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Exercise Cope India 23': An Assessment

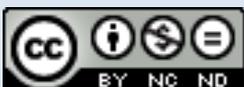
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Washington has sent a pair of B-1B 'Lancer' bombers to India to participate in the India-US air force drill 'Exercise Cope India 23.' The 12 days exercise between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the US Air Force (USAF) started on April 13 at Kalaikunda Air Force Station, West Bengal. 'Exercise Cope India' was instituted in 2004 as a fighter training exercise. This year's edition is taking place in two phases: the initial phase was at Kalaikunda, while the second phase was at the Air Force Station Agra.¹ The South China Morning Post reported that the US B-1B supersonic heavy bombers and the USAF's F-15 fighter aircraft would participate in a joint drill with the IAF fighters along the India-China border areas in the second phase of the exercise.² The presence of supersonic bombers in the US contingent is a strategic signal to China that India-US joint mechanism can be a lethal counterweight to China's military power in the Indo-Pacific.

Held alternately in India and the US every year, 'Exercise Cope India/Thunder' is the third armed forces exercise between the US and India. The naval exercise 'Malabar' started in 1992, and 'Yudh Abhyas' by the armies established in 2002, are the other two. The 2022 edition of the 'Yudh Abhyas' was also held in the Himalayan border area at Auli in Uttarakhand, about 100 km from the Line of Actual Control (LAC).³

Even though the Indo-Pacific is a maritime construct, the US and China are competing for aerial supremacy because, without it, naval assets on the seas are highly vulnerable, including aircraft carriers. China's anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) systems are to gain aerial supremacy in the western Pacific. Last November, China unveiled its stealth bomber, the H-20. This is seen as an answer to the US' 6th-generation bomber B-21 'Raider.'

Bombers are gaining increasing importance in the air power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. As bombers are heavy aircraft, they can carry more weapons and have a longer range than fighter aircraft; thus, they can conduct long-range precision strikes. As a result, the US had put on hold the development of next-generation fighter aircraft after the 5th-generation of the F-35 Lightning and F-22 Raptor and instead focused on developing the world's first 6th-generation bomber, the B-21 Raider.⁴ However, recently, the US Navy and Air Force have revived the 6th generation fighter program but has not finalised yet about the type of the system and the company.⁵ The Pentagon believes that the B-21 Raider could fly under the nose of Chinese S-400 air defence systems and Northrop Grumman is producing five such bombers for the USAF.⁶ The B-21 Raiders are going to be the mainstay of the US bomber category for the next three to four decades, and the USAF plans to induct a minimum of 100 Raiders.⁷

This is the first time ever that the US is despatching a bomber for the India-US air force drill. The presence of bombers is a clear signal to China about the importance India attaches to air superiority in areas of interest on land and at sea in partnership with strategic partners. The B-2 is the existing advanced bomber of the USAF. The USAF B-1B Lancer is another strategic bomber with deep-strike capability outside the defence zone. However, due to its heavy maintenance costs, the Lancer makes few appearances in drills. The IAF doesn't have a bomber in its inventory, while China has a total of 150 bombers of four types from the H-6 series (H-6M, H-6-H, H-6K, and H-6N).⁸ In recent times, China has enhanced its airfields in western China, including the Hotan, Gar Gansa, Hopping, Kashghar, Linzhi, Dkonka Dzong, and Pangat airbases in the Xinjiang and Tibet regions. The People's Liberation Army Air Force has already deployed Sukhoi-30MKKs and six H-6 bombers with KD-63 cruise missiles at the Kashgar airbase in Xinjiang.⁹

The participation of a US bomber in the India-US air exercise will allow IAF personnel to become familiar with jointly operating bombers and fighter aircraft with the US in future combat operations. The US defence systems are technologically advanced, and Washington is pushing India to buy more arms from the US to 'avoid overdependence on Russia.'¹⁰ As a result, India-US defence cooperation has transformed from buying supporting systems from the US to joint development and buying offensive systems for the Indian armed forces.

Conclusion

Bringing advanced new systems into the joint exercise will help improve interoperability between the two forces. It will also enable the IAF to understand technological changes in the aerial domain. Both countries' air forces have been increasingly cooperating in recent times; last year, the IAF joined the multilateral 'Exercise Pitch Black 2022' with the USAF in Australia. Even though multirole fighter aircraft would be used in the Himalayan theatre against China but given China's increased military focus towards the Indian Ocean, bombers could be handy against China in a joint India-US operation in the maritime theatre. In this regard, the participation of bombers in an air exercise is a strategic boost for New Delhi to counter the threat from Beijing.

Notes:

- ¹ "Exercise Cope India 2023", *Press Information Bureau*, April 10, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1915316>. Accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ² Zhao Ziwen, "US supersonic bombers to make surprise appearance in drill near disputed China-India border", *South China Morning Post*, April 21, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3217774/us-supersonic-bombers-make-surprise-appearance-drill-near-disputed-china-india-border?module=lead_hero_story&pgtype=home_page. Accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ³ Dinakar Peri, "Five bilateral Army exercises under way, including 'Yudh Abhyas' in Uttarakhand", *The Hindu*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/five-bilateral-army-exercises-under-way-including-yudh-abhyas-in-uttarakhand/article66201755.ece>. Accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ⁴ Kris Osborn, "Navy & Air Force 6th Gen Come to Life ... Not a Moment Too Soon", *Warrior Maven*, April 12, 2023, <https://warrormaven.com/air/navy-air-force-6th-gen-f22-f35>. Accessed on April 22, 2023.
- ⁵ Joseph Trevithick, "F/A-XX Future Navy Fighter's Big Funding Points To Prototypes", *The Drive*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/big-ramp-up-in-f-a-xx-future-navy-fighter-funding-points-to-prototypes>
- ⁶ John A. Tirpak, "Kendall: Modernize Now to Counter China", *Air And Space Forces Magazine*, September 20, 2021, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/kendall-modernize-now-to-counter-china/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=kendall-modernize-now-to-counter-china. Accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ⁷ W.J. Hennigan, "Exclusive: The Making of the U.S. Military's New Stealth Bomber", *Time*, December 3, 2022, <https://time.com/6238168/b-21-raider-bomber-us-military-exclusive/>. Accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ⁸ Military Balance 2023, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2023, p. 242.
- ⁹ Smriti Chaudhary, "After Spotting J-20 Jets, Nuclear-Capable H-6 Bombers, India Deeply Monitoring Chinese Air Bases", *The Eurasian Times*, August 21, 2020, <https://eurasianimes.com/after-spotting-j-20-jets-nuclear-capable-h-6-bombers-india-deeply-monitoring-chinese-air-bases/>. Accessed on November 10, 2022, accessed on April 21, 2023.
- ¹⁰ "US-India in talks to reduce country's dependence on Russian arms, energy", *Business Standard*, September 21, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/us-india-in-talks-to-reduce-country-s-dependence-on-russian-arms-energy-122092100804_1.html. Accessed on April 21, 2023.