

Air Power: The PLA Air Force and India's Responses

Speaker: Angad Singh
Chair: Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur (Retd.)
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The presentation of the speaker focused on the comparative capabilities of China and India in Airpower alongside dealing with India's responses to PLA's Airpower projection. Before the speaker's presentation, the chair talked about three thrust areas on which PLAAF looks forward to projecting its air power. They are:

1. Increasing number while upgrading the present generation of weaponry system.
2. Moving into niche technology (H-20 bomber)
3. Modernizing its training regimen and integrating with various theatres.

He highlighted that there is a lot of China fatigue happening that we should not get lulled into. It is important to keep visualizing.

The speaker then focused the discussion on India-China air power balance. The decade of 1990 was a watershed period in the history of airpower development of both the countries. During that period, both India and China went on modernizing their air force. However, the scenario today becomes different as the gap in economic capability and strength has widened today. Before the 2000s, the relative strength was not as large as it is today. Also, such a relative strength with Pakistan becomes irrelevant when we see China rapidly modernizing its air force. Their association with the Pakistan air force is dangerous for India.

Discussing the capability of PLA's air power, the speaker noted that the PLAAF has Xian H-6 bombers at present, which makes its capacity unmatched in the region. India wants to be a benign regional player against the Chinese. China has the largest capacity of tankers and turbine engines that are continuously growing. The ISR capabilities within PLAAF have increased massively. Due to relative economic strength, China is in a better position when it comes to modernization as bombs and missiles are particularly expensive today and that is what India is missing.

Talking about India's capability and relative strength against China, he emphasized how India is also moving towards standardization. As compared to PLAAF, India has done quite well in GPS guided weapons. India coped up well in the last decades after lacking in the earlier phase. However, the disparity remains a concern.

Talking about the threat from the Chinese increasing airpower the speaker admitted that there is a big elephant in the room. However, PLAAF in China is not so much postured against India as it is postured against countries like Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the USA. The concern for India arises at the fact that China is on the escalation ladder in arms building and that India tends to fall behind. Especially when India is focusing on countering the past generation technology. That blind spot needs to turn on its head. Since Airpower is above theatres therefore it is also pointless to assume that only western air command will be committed against India.

In the air power balance, China can bring overwhelming force against IAF. The PLAAF and IAF are vastly different in their size nearly in the ratio of 2:1. The major airpower of PLA includes the Sukhoi J-8, J-7, J-11, SU-35, etc. The scenario of the 1962 war and second world war does not exist and so the sustained bombing campaigns. Nevertheless, the Chinese have done what they could do to mitigate the high-altitude limitations. Tibetan plateaus have longer runways now. PLA is aware of what limitations they suffer in the region and hence they have developed more forward operating places like new airbases near Kashi and Hotan. They are putting up a multitude of bases in Xinjiang near Kashi. As of date, they have doubled their targets.

Major Indian critical view of Chinese developments in this area was that they don't have high altitude aircraft shelters. However, in recent times, some major air shelters have come up in Kashi Hotan is an important base for them having dedicated UAVs in place. There are lots of parking lots and runways, having J-11, Sukhoi 27, etc in place. This shows how seriously China is taking this confrontation in the north of India. Despite this, a Belfour Centre study this year noted that India is still in a geographically advantageous position due to its multiplicity of bases and flexibility of basing its airpower complicates the responses of PLAAF.

Talking about Stealth and domestic Research and Development, the speaker took a note of what stealth is. Stealth is a domestic R&D production that is not invisible or invulnerable but it is a tactile advantage for any military. It is a matter of concern for India as we have not done well on this part too and we are far from developing a mature stealth capability. Network capability engagement is not seen in India yet. We are far from fielding a stealth aircraft of our own. India's counter strength stealth capability lies way behind China.

Coming on to Indian R&D capability, the speaker remained concerned about India's terrible condition in R&D and believes that it largely remains below potential. There has been a lack of self-reflection and lack of continuity in India's R&D agenda including the leadership and bureaucracy. There is a lot of duplication in Indian R&D which is worst for any developing country. There is a lack of real oversight and focus on what has to come when, where, and how in India's R&D agenda. On the other hand, PLAAF has managed well on this. One best thing about Beijing's R&D is focusing on what it can do for means rather than ends. India's air power capability remains only sustainable and China is eventually going to expand.

Responding to a question on obstacles that IAF can face from China in Tibet and how it will respond, the speaker said Indian response will be suppression and destruction of enemy air defences and how they prosecute would be through jammers and kinetic arms. Chinese air defence in Tibet is in response to the challenges they face in the region. Responding to another question on India's capability in inter-linking on network centricity, the speaker informed that barring the US, no other power has yet demonstrated this on a multitude of platforms. Adding to that, the chair informed about IAF's program called IACCS (Integrated Air Command and Control System) which is in its final shape. For future wars, the side which cannot interlink and can't transfer data would be at a big disadvantage.

This report was prepared by Megha Shrivastava, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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