

The 1962 India-China War and Kargil 1999: Restrictions on the Use of Air Power

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Abstract

The paper examines the utilisation of air power in the 1962 India-China war and in the 1999 Kargil conflict. The study reveals a certain continuity in the attitudes to the use of offensive air power in limited conflicts. Both in 1962 and in 1999, the use of air power was hedged about with various restrictions. Underlying these appears to be the belief that the use of offensive air power is fundamentally escalatory. Hence there is a hesitation to commit offensive air power assets.

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Introduction

Between October 20 and November 21, 1962, India and China fought a short, sharp border conflict in Ladakh and the then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). India suffered a series of reverses and lost extensive territory. On November 21, 1962, China initiated a unilateral ceasefire and troop pullback and repatriated Indian PoWs. The Indian Army bore the brunt of the action. The IAF only carried out air supply and was not used for any offensive action.

In early May 1999, local shepherds spotted strangers digging in on the Kargil heights in Jammu and Kashmir. Three army patrols sent to investigate were repulsed with heavy casualties. By May 11, it had become clear that intrusion was taking place on a large scale. The use of offensive air power was sought as early as May 7. However, use was sanctioned by the Cabinet only on May 25, with the stipulation that the Line of Control (LoC) was not to be crossed. Eventually, through determined and concerted Army and Air Force action, the intruders were pushed back with heavy loss of lives. Indian casualties too were heavy, albeit lighter than Pakistan's.

Both the 1965 and the 1971 India-Pakistan wars saw the all-out use of the IAF. These were clear-cut cases of conventional war, in which all the three services participated. However, the 1962 India-China war and the 1999 Kargil conflict were not conventional, but limited wars. Offensive air power was not used at all in 1962 and was used after some initial hesitation in 1999. There are some parallels between these two cases, which deserve closer scrutiny.

The 1962 India-China War

When the 1962 conflict began, India was the acknowledged leader of the non-aligned movement and Jawaharlal Nehru its unquestioned leader. When it ended in defeat, India lost prestige. Its non-aligned credentials were also dented when she sought military intervention by the USA and the UK.

Pre-war Debate on the Use of Offensive Air Power

Maj. Gen. D. K. Palit was Director, Military Operations (DMO) under the Chief of General Staff (CGS), Lt. Gen. B. M. Kaul, who was later blamed for the debacle. In his book, Gen Palit says that the Directorate of Military Operations had, as early as May 02, 1962, recommended the use of offensive air power to redress the adverse force ratio in Ladakh.¹ Offensive air action was considered feasible in both NEFA and Ladakh.

The Army headquarters put forward the view that there was little reason to fear strategic bombing, since there was no intelligence of bomber bases in Tibet.² Fighting, if any, was not likely to spread beyond border areas. Indian air defences were capable of countering strategic bombing by the Chinese. The Chinese were assessed as only capable of occasional raids, with no serious effect on the border war. However, the issue was not broached with the Defence Minister, since tension had subsided by then. Palit feels that a more deliberate examination of the proposal would have resulted in a more reasoned response.

Indian Intelligence Assessments

Offensive air action was first discussed on or around September 18 during one of the daily meetings chaired by the Defence Minister.³ In view of the shortage of troops, it was proposed that that all troops be withdrawn from outer Ladakh into inner Ladakh to concentrate around Leh. As this meant the loss of the major part of Ladakh, including Chushul airfield, it was vehemently opposed. The CAS, Air Chief Marshal Aspy Engineer, offered to fly reinforcements and equipment to Chushul. He also offered to provide Close Air Support

(CAS) missions against targets in West Tibet bordering Ladakh, if any troop concentrations were noticed there. The IB was asked to make an assessment of PLAAF strength, which could be brought to bear against India.⁴

B. N. Mullick was the Director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) from 1950 to 1964. He claims that accurate intelligence assessments of Chinese intentions were passed on to Service headquarters as early as June 1962.⁵ Information was also received of Pakistani plans to attack India simultaneously from the West, in coordination with the Chinese.⁶ Despite the withdrawal of support after the rift with the USSR, the IB felt that the PLAAF would be capable of undertaking missions at night as far as up to Madras, without interference, due to our lack of night interceptors.⁷ Operations against Indian forces could also be undertaken from Chinese airfields in Tibet, Yunnan and even Sinkiang. The IB inputs indicated that the PLAAF already had MiG-21s supplied by the USSR before the rupture. They also had night interception-capable MiG-19s as well as MiG-17s. It was felt that this would make it difficult for our Canberras to operate.

The PLAAF had expanded rapidly in the early 1950s, with Soviet assistance. In the mid-1950s, American assessments ranked the PLAAF as the fourth most powerful Air Force in the world.⁸ According to the official Indian history of the war published by the MoD in 1992, the PLAAF was estimated to have about 1,500 frontline fighters of the MiG-15, MiG-17 and MiG-19 class (refer Table-1).⁹ The PLAAF had only six airfields in Tibet. The mainland airfields were too far away to be effective. Because of the elevation, aircraft operating from Tibet would be able to carry less weapon and fuel loads. As a result, PLAAF capability to bomb Indian airfields would be extremely limited. The PLAAF would also find it difficult to sustain operations from these airfields, which still lacked adequate facilities.

The official history gives Indian Air Force strength as 559 fighters and fighter bombers (Table-2).¹⁰ These included aircraft like the French Ouragan and Mystere, the Hawker Siddeley Hunter and the Gnat. The Hunter and the Gnat were among the most modern subsonic aircraft at the time. Of the Chinese aircraft, only the MiG-19 was comparable in performance. Most IAF aircraft were based in the western sector and would have been able to support Army operations in Ladakh. However, two squadrons each of Ouragans (Toofanis) and Vampires were also based in the eastern sector at Tezpur, Bagdogra, Chabua, and Jorhat. Two squadrons of Hunters were also available at Kalaikunda, close to Calcutta. Apart from these airfields, many second

World War strips used in the Burma campaign were still available.¹¹ Unlike the Chinese airfields, the Indian airfields were at sea level; aircraft would be able to operate easily. We must note here that the official history was written with the benefit of 20:20 hindsight.

Table-1: PLAAF ORBAT

Aircraft Type	Number	Role	Weapon Load	Radius of Action
MiG-15/17	1350	AD		
MiG-19	150	AD	500 kg	365 km
II-28	500-600	GA	3000 kg	700 km

Table-2: IAF ORBAT

Aircraft Type	Number	Role	Weapon Load	Radius of Action
Vampire	224	Trainer		
Ouragan	57	GA		
Mystere	105	GA		
Hunter	140	GA/AD	2000 lb	445 km
Gnat	33	AD		
Canberra	N/A	GA	8000 lb	830 km

AD - Air Defence

GA - Ground Attack

Source (for both Tables): S. N. Prasad, *Ed*, "History of the Conflict with China, 1962", History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992, pp 356-357

British Assessment of the PLAAF

Writing in the 1963 edition of *Brassey's Annual*, Wg. Cdr. Asher Lee, the well-known British air power analyst, noted that "...the performance of Communist Chinese air defence units against US-equipped Chinese National Air Force planes operating over and near Amoy, Shanghai and Canton was not impressive...Interceptions made during this period were rare and ineffective..."¹¹ In 1955, China's new Ilyushin-28 bombers had ineffectually bombed the Tachen Islands between the mainland and then Formosa (Taiwan), despite the absence of aerial opposition.¹² After the rift between the USSR and China deepened in the late 1950s, China was denied the supersonic replacements for the II-28. It was only provided with a few Tu-16 bombers.

China's only medium range bomber continued to be an older version of the Il-28.

According to Wg. Cdr. Asher Lee, China had no MiG-21 aircraft, in contradiction to the IB assessment. Interestingly, he credits the lack of the Chinese air effort in the 1962 war and in clashes with Taiwan in the previous five years, to a serious aviation fuel problem. If this had been known to India, it might perhaps have changed our position on the use of offensive air power.¹³

Indian Fears of Escalation

Request for Offensive Air Support

The fear of escalation dominated Indian thinking throughout the crisis. On May 26, 1960, the Defence Minister directed both the Chiefs of the Army and the Air Force to explore likely sites for constructing new airstrips and to assess aerial supply requirements in order to establish new posts under the 'Forward Policy'. However, flying fighter aircraft within 15 miles (24 km) from the International Border (IB) was prohibited by orders issued by the Prime Minister on October 20, 1962, in order to avoid exacerbating tension. There were no restrictions on transport flying. When the Army urgently requested in December 1961, a waiver for operational reasons, the Defence Minister agreed to permit fighter flights on a case-by-case basis; no blanket authority was given. Canberra aircraft were then used for mapping and reconnaissance missions to obtain data on Chinese deployments.¹⁴

The task of evicting the Chinese intruders from the Thag La ridge was delegated to 7 Brigade in the Namka Chu valley. The brigade had just two 75 mm artillery pieces. Gen. B. M. Kaul, now Commander, IV Corps, requested the use of IAF fighter aircraft on September 09, 1962. The request was repeated on October 07 as he felt that a Chinese offensive could not be faced without air support.

In the Western sector, Chinese troops had surrounded the Galwan post on July 04, 1962. The GOC, XV Corps asked for Air Force aircraft to overfly the post in order to boost the morale of the encircled troops.¹⁵ After hostilities commenced, IAF fighters were put on alert for operations in Ladakh by October 19. When the Indian inferiority in artillery became apparent, the headquarters XV Corps requested Western Command urgently for Close Air Support missions on October 31.

Army Headquarters Position on CAS

The Army headquarters categorically refused the IV Corps request on September 11, saying that Close Air Support (CAS) would not be used. On October 07, the Army clarified its stand stating that "...the use of offensive air support is not to our advantage".¹⁶ Since the Indian Army was heavily dependent on air supply, Chinese retaliation could affect the aerial re-supply of our troops. A similar reply was sent to Western Command as well. The Army Headquarters also felt that the Chinese could bomb our population centres, communications and transport links. As a concession, IAF aircraft were placed on alert in both sectors, to be used only in "extreme emergency".¹⁷

Air Headquarters' Views on Offensive Air Support

The official history states that no notings or documents are available to explain the decision to forego the use of offensive air support. However, Air Marshal HC Dewan (retd), then Director of Operations at Air headquarters, is quoted as saying that he had advised the CAS against the use of offensive air support.¹⁷ In his view, the rugged and heavily forested terrain in NEFA precluded the use of Close Air Support against dispersed infantry. Since armour was not likely to be used, there were no worthwhile targets for air attack. With our troops heavily dependent on air supply, it would be best not to provoke the Chinese. As the larger Air Force, they could withstand losses that the IAF could not. IAF resources were also to be kept in the West to deal with a possible Pakistani threat. Lastly, he felt that India was likely to forfeit international sympathy, if it chose to 'escalate' the conflict. There is no mention of bombing targets in Tibet. It seems that only Close Air Support in NEFA was under consideration. It was apparently felt that even within our borders, the use of offensive air power would be 'escalatory'.

Decision not to use Offensive Air Power

The IB assessment of overwhelming Chinese superiority and likely Chinese retaliation appears to have tilted the balance against the use of offensive air power. The decision to limit the role of the Air Force to transport and supply seems to have been taken between September 18 and September 20, 1962.¹⁸ One year later, in a conversation with Marshal Arjan Singh, then Deputy Air Chief, Palit says that the Marshal admitted this grave misjudgement.¹⁹

Request for American Military Aid and Galbraith's Role

When Bomdila fell on November 18, it was decided to abandon Tezpur. The Chinese advance was considered unstoppable in the hills and valleys of Assam. The Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Gen. Thapar then recommended to the PM the evacuation of Assam and the holding of a defensive line in the plains of Siliguri. The PM agreed.²⁰

Palit says that after Bomdila fell, he recommended the use of Close Air Support in the plains and interdiction in the hills, to cut roads and supplies, to Additional Secretary (Defence) Harsh Sarin. However, Sarin was opposed to the use of the IAF unless cities in North India could be adequately defended from air attack. The prospect of intervention by American and British airpower was discussed. There is no evidence of any discussions with the IAF. On November 19, Sarin promised to take up the matter with the PM.²¹

The next day Palit was shown a draft from Jawaharlal Nehru to President Kennedy, asking for 12 squadrons of F-104 fighters and two squadrons of B-57 bombers. These would be manned by Americans. They would defend Indian cities until Indian personnel had been trained. The IAF personnel would handle all action beyond Indian frontiers. The IAF personnel would also require American training to man the B-57 bombers required to attack the Chinese mainland.²² In all this, the IAF does not seem to have been consulted. Only the Foreign Secretary and the Additional Secretary (Defence) were privy to the draft. S. Gopal, in his biography of Pandit Nehru, also mentions two letters personally written by Nehru to President Kennedy, in the same context.²³ According to Palit, the US later turned down the request for intervention, on the grounds that it could not commit its aircraft when the IAF's own fighters had not been committed.²⁴

John Kenneth Galbraith was US Ambassador to India during this period. In his memoirs, *An Ambassador's Journal – A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years*, Galbraith too refers to American fears of possible Pakistani action on India's western borders.²⁵ According to Galbraith, Pakistan had to be restrained from embarrassing India in the West. On October 18, 1962, Galbraith was shown a draft State Department telegram from President Kennedy to President Ayub Khan, promising Pakistan firm support on Kashmir, if it desisted from attacking India in the West.²⁶ He felt the Indians would regard this as blackmail, just when the Chinese were menacing India. He strongly advised the State Department not to send the telegram as drafted. Galbraith's account appears

to confirm the Indian fears of Sino-Pakistani collusion cited by Mullick.

Galbraith had anticipated an Indian request for military aid. As early as October 24, he had asked his staff for a full paper on the subject.²⁷ On November 17, following the defeat at Walong, the Foreign Secretary, M. J. Desai, requested the US for transport aircraft and aircrew to fly them. On November 19, 1962 Galbraith recorded the sense of shock in New Delhi at the Chinese takeover of NEFA: "The Chinese have taken over most of NEFA ... Indians at all levels are in a state of shock ... the Indians are pleading for military association... non-alignment is far out of date."²⁸ He says that the Indians wanted the US Air Force (USAF) to back them up so that they could employ the IAF tactically, without leaving their cities unprotected. He felt that sufficient thought had not been given to tactical utility. Later that day, he strongly advised against any use of offensive air action. The same day, the Secretary of State asked him to demand firm assurances that India would adopt a conciliatory approach on the Kashmir issue in return for Pakistani forbearance in this period.

On November 20, the planning group at the US Embassy in New Delhi decided that about 12 C-130 transport aircraft would be sent in as soon as possible. The Seventh Fleet would be asked to steam into the Bay of Bengal. The airlift already underway would be intensified. Galbraith once again urged the Indians to desist from using the IAF. Neville Maxwell states in his book, *India's China War*, that an American aircraft carrier was indeed despatched from the Pacific towards Indian waters. However, since the crisis passed within 24 hours of Nehru's appeal, the ship turned back before it reached the Bay of Bengal.²⁹

Galbraith too believed the use of offensive air action would lead to massive Chinese retaliation. He felt the IAF was not a very effective force. He did not believe that the USAF would be able to protect Indian cities. Despite complete control of the air, the Chinese could not be kept from advancing or re-supplying their forces. They were not likely to use major roads to advance. They would do so under cover of forest and at night. In these circumstances, the Indians would be unwise to initiate air action.

Galbraith seems to have felt that, unlike conventional armies, the People's Liberation Army had only a light logistics train. However, Maxwell states in his book that the Chinese had all-weather roads capable of taking the largest vehicles. They had also laid "lateral roads in the Tsangpo valley with feeders

to the south” running to within a few miles of the McMahon line.³⁰ Large forces had also been stationed in Tibet for years, to fight the Khampa rebels. The troops were suitably equipped and clothed for fighting at high altitude. All this would have required an extensive logistical infrastructure, which could have been targeted.

On November 21, the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire. On December 01, 1962, Foreign Secretary M. J. Desai suggested a tacit air defence pact with the United States.³¹ Such a measure would have meant a very long-term commitment and a major policy shift. Galbraith expressed himself in favour of the idea, to the State Department. But, he was advised to make no commitments. By December 21, the US had decided against the proposal.³² Galbraith felt that a great opportunity to bring India into greater association with the Western community had been lost.

In his journal, Galbraith congratulates himself on his success in dissuading the IAF from offensive air action. In fact, the official history goes so far as to say that “... it appears that the US Ambassador, who frequently met the top Indian leaders during the Sino-Indian conflict, tilted the balance in favour of non-use of the Air Force”.³³ However, it is apparent that he was preaching to the converted.

Indian Attitude to the Use of Airpower

Faulty intelligence on Chinese air capability had convinced the Indian leadership that the Chinese were likely to retaliate massively to any offensive air action. The Indian leadership was not willing to accept any threat to the cities of the plain. Analysis would have indicated that the Chinese had little capability to inflict any significant damage. The effects of strategic bombing were also over-estimated. The use of offensive air power was therefore abjured. This decision was never reconsidered, even when the Indian Army was preparing to abandon Assam. It however does appear that even the Americans over-estimated PLAAF capability, as Ambassador Galbraith’s journal testifies.

The use of offensive air power even within our own territory seems to have been considered ‘escalatory’. However, this judgment does not seem to have extended to American intervention. The decision to seek American intervention, even before we had used our Air Force offensively does seem premature. A deep-seated urge for international approval is also evident, as is a certain naiveté in our understanding about the role of force in inter-state relations.

What if ...?

The IAF had enough air power in both western and eastern sectors. The IAF's airfields were at sea level and would have not inflicted any performance penalty on its aircraft, unlike the airfields the Chinese would have had to use in Tibet. Operating from these airfields would have severely curtailed both the radius of action and the operational loads that Chinese aircraft could have carried. In any case, these airfields had not been prepared for operations.

The Chinese eventually used eight infantry and three artillery regiments in the east. Supplying these forces would have required substantial dumps in the concentration areas. Further, the Chinese would not have been unaware that as they moved further away from the border, their supply lines would stretch. Intelligent analysis would have concluded that their supply lines were vulnerable to attack and that their advance could not continue indefinitely. With Indian supply dumps in the plains well out of Chinese reach, a well-planned strategy of air interdiction could certainly have been carried out.

It has long been known that one of the major effects of any fighter aircraft activity is to boost troop morale. This is quite apart from any effect that they may have on the enemy. It was for this reason that the GOC XV Corps asked for IAF aircraft to overfly the Galwan post after it was surrounded by the Chinese in July. The use of air power in 1962, would certainly have significantly boosted troop morale and stiffened resistance. It would also have conveyed a message to the Chinese about the extent of Indian resolve.

In a recent book titled *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Roderick McFarquhar states:

“In May-June 1962, the main concern in Beijing was over the threat of an invasion from Taiwan... Chinese leaders would have been reluctant to provoke hostilities in the Himalayas, which might have meant diverting military resources from the main danger point along the Fujian coast.”³⁴

He adds that the Chinese press played down events on the Indian border and that as late as June 03, 1962, Chinese papers were affirming Sino-Indian amity. In July, KMT threats of an attack were discounted following American reassurances. It was only after this that the Chinese focussed on the Sino-Indian border issue.³⁵ According to McFarquhar, the Military Affairs Commission (MAC), headed by Marshal Lu Bocheng, made the decision to annihilate Indian troops north of the McMahon Line only on October 16; the

attack took place at dawn on October 20. All this indicates that the bulk of the Chinese forces were actually geared for repelling an invasion on the west coast opposite Taiwan. Only limited forces would have been available for any attack on India. Terrain and supply constraints would have further reduced the numbers that could be used. Therefore, the attack could only have been a limited one.

In all the Chinese preparations, there is no word about the PLAAF role. This is not surprising considering the generally undeveloped nature of the airfields in Tibet and the limited offensive capability of their aircraft. More to the point is Wg. Cdr. Asher Lee's unflattering portrait of Chinese air capability discussed earlier. Aerial retaliation need not have been feared.

In the Sino-Vietnamese conflict which took place 17 years later in 1979, the PLAAF was conspicuous by its absence. In an article on the war in the *Indian Defence Review*, Col. G. D. Bakshi writes:

“After the war, Gen Wu Xiuquan, the Chinese Deputy Chief of the General Staff told a delegation from the Institute of Higher Studies for National Defence, France (led by Gen Andre Marte)... (that)... The PLA Air force was thoroughly antiquated and ...that it was at least 15 years behind the Western Air Forces. It had flown no combat sorties (except Air OP sorties) in the whole war...”³⁶

The Sino-Vietnam conflict was a classic case of limited war and some parallels to the 1962 war can be drawn, in escalatory terms. As in 1962 with India, China decided in 1979 that it had to teach Vietnam a lesson for its temerity in invading Cambodia and evicting the brutal Pol Pot regime. The parallel does not end here. Neither side used air power.

The Chinese expected an easy victory, but were severely mauled by the battle-tested and hardened Vietnamese veterans, who had only recently defeated a superpower. The ferocious resistance of the Vietnamese and their unwillingness to ‘curl up and die’ shocked the Chinese. In the end, they were forced to ‘declare victory’ and withdraw, in rather different circumstances than they had in 1962. In his conclusions, Bakshi states: “Despite a quasi-nuclear backdrop, the war was kept limited to the conventional level. Nor did it lead to a wider clash between China and the USSR.”³⁶

“It was a classical limited conflict—limited in aim and scope, limited in space by the depth of penetration, limited in time. Resource limitation involved

abjuring the use of Air Power. Knowing the Chinese weakness in this field, this amounted to making a virtue out of necessity. The PLAAF could have done little in this conflict and would have taken heavy and high profile losses.”³⁶

Coincidentally, the Cuban missile crisis was unfolding coevally with the Sino-Indian war. Relations between NATO and the Warsaw Pact were at their nadir. In its tussle with China, India as a democracy, could count on assistance from the Western bloc, despite past differences. Stiff resistance would only have been required for a brief period, before the West rushed in to prevent another domino falling.

In 1962, Indian resistance was feeble except in patches. When well-led, Indian soldiers put up fierce resistance in spite of being outnumbered and out-gunned. However, poor political and inept military leadership resulted in a humiliating defeat for India. It is interesting to speculate on the outcome if the Chinese had been met by well-equipped and well-led troops backed by air power. The subsequent Vietnamese experience indicates that a pragmatic Chinese leadership would most likely have beaten a retreat. It is clear that the use of the IAF would not have been escalatory.

Failure to Foresee Chinese War Aims

We were never clear what Chinese aims were. In the panic that followed the attack, no analysis of Chinese war aims was carried out.

“Indian misperceptions were compounded by the lack of any systematic attempt by the New Delhi intelligence community to analyse Chinese domestic and diplomatic developments. Instead, reliance was placed on CIA briefings, newspaper accounts, and, presumably, despatches from the Indian embassy in Beijing about China’s economic crisis, its split with the Soviet Union, and the threat of invasion from Taiwan. India concluded that the Chinese were too hard pressed to contemplate any major hostilities.”³⁶

By the time it became clear that Chinese aims were strictly limited, the conflict was practically over. The Chinese success in concealing their war aims contributed to the lack of an aerial Indian response and must be considered a strategic victory. In retrospect, it is clear that the IAF could have been used offensively without inviting the kind of retribution that was feared at the time.

The 1999 Kargil Conflict

The Kargil conflict of 1999 bears some parallels to the 1962 experience in Indian attitudes to the use of air power, though the prohibition this time on the use of offensive air power was not as absolute.

The Plan

Pakistan's Kargil operations were apparently planned sometime in November 1998. In an article titled "Analysis of the Kargil Conflict 1999" in the April 2002 issue of the *RUSI Journal*, Brig Shaukat Qadir (retd.), states that the plan was formulated by Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmed, then commanding 10 Corps, and Maj Gen Javed Hassan, then GOC, Frontier Constabulary of the Northern Areas (FCNA). It was forwarded to the COAS, Gen Pervez Musharraf by the CGS, Lt Gen Muhammed Aziz³⁷. The idea was to exploit the large gaps that existed in the Kargil sector to cut the Leh-Srinagar highway and thereby prevent re-supply in the Ladakh area. The plan also dictated the capture of certain key heights in the Batalik and Turtok areas in order to cut off the Siachen glacier and force India out of Siachen.³⁸ The plan was approved and preparations commenced.

The plan was actually far more wide ranging³⁹ The conventional force ratio of 2.25:1 was in India's favour. To counter the intrusion in Kargil, India was expected to rush troops into Jammu and Kashmir, thus depleting its forces elsewhere. Mujahideen would step up their activities in the depleted rear areas, cutting lines of communication at selected points, to form isolated pockets. When Indian troops were rushed in, the forces in Kargil could push forward. This would result in forcing India to the negotiating table. Pakistan would be able to hold on to its gains and strengthen its bargaining position. Conventional war was ruled out because India would not have the strength of forces needed to carry out an offensive, due to the need to stem the gaps in J&K. If war did occur, it would end in stalemate, thus stabilising the situation in Pakistan's favour. In any case, India was not expected to start a nuclear war.

In *Kargil 1999—Pakistan's Fourth War for Kashmir*, Air Cmde (retd) Jasjit Singh quotes Altaf Gauhar, once President Ayub Khan's information adviser, as saying that the plan dated back to 1987 and formed part of General Zia-ul-Haq's '*Op Topac*'⁴⁰. It had then been shelved following strong objections raised by Foreign Minister Sahebzada Yakub Khan, who had cast doubts on the Army's ability to sustain operations. Revived in 1996, exercises based on the plan were held in 1997 by 10 Corps, then commanded by Maj. Gen. Pervez

Musharraf. Gen. Jehangir Karamat's objections possibly contributed to his removal from the post of COAS.

Execution

By November 1998, Pakistani regulars had started infiltrating the area in small bands. The troops were inserted in winter, when Indian troops normally withdrew from the heights. When the Indians returned, it would be to find Pakistani troops already well entrenched in their former positions. Up to 1,000 well-equipped regular soldiers occupied the heights, ostensibly camouflaged as mujahideen. Four times as many troops were used to provide logistical support to these soldiers.⁴¹

For the past several years, the Indian Army had been occupied in counter-insurgency operations. This had involved deployment well away from the LoC, mainly to block likely infiltration routes along valleys and approaches to the towns and villages where these routes converged. Foot patrols and air reconnaissance sorties along the LoC were the exception rather than the rule. The intrusions were thus not detected till early May.

On May 03, 1999, local shepherds reported seeing strangers digging in on the heights. Over the next few days, three Army patrols were sent out. All were repulsed with casualties. Lack of intelligence on the extent of the infiltration and other details made planning difficult. The Army now launched, Operation Vijay, to evict the intruders. However, carefully directed enemy artillery fire resulted in the destruction of the Army's main artillery dump on May 09. Over the next few days, Army casualties mounted.

The number of intruders, initially assessed by the Army Headquarters as being between 80 to 100 by May 18, continued to be revised upwards, finally being estimated as between 1600 and 2500.⁴² Initially, however, local commanders were quick to downgrade the scale of the intrusion; it is safe to say that the Army was in denial. This delayed any request for air support that could have been made.

Army Requests for Offensive Air Support and IAF Reaction

The Air Headquarters first received a request for armed helicopter support against intruders in the Batalik sector on May 07, 1999. The Army was advised to use artillery first and only then ask for air power.⁴³ On May 11, the Army again asked for attack helicopters. The Air Headquarters asked for a fuller picture of the situation. It stated that attack helicopters could not be used at

those altitudes. The Mi-17 armed helicopters would be more suitable.⁴⁴ Attack helicopters like the Mi-35 would be vulnerable to surface air defences and would also require fighter escort, in case of enemy reaction. It was therefore felt that fighters would be preferable to helicopters.⁴⁵ In any case, the Air Force desired Government sanction, because of the danger of escalation.

By May 18, the extent and depth of the intrusion had become clear. With the COAS, Gen. V. P. Malik away on a visit to Poland, the VCOAS, Lt. Gen. Chandrasekhar requested the use of offensive air power. The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) discussed the matter on May 20. The Army once again called for attack helicopters. It did not see why these could not be used when Army Aviation helicopters were flying in the area. The CAS, Air Chief Marshal A. Y. Tipnis, was of the view that the use of air power close to the LoC could result in escalation. The IAF proposed the destruction of enemy logistics bases in the vicinity of the LoC initially, and then, subsequently, those in the middle distance, using fighters. However, there was a danger of fighters crossing the LoC. As the Government had not yet decided on the advisability of crossing the LoC, the use of air power was again deferred.⁴⁶

Clearance for Use of Airpower

The COAS returned to India on May 21 and visited the forward areas on May 23. He felt that it was unlikely that the intruders could be evicted before winter, without the use of air power. On May 24, he discussed the situation with the CAS. The next day, they made their presentations to the CCS. The CCS then authorised the Armed Forces to take any necessary action to evict the intruders, with the binding stipulation that the LoC not be crossed.⁴⁷

IAF Operations

The IAF rules of engagement for 'Operation Safed Sagar' stressed the CCS stipulation that the LoC was on no account to be crossed.⁴⁷ Between May 27 and 28 the IAF lost three aircraft, a MiG-21, a MiG-27 and a Mi-17. The MiG-27 developed mechanical trouble forcing the pilot to eject. The MiG-21 pilot, orbiting in the area to look for the ejectee, ventured too low and was shot down by a man-portable SAM. The Mi-17 was also lost to a SAM, possibly due to the lack of a flare dispenser.

Earlier, on May 21 a Canberra reconnaissance aircraft operating in the Kargil sector, had got one engine damaged by a SAM. It was clear that the intruders had access to man-portable missiles, hitherto not used in the valley.

The subsequent use of SAMs should not, therefore, have come as a surprise. This also pointed to the possibility that regular forces were probably involved, since SAMs have never been used by the militants in Kashmir.

Change of Tactics

The losses resulted in a change of tactics. Fighter operations stayed well above the ridgelines, using high-level bombing and laser-guided bombs.⁴⁴ Mirage fighters were used to lob laser-guided weapons at the bunkers—an expensive way to fight infantry. However, no more aircraft were lost. Eventually, a combination of air power, determined infantry assault, and artillery bombardment resulted in the Pakistani forces retreating across the LoC. The turning point was the encirclement and then the successful air attack on the Muntho Dalo base camp, a logistics hub. The destruction of the camp resulted in the intruders' supply line being cut. Their positions having become untenable, they were forced to withdraw.

Difficulties in Fighter Operations at High Altitude

The difficulties in the use of air power in mountainous terrain are well known. The targets in Kargil were static positions—small bunkers, each containing five to eight men at altitudes of three to five kilometres. These would be difficult to sight and attack with fast moving aircraft. The aircraft would be operating at their aerodynamic limits. While this would not affect the modern aircraft in the inventory, aircraft like the MiG-21, MiG-23 and MiG-27, which are not equipped with fly-by-wire systems, would be difficult to handle at these altitudes.

Bombs and other weapons are designed to be dropped at altitudes from Mean Sea Level to heights of around 6000 m. In Kargil the aircraft were operating at much greater heights. The ballistic characteristics of air-dropped weapons at these heights were not available. Bombing accuracies dropped. Once combat is joined, both own and enemy forces come into contact, thus blurring the frontlines. Bombing needs to be extremely accurate in order to avoid fratricide. Methods for overcoming these difficulties were devised. The IAF may be faulted for not having anticipated and trained for ground attack at these altitudes. Eventually, the IAF opted to use bombs fitted with laser guidance kits to improve terminal accuracies, against the bunkers. The logic which dictates the use of a Rs 100 crore-plus aircraft and laser-guided bombs, each probably worth Rs one crore at least, against five-odd men in a bunker may well be questioned. Given the self-imposed restriction on not crossing

the LoC, there was probably little else that the IAF could have done.

Operation Safed Sagar—Significant Features

'Operation Safed Sagar' had some significant features. The first and most important feature was the reluctance to authorise the use of offensive air power. There was a gap of two and a half weeks before the use of air power was authorised. This does not include any delay at Army Headquarters itself in processing the request from 15 Corps, due to the fact that the COAS was away abroad. There are probably two main reasons for the delay. The first was the Indian Army's denial that any intrusion had taken place. The second was the delay in the decision to use air power. One of the contributing causes for the delayed decision appears to be the view at Air Headquarters and within Government, that the use of air power is intrinsically escalatory. Pakistan's declared nuclear capability also probably had a bearing on this position.⁴⁸ Pakistani planners are also likely to have calculated that the possibility of nuclear retaliation would deter even a conventional reaction from India.

The delay in the release of air power points to a lack of joint planning and the absence of a mechanism for the prompt application of air power in an emergency. Such delay is inevitable if air power is considered a political weapon instead of the physical weapon that it is. This is not to deny some of the political implications of using air power. However, these are variables and not constants, and will vary from situation to situation. They will therefore have to be evaluated afresh each time. The initial delay in the use of air power allowed the enemy to build up and reinforce their defences and contributed to increased casualties.

The second feature was the Indian insistence on the sanctity of the LoC. Army requests for the use of air power were initially brushed aside with the observation that the use of offensive air power would be escalatory. When air power was finally used, it was hemmed in by restrictions on not violating the LoC. The LoC separates the India-held portion of Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), India's position is and has always been that PoK is Indian territory held by Pakistan. Crossing the LoC would therefore not constitute a violation of an international border. The insistence on the sanctity of the LoC in a combat situation is difficult to understand. Once the decision not to cross the LoC was taken, the IAF was forced to adopt a strategy of attrition. This may also be viewed as an Air Force failure to convince the

political leadership about the imperatives of aerial action.

The third feature that strikes an observer is the reluctance to go back to Government for a modification of the rules of engagement. The air campaign went badly at first, essentially because conventional Close Air Support was attempted in unsuitable terrain. The aircraft used did not have modern weapon delivery systems. They had to come close to the target in order to deliver conventional weapons. This made them vulnerable. Three aircraft were lost. The tactics were obviously unsuitable. Operating under the constraint of not crossing the LoC and attempting CAS, when the troops were already in contact and the limitations of high altitude imposed too many restrictions on the effective application of air power. Under these conditions, with casualties mounting, there was a strong case to be made for modifying the initial mandate on not crossing the LoC. However, Government was not approached again. This is possibly indicative of the reluctance to admit mistakes in earlier appreciations of the situation and a desire to save face. The decision to press on also points to a lack of communication between the various arms of Government and does not bode well for the future.

In the Indian scheme of things, the IAF controls all offensive air power. This has been the cause for much heartburn in the other two services. It could also lead to a delay in requesting IAF assistance, as this would be an admission of the other service's failure. In Kargil, the failure to detect the intrusions in time could be laid squarely at the Army's door. Asking for air power to evict the intruders would have been both an admission of guilt and of inability to evict the intruders. This could also have significantly delayed any request for the use of offensive air power.

The Limitations of Nuclear Blackmail

Pakistan must have hoped that its nuclear status would deter even the use of conventional force. The acceptance of such a thesis would render air power unusable in the India-Pakistan context and render India perpetually subject to blackmail. This would only work in favour of the country with the weaker air arm – Pakistan. The Kargil conflict in fact proved that nuclear blackmail has its limits. Our media was successfully able to mobilise Indian public opinion. World opinion was also clearly in favour of India as the injured party. Indian aims were seen to be limited to vacating the aggression, while Pakistan was seen to be attempting a forcible redrawing of the map. The very absence of an aerial Pakistani reaction put paid to the possibility of nuclear conflict.

It has been argued that the PAF did not react to the Indian use of offensive air power because the IAF did not violate the LoC. This is reiterated in the Kargil Review Committee report:

“Since India did not cross the LoC and reacted strictly within its own territory, the effort to conjure up escalation of a kind that could lead to nuclear war did not succeed. Despite its best efforts, Pakistan was unable to link its Kargil caper with a nuclear flashpoint, though some foreign observers believe it was a near thing. The international community does not favour alteration of the status quo through nuclear blackmail as this would not be in the interest of the five major nuclear powers. Pakistan obviously overlooked this factor.”⁴⁸

However, a more appropriate argument would be that the PAF could not react to IAF action without giving lie to the claim that it was Kashmiri mujahideen and not Pakistani regulars who were fighting in Kargil. It emerges from Brig. Qadir’s article that the CAS of the PAF was openly critical and sceptical about the conclusion that India would not opt for all-out war. He had also stated that the PAF would not be able to support the Army in the manner that it desired.⁴⁹

The fact that the intrusion was claimed to be a mujahid operation can be considered a tactical blunder. Crediting the so-called Kashmiri mujahideen with the success achieved automatically limited the scope for the induction of larger numbers of regular Pakistani Forces. Brig. Shaukat Qadir feels that, faced with the embarrassment of having been caught out in a blatant falsehood, “the leadership might have been better (sic) (*advised*) to allow the operation to run its course.”⁵⁰

Alternative Strategy

It has been suggested that the early application of air power before the ground forces came into close contact, could have reduced casualties. However, this would have required early recognition of the scale of the intrusion and the prompt application of air power. As already stated, with the Army in denial and the absence of a mechanism for bringing the air power promptly to bear, this did not take place.

To be effective, air power needs discrete targets, not diffused ones. Such targets would have been available only after the intruders had settled down. Subsequently, accurate intelligence would have been required to specify the

targets. Therefore, the first requirements would have been reconnaissance flights, good photo-interpretation and then precision strikes on these targets. This would have given the Army sufficient time to bring up its forces and their equipment in relative safety. With the Army in position, Close Air Support would be stopped and the next phase—that of Battlefield Air Interdiction (BAI)—would have begun.

The logistics infrastructure across the LoC was an obvious target for air power. Instead of frontal air attack on the intruders holding the heights, a strategy of air interdiction against the supply lines would have been more effective and would have resulted in fewer casualties amongst our troops. CAS is not used, especially in such terrain, for fear of fratricide. Interdiction is the best option once ground forces are in contact. It results in the destruction of enemy supplies and war stores just when they are required for fighting the ground forces. This prevents the replenishment of the enemy's present supplies, which are being rapidly depleted by the fighting. Air interdiction thus goes hand in hand with the active engagement of the ground forces. The aerial attack on the Muntho Dalo camp was the culminating point of the air war in Kargil. The destruction of the camp brought about the realisation that the Kargil heights could not be held.

Such a strategy may take some time to fructify. This may not be available in the face of public opinion and the pressure for results, which could force the adoption of attrition strategy. In 1999, operations in the Drass sector were carried out by 8 Mountain Division in the full glare of the media. These were primarily frontal attacks on enemy positions. Though successful, they resulted in high casualties. However, away from the media spotlight, 70 Infantry Brigade was successfully able to carry out position warfare in the Batalik sector. This was militarily more significant.⁵¹ The brigade carried out an encircling manoeuvre in extremely rugged terrain. Coupled with the aerial destruction of the Muntho Dalo base camp, this manoeuvre cut logistic supply lines of the enemy and thus forced the intruders to withdraw across the LoC. The use of manoeuvre strategy resulted in far fewer casualties (roughly one-fifth). Air operations carried out across the LoC could have had a similar effect.

Thanks to adroit diplomacy, the international community recognised that Pakistan had attempted a forcible redrawing of borders. Since the 1991 Gulf Crisis, this has internationally been recognised as unacceptable. It is therefore unlikely, that the international community would have demurred at any reasonable application of force, including the use of precision air power, at

tactical targets in the vicinity of the LoC. Such a restrained application of air power would not have allowed Pakistan to scream 'escalation'. In any case, Pakistan has only two airfields in the vicinity, Gilgit and Skardu. Even though radars were moved up, it seems that only two aircraft were deployed for any length of time. These were initially F-16s, which were subsequently replaced by F-7s. As Jasjit Singh writes :-

“Pakistan deployed SAMs and air defence weaponry in the bridgehead across the LoC on the Indian side. The PAF mounted patrols on an ongoing basis, but prudently preferred discretion... and did not attempt to challenge the IAF.”⁵²

Gurmeet Kanwal adds that “though some (IAF) pilots spotted PA fighter aircraft including F-16s, the PAF studiously avoided raising the ante.”⁵³

The Illusion of International Support

India's decision not to cross the LoC is cited as one of the main reasons for the support that the international community offered during the crisis. However, it is doubtful whether this support would have translated into any action to vacate the aggression, if our efforts to evict the intruders by brute force had not succeeded. The most likely outcome would have been an international appeal to India and Pakistan to settle the Kashmir issue peacefully, with some footnotes in the media about the “South Asian nuclear flashpoint”.

Air Power and Escalation

The Pakistani assessment seems to be that an all-out war is no longer likely. Pakistan's strategy has therefore increasingly relied on the support and use of cross-border terrorism, thinly disguised as a “freedom struggle”. India's acquisition of advanced aircraft and weapon systems like the MiG-29, Su-30 etc., does not seem to have deterred Pakistan from this course. It may therefore be assumed that Pakistan believes that India is not likely to use its conventional superiority to deter it from interfering in Kashmir and elsewhere. Post-1998, Pakistan has also upped the *ante* by frequent threats to 'go nuclear'. These have generally been made in the context of Indian threats of 'hot pursuit' in reaction to a terrorist outrage.

India enjoys conventional superiority over Pakistan, not only in quantity, but also in quality of weaponry. A conventional war, especially one involving the use of air power, is what Pakistan dreads. In order to avoid this, it has adroitly played on Western fears of a nuclear holocaust in the sub-continent.

India's acceptance of this thesis would rule out the use of air power, in which we have overwhelming superiority. India cannot therefore afford to accept this proposition. However, in order to use air power successfully, we need to abandon the unspoken but tacit assumption, that the use of air power is escalatory. We must emphasise that air power in its many forms, is only one of a number of tools, that India reserves the right to use, appropriately, in order to counter the terrorism that Pakistan supports and empowers. Jasjit Singh argues, "the use of combat air power across borders would raise the stakes, but is also less escalatory than sending the army across..."⁴⁰

To argue that the use of air power is escalatory is to miss the point. There is no uniform agreement on what causes escalation. Escalation is contextual. It depends on the subliminal messages that are transmitted, both before and during the action, by the actors involved. The message that India needs to send is that our aims are limited. India will respond strongly to any aggression, but in context. However, our action must be tailored carefully to the context and be perceived as such. Punishment must swiftly follow the crime, or the connection is lost. Limited war "reflects an attempt to affect the opponent's will, not to crush it."⁵⁴ "Success in limited war requires that the opponent be persuaded that national survival is not at stake and that a settlement is possible on reasonable terms."⁵⁵ The aim in limited war is to pose risks out of all proportion to the objective. While decisive victory is ruled out, the initiative must be ours.

India's apprehension that the use of air power is likely to lead to all-out war is therefore unfounded. Limited war is not only possible, but also likely to be the only available option.

Reducing the Credibility Gap

One problem that India needs to address is credibility. Thomas Schelling defines 'face' as "...a country's reputation for action, the expectation other countries have about its behaviour."⁵⁶ Repeated Pakistani interference in India's internal affairs, especially in Punjab and in Jammu and Kashmir, has failed to elicit a strong Indian response. Despite talk of 'hot pursuit' on occasions, we are viewed by Pakistan as a soft state. Attempts to project a sterner face have failed (e.g., mobilisation post December 13, 2001). In order to prevent Pakistan's misadventures in future, we need to change our image. Pakistan needs to be convinced that deviant behaviour risks punitive action. This will be difficult, but needs to be attempted.

“Crisis escalation involves a trade-off between victory and peace, in that showing more resolve during crises leads to victory...if the defender establishes superiority in the immediate and short-term balance of forces, responds to probes with tit-for-tat military moves and firm but flexible bargaining, and has behaved with similar skill, rather than being too conciliatory or intransigent, in prior encounters with the same adversary.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

In the 1962 India-China war, offensive air power was never used. In the 1999 Kargil crisis too, India was initially reluctant to use air power, even though it was finally applied. However, its use was hemmed in by the stipulation of not crossing the LoC. In both 1962 and 1999, the prompt use of air power could have made a significant difference to the course of the campaign. Both cases indicate a pattern of Indian thinking that considers the use of air power as ‘escalatory’.

Deterrence is one of the functions of military power. When deterrence fails, military power has to be used. Use of air power is essentially a manoeuvre strategy and as such is not easily appreciated by the uninitiated. It does not recognise borders or Lines of Control. As the saying goes, “In the air are no roads. All roads lead everywhere”. Further, manoeuvre strategy is possibly incorrectly perceived as escalatory. Frontal assaults are always easier to explain and justify, despite the high human and material costs.

A firmer approach to crisis resolution is required. The Indian reluctance to use air power, when such use is justified, needs to be overcome. A graduated approach to the application of air power needs to be evolved, as also a mechanism for the prompt processing of inter-service requests for offensive air power.

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