

Hybrid character of aerospace power

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The use of the term 'hybrid' has become exceedingly common; its true meaning, however, can be seen in the domain of aerospace power.

The evolution of airpower immediately attracted the strategists, who started to use the medium of air for military purposes. Hence the race to reach space started, because mankind believed that whosoever controls the air will hold the strategic advantage over the adversary.

Without going into the historical details of the airpower development, this article examines the hybrid utilization of aerospace power to place oneself in an advantageous position over the adversary in any future conflict.

Aerospace power has an inbuilt hybrid character in its employment due to its attributes of flexibility, ubiquity, accuracy, destructive power, and availability on short notice. Add quick logistical ability at relatively long ranges with speed makes it a favorite for military commanders to call for an early advantage in any military engagement. The availability of geospatial intelligence and satellite communication interfaced with highly accurate real-time data makes it an extremely important element of the desired firepower.

South Asian rivals: India and Pakistan have tested each other's abilities of the optimum utilization of airpower on several occasions. However, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) was able to outsmart its relatively larger adversary the India Air Force (IAF), perhaps in each engagement. The equipment used by both air forces was acquired from advanced aerospace industrial powers. However, of late, the two nations have embarked upon developing the capabilities indigenously, though with the help of relatively developed partners.

Since the signing of the Indo-US Strategic Partnership 'Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement' (BECA) on October 27, 2020, India is buoyed with confidence in anticipation of its potential benefits. Under the BECA, India and the US have expanded the partnership for the shared utilization of aerospace power in its true hybrid character. The process took some 18 years to sign four different agreements, commonly referred to as 'Foundational Pacts'. From surveillance to satellite guidance and space intelligence to terminal information in real-time, India is expected to gain exponentially under the subject agreement. Apparently, the IAF stands to gain the maximum out of these agreements because most of the support of the US' technological prowess in aerospace would be

made available to it, especially while its warplanes are searching for its targets in real-time.

The Indian leadership, perhaps, as usual, was blamed for the lack of certain geospatial intelligence capability during the 2020 Ladakh standoff with China, as it did for the absence of Rafale aircraft during February 2019 against Pakistan. Now that strategic partnership with the US has been formalized, 'India's Chief of Défense Staff General Bipin Rawat's has claimed that India is ready for a two-front war.' Rawat's confidence is reflective of the US support under the BECA, particularly for the IAF in terms of real-time intelligence and communication thereby enhancing the situational awareness of his operators.

While closely monitoring Indo-US agreements for any potential strategic imbalance, Pakistan will be forced to initiate steps required to deny the IAF the hybrid use of aerospace power against its interests in parallel. The IAF, with access to an abundance of credible intelligence information and real-time guidance for its manned and unmanned aerial platforms, would not be required to launch Balakot-like strikes, but plan a multi-level, multi-platform, multi-directional, and hybrid deployment of its aerospace power against multiple targets at Line of Control and across into Pakistan's territory. Furthermore, with enhanced accuracy due to the frequency of satellite updating of the navigational data, the IAF would be able to plan strikes into deeper targets with relatively assured survivability from their partners.

The BECA would reinforce the hybrid character of aerospace power due to its expanded scope. The IAF would have the opportunity to enhance its interoperability with the US and NATO aerospace powers. This would help IAF pilots train better to face the PAF in future engagements.

India is also expected to use its much-improved aerospace power as a political tool along with an important element of warfare. The operationalization of the BECA and the induction of Rafale aircraft would be trumpeted through a well-thought-out media strategy. The BJP government, like in the past, would strive to convince the people of India that the IAF is far more superior and prepared to take on the PAF and irreparable damage will be inflicted on Pakistan if they do not desist from interfering in our internal affairs.

The outcome of any future conflict between India and Pakistan, no matter how limited, will depend on the smart utilization of the hybrid character of aerospace power.

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