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HELICOPTERS IN COUNTER–TERRORISM AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY OPERATIONS

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The Pathankot Episode

The New Year was ushered in with the focus of news channels remaining on implementation of the odd-even rule in Delhi, while the news of alleged beating up and abduction of a Punjab police SP by some "Army Personnel" only found a minor reference. However, in less than 24 Hrs, there was a complete reversal of focus, with the alleged abduction and release being linked to the news of terrorist attack on Pathankot Airbase. Thereafter, the live feed broadcast from outside the Airbase was dominated by the visuals of helicopters operating overhead the Airbase. Further, a Press Trust of India (PTI) report even claimed that Indian Air Force (IAF) had pressed into service, helicopters which played a critical role in tracking the intrusion and had used onboard sensors to monitor the areas from where the firing was coming from.[1] If true, this was probably the first time that such a platform has been used directly in a counter-terror operation. Thankfully, the attack was successfully contained without any hostage situation and no damage was reported to the critical operational assets of the base. In addition, the Airbase remained operational throughout the conduct of operations. There were, however, some human costs involved in terms of casualties sustained by the security personnel. In contrast, some of the earlier such attacks on airfields around the world have proven to be extremely damaging. The 14 member Tamil Tiger suicide assault on Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike airport on 24 Jul 2001 was aviation history's most destructive terrorist act with a total of 26 military and commercial aircraft being destroyed or damaged in five hours of fighting.[2]

The decision to utilise the aerial platforms, especially the helicopter, is also indicative of a distinct change in the employment of such a potent aerial asset and is clearly an addition to

the primary roles envisaged for such a versatile platform. The lessons learnt in this operation must lead to a doctrinal change in utilisation of helicopters in counter-terror and even counter-insurgency operations. Considering the capabilities of the forces utilised in the counter-terrorism operation, it was a foregone conclusion that the threat would be neutralised, but the challenge and an area of concern which needs to be addressed in such operations is to minimise the losses, especially in terms of a trained human resource.

The Versatile Helicopter

Invariably, a situation involving terrorists prepared to die during execution of their plans, demands a speedy elimination of the threat. Deployment of a versatile platform such as the helicopter has the potential of having a profound effect on the developing terror situation. This ability was also demonstrated during the Mumbai terror attacks wherein the troops inducted on top of a building, aided in the effective neutralisation of the threat. The versatile helicopter despite its vulnerability to small arms fire is one of the best platforms to attain favourable asymmetry is such situations, in order to limit the damage and preserve precious trained human resource in addition to the other critical assets.

Already, Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters are being extensively employed for conduct of operations under 'Operation Triveni' which spans as many as eight Maoist insurgency infested states namely Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. The recent statement by Air Marshal SBP Sinha, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) Central Air Command (CAC) on his first visit to Raipur and Jagdalpur on Jan 7, 2016 regarding utilising helicopters to carry out attacks from air in 'self defence' to dissuade Maoist rebels from attacking helicopters, is also indicative of this distinct change in policy of using this platform, albeit in a limited offensive capacity in close co-ordination with the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs)[3].This is a shift from the earlier stand of the IAF of never retaliating with an aerial attack on "own people" to now carrying out attacks from air "in retaliation" against perceived threat. This distinct shift appears to be a successful culmination of the efforts initiated by the IAF in October, 2015 in co-ordination with CAPFs as confirmed by MrRK Vij,ADG (Anti-Naxal Operations).[4]

Sensor Technology

The ideal use of an airborne sensor technology in unprecedented situations demanding an offensive approach imposes additional restrictions, especially in situations under limited doctrinal support. The available sensors onboard a MI-35 helicopter include an Israeli origin helicopter multi-mission optronic stabilised payload (HMOSP), together with a

laser rangefinder, designator and pointer, plus a built in auto-tracking unit that uses centroid and edge-tracking techniques. A capability which aids in acquisition of targets in pitch dark conditions. Its cockpits are night vision goggles (NVG) compatible with a single multi-function display (MFD) for TV, FLIR and targeting information. [5] Utilisation of this platform, as reported in the media[6], proved to be critical in making the first contact with the terrorists and engaging them after the perimeter breach in the Pathankot attack.

The Future

The element of surprise, target specific training, possible insider help, type of explosives and arms carried with a willingness to die is the type of asymmetry which is utilised by the planners of a terrorist strike, to their advantage. This is further boosted when the terror strike is possibly state-sponsored or supported. Neutralising this asymmetry and achieving a complete reversal in the shortest possible time can be the only effective counter.

Besides the strengthening of intelligence network along with creation of physical barriers, effective utilisation of the helicopter, which can give the "Birds Eye" view, provides the necessary technological and more importantly the psychological means to achieve this reversal.

The need of the hour is to formalise the governing principles for use of helicopter in counter-terror and counter-insurgency situations while drawing upon the rich experiences gained during operations conducted in the Maoist insurgency affected states, as also those gained during the more recent Pathankot operations. This, with a sole aim of achieving the necessary asymmetry to the advantage of the security forces in order to minimise the damage to critical assets and reduce the loss of trained human resource. In this manner the versatile helicopter can play a pivotal role in evolving an effective counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategy.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

[1] "Fresh Firing at Pathankot: IAF using Attack Helicopters", *Economic times*, Jan 02, 2016, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/fresh-firing-in-pathankot-iaf-using-attack-helicopters/articleshow/50415161.cms accessed on 06 Jan 2016

[2] http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jir/jir010903_1_n.shtml accessed on 06 Jan 2016

[3] "IAF will fire in self defence to boost morale of forces in Bastar says Air Marshal", *Times of India*, Jan 07, 2016, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/raipur/IAF-will-fire-in-self-defense-to-boost-morale-of-forces-in-Bastar-says-Air-Marshall/articleshowprint/50488740.cms accessed on 08 jan16

[4] Ashutosh Bhardwaj, "Anti-Maoist operations: Chhattisgarh, IAF to carry out retaliation attacks from air", T*he Indian Express*, Oct 21, 2015, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/chhattisgarh-iaf-practise-air-attacks-on-naxals-addl-dg/ accessed on 08 Jan 16.

[5] "The Mil Mi35 Upgrade", Nov 25, 2009, http://www.bharat-

rakshak.com/IAF/Aircraft/Current/609-Mi35-Himanshu.html accessed on 07 Jan 16.

[6] Vishnu Som, "With Thermal Imaging, Air Force Detected Pathankot Terrorists In Pitch Dark, *NDTV*, Jan 02, 2016, http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/with-thermal-imaging-air-force-detected-pathankot-terrorists-in-pitch-dark-1261539 accessed on 06 Jan 16.