Air Commodore Jasjit Singh (retd.), and Air Commodore Ramesh V Phadke (retd.) have written in their literature that there is a prejudice in the Indian power centres, that offensive use of air power is escalatory in nature.

Direct examples can be picked up from the Kargil conflict that clearly show the apprehension and lack of understanding in the use of offensive Air Power in low-intensity conflict operations in India. Former Chief of Army Staff, General V.P. Malik (retd.) stated in his book that it was more than that just 'jihadis' who had occupied the posts in Kargil. He was ready to pump in more troops, yet he wanted to use armed/attack helicopters only for reconnaissance purposes. He further adds that the then Air Chief and the Cabinet Committee on Security, however, did not permit use of kinetic air due to fear of escalation³². However, in the same book, General Malik later writes: "On 19 May, Anil Tipnis (Air Chief) had addressed a long letter to me, with a copy to Sushil Kumar (Naval Chief), stating that there was considerable misconception about the use of Air Power and its political and operational implications."³³

A historical background can be traced to this hypothesis of escalation. After its birth, the Royal Indian Air Force was considered as a mere appendage to the Army for years to come. British policies ensured that Indian Armed Forces especially the Air Force remained a sheer tactical force. All strategic guidance was made available only from the British Government. This 'deficit thought process' was visible during the 1947-48 Kashmir Conflict, which is till date the

longest war (or longest protracted conflict, as for war the two countries need to make the declaration) India has fought. Later top leadership of the Indian Air Force was not part of planning of Hyderabad Ops, Goa Ops and 1965 war. Offensive action was not envisaged during 1962 war. It was only in 1971, where in true potential of the IAF was utilised to attain national objective.³⁴ Nonetheless, this school of thought that use of offensive airpower will escalate the battle is still fostering in politico-military establishments. The same had seeped into various doctrines and campaign planning processes.

There are no specific reasons in doctrine that relates to this understanding of escalation caused by use of air power. Looking at the various conflicts across the globe, it is not clear when and how the perception grew within our country that offensive use of air power is escalatory. Some military historians believe that it could be because of the reason that aerial warfare is a relatively a new phenomenon as compared to surface battles. However, many of them also say that record of the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Arab-Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo have indicated that Air Power in itself is not escalatory.

Some modern writers have the opinion that ‘low attrition warfare’ can provide desired results without escalating the scale of battle. During the 2003 Iraq war, the United States Air Force came in open to say that it has changed its strategy to what is known as ‘effects-based operations’ from erstwhile ‘attrition based approach’. The aim of effect-based operations is to minimise the effort required to neutralise the target. It carefully matches vulnerability of targets to the capabilities of the weapons system. Thus, destruction of the smallest component ensures the total collapse of the whole target system. It obviously reduces collateral damage. Some savants combine effect based operations with parallel warfare to optimise the results.³⁵ Use of air power to carry out effects-based operations in lower spectrum of warfare is also an effective option to achieve the desired results. US Air Force operations are pan globe and they are available in open domain. All modern air forces today have studied the effects of effect based operations and parallel operations as a fallout. Now they are imbibing relevant lessons towards evolution of their own doctrines.

Escalation matrix in low-intensity conflicts is itself very obscure and a particular sect feels that adding the variable of air action in surface warfare further complicates the matter. During the research no example could be spotted in history which proves that a low-intensity battle has intensified due to use of offensive elements of air power. To give a fair chance to contrary belief that it could be because not so visible reasons and certain undocumented restraints, escalation management was also researched. Nevertheless, for future conflicts

there is no harm to have certain preventive measures in place for general escalation avoidance.

Escalation Management

A glance at world history and it is evident that war is inevitable. The older school of thought, regarding limiting wars, quotes straight-jacketed moral, political, economic, technical and human factors.³⁶ Modern strategists do talk of similar restraints but add more dynamism to it. Moral grounds are largely confined at a low key, placed on a lower pedestal especially in low-intensity battles with non-state actors. It is a matter of perpetual debate amongst various military scholars of whether low-intensity conflicts can be fought between two powerful states without it escalating into a conventional war. There are historical examples to prove the hypothesis either way, for or against.

In any conflict the escalation is governed by the breach of certain thresholds, which are decided dynamically by the forces involved. Thus, to avoid intensification of battle, the fighting forces have to decide on not breaching these thresholds, which is easier said than done. Firstly, it is difficult to identify them in the fog of war and it may also not be practical to fight a war with such constraints. This leads to the concepts to 'escalation dominance' and 'escalation avoidance'³⁷ towards escalation management.

Escalation Dominance and Escalation Avoidance

Escalation dominance is the result of a combatant discovering and effectively exploiting some asymmetric vulnerability in an opponent, thereby imposing some cost that the opponent cannot avoid and is not willing to bear.³⁸ One approach for seeking a measure of escalation dominance is to cultivate asymmetries in which the enemy is unable to respond in kind to an escalating act, for example, acquiring a class of weapon that the enemy does not possess.³⁹ Escalation dominance can be achieved by technological superiority, deterrence and coercion. Escalation avoidance on the other hand means to keep the low-intensity conflict confined and engage with the enemy in a limited and retaliatory manner keeping the force structure and force level well below that of the enemy.

However, there are various other means by which any perceived escalation can be checked and force asymmetry can be applied to achieve desired results. There are four broad categories namely political, diplomatic, economic and military (*Saam, Daam, Dand & Bhed*⁴⁰ sutra of 'Chankya Neeti' aptly describes them) in which various methods of escalation avoidance can be grouped. These methods, though not all encompassing are valid and effective for limiting any conflict. If policy or strategy makers 'appreciate' that there are chances of

escalation (due involvement of air power or otherwise) these methods can be applied.

Air power with its unique traits and modern day weapons can target the intended jugular vein of the enemy with pinpoint accuracy without any large-scale collateral damage. With careful selection of targets, weapons and platform, low-intensity conflict operations can be terminated early by using offensive air power. Such missions can actually hasten the achievement of conflict termination criteria. Offensive air power is utilised for strategic strikes, counter air campaign and counter surface force operations in any scale of operations and perhaps the most important contribution air power can make in a low-intensity, conflict operations setting is close air support. While studying various low-intensity conflicts, few offensive roles of air power that have not resulted in any escalation emerged out are as follows:⁴¹

- (a) Surgical strikes using Precision Guided Munitions from a fighter/unmanned aircraft.
- (b) Delivery of stand-off weapons from an aerial platform.
- (c) Suppressive fire by escorting armed/ attack helicopters.
- (d) Retaliatory fire in self-defence.
- (e) Low level high speed runs/ fire in near vicinity to disperse the gathering.

Conclusion

Military scholars worldwide believe that there are three major reasons that an all-out war is less likely to occur in the future. These are namely; economic globalisation, availability of nuclear weapons and interconnectivity of the world on both, the electronic and social media. However, there is no one who says the world is going to be peaceful, inspite of these inherent beliefs. Conflicts are part of human existence and they will always be there occupying the centre stage and continue to do so in the times to come. Ascertaining that full-fledged wars are less likely, one should realise that it follows that chances of low-intensity conflicts become more profound and likely than ever before.

When we talk about low-intensity conflict operations, it has to be understood that Air Power, is likely to be a part and parcel of any military response. There is a misplaced apprehension that use of the offensive elements of air power escalates the battle. The exact causes behind this are not very clear. The most probable cause can be the fact that Air Power is relatively new on the stage of battle orchestration. In Indian context, the Royal Indian Air Force was primarily created as a support arm to the Indian Army and its effective utilisation as a separate force is not part of the doctrinal evolution. At many instances in history

the Royal Indian Air Force/ IAF were not even any part of the actual campaign planning. It has never ever been considered as the 'first responder' and escalation was seen as a natural consequence of its employment.

Other than being a technologically advanced service, unique characteristics of Air Power like flexibility, responsiveness, reach etc should make it the first choice in response of a low-intensity conflict. Air power can be applied in the battlefield without mobilisation and concentration, close to the required projection area. Other than direct effects, use of air power has various indirect and psychological effects. Use of precision munitions, standoff weapons and long range aircraft minimises collateral and own damage in modern day battle fields. Air power can be effectively utilised in direct attacks on enemy centres of gravity, bypassing fielded forces, as described in the Warden's five ring model.⁴²

Air power can be utilised in all offensive roles in a low-intensity conflict operations environment. Moreover, the understanding of offensive operations can vary from scholar to scholar. Some consider only fighter and attack helicopter missions as offensive while others include the otherwise support missions, like transport of combat ready troops as offensive operations. Keeping in mind the short, swift and intense nature of future localised limited conflicts under the overhang of nuclear dimension, use of Air Power can provide quick solutions.

Whenever there is a military response to a situation, it is generally understood that all other sources of National Power have already been exhausted. The chances of escalating the scale of battle are always there with or without the use of offensive elements of air power. It is in the interest of a state that a conflict is avoided at all costs and if it takes place, then it is limited in nature and terminated quickly. For escalation avoidance in low-intensity conflict operations, political, diplomatic, economic and military means have to be utilised.

In the Indian context, since the inception of the IAF, air power has been utilised in all low-intensity as well as full scale wars barring the exception of the 1962 Sino-India conflict. From counter insurgency operations in Waziristan to the Kargil operation, air power has proved its efficacy beyond any doubts. When we study all these campaigns and some of the United Nations missions that the IAF has undertaken, we can notice that there was no escalation of the scale of battle, solely because of the use of air power.

In the history of warfare since WW-II, air power has dominated the outcome of ground battles. It is now widely accepted that without some kind of control from the air, no ground operation will achieve the requisite degree of success in

the desired time frame. Use of air power thus becomes mandatory in swift conflict resolution. Whenever air power is used, it should be used in an offensive manner. If offensive elements are not utilised, then there is a chance of under-utilisation of the potent force. Further, to degrade the enemy's air potential, a personal air force is the best suited weapon. Enemy retaliation in terms of air attacks can be tackled by means of air defence again. The threat of enemy air action should not be considered as a deterrent for not launching our own air attacks, as the enemy can and will launch its air attacks irrespective of our launch.

In any battle, seizing of the initiative enhances the chances of victory. Thus, those who arrive first at the place of conflict are in a better position to take initiative. Those who arrive later must hasten into action, troubled. Thus, those who are skilled in conflicts will make the first move to prevent others from taking initiative.⁴³ Air power, due to its inherent characteristics of speed, reach and mobility, is better suited to seize initiative and be the first responder in low-intensity conflicts. Surface forces too must mobilise nearly simultaneously, not only to deter enemy from escalation but also to provide a conventional response if required.

Study of various low-intensity conflicts, wherein air power was used offensively, a few employment considerations emerged out they can be listed as follows:

- (a) Clear political aim of the conflict with any associated restraints is required to be spelt out.
- (b) Military objective, rules of engagement and conflict termination criteria is to be provided with.
- (c) It is obligatory to place all air assets under a highest possible central authority. Planning has to be carried out together for all assets, even though execution may be decentralised.
- (d) Accurate, timely and legitimate intelligence will form the bedrock for precise targeting.
- (e) Avenues and medium of communication within inter-service elements are essential for effective orchestration of fire power.

Though there is a school of thought in India, which believes that the use of offensive elements of air power escalates the scale of battle, there is very less factual, historical or statistical information behind it. Air power, being the most suited force for rapid action, has to be a part of the response in limited conflicts. The Indian doctrine on low-intensity conflict can be drawn around the primacy of offensive air power; moreover, escalation avoidance is part of war-craft and it has to be carried out with or without use of air power.

Notes

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