

AERIAL DIPLOMACY FOR INFLUENCE, PROJECTION AND COERCION

**ANSHUMAN JAYDEV, GAGANJIT SINGH SAINI, SUNNY
AND GITANJLI SINGH**

One must be clear when diplomacy of persuasion must end and diplomacy of threat of force and force itself should be considered.¹

– K Subrahmanyam

Diplomacy is the art and science of maintaining peaceful relationships among nations, groups or individuals. Often, diplomacy refers to representatives of different groups discussing issues such as conflict, trade, the environment, technology or maintaining security.² It uses all possible components of national power, including military and air power, to achieve the national

Wing Commander **Anshuman Jaydev** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force (IAF) on December 16, 2007. He is presently posted at an Air Force Station in the Eastern Air Command (EAC), IAF.

Wing Commander **Gaganjit Singh Saini** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force (IAF) on December 24, 2009. He is presently posted at an Air Force Station in the Eastern Air Command (EAC), IAF.

Wing Commander **Sunny** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force (IAF) on June 19, 2010. He is presently posted at an Air Force Station in the Eastern Air Command (EAC), IAF.

Squadron Leader **Gitanjali Singh** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force (IAF) on January 3, 2011. She is presently posted at an Air Force Station in the Eastern Air Command (EAC), IAF.

1. Doctrine of the Indian Air Force 2022, p. 31.

2. *National Geographic*, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/diplomacy/>. Accessed on September 10, 2023.

Air diplomacy is an effective tool by which a nation can further its interests during peace as well as war. Aerospace power can achieve this through soft and hard power options of influence, power projection and coercion.

objectives. The Doctrine of the Indian Air Force (IAF) defines air power as aerospace power capable of controlling and exploiting the air and space environments in order to achieve India's national and security objectives.³ Aerospace power provides multiple options to policy-makers in furtherance of foreign policy. The characteristics of aerospace power make it capable of furthering national interests at all times, be it war, no war no peace or peace-time.⁴

The uniqueness of aerospace power is elaborated through the IAF Doctrine wherein it directly connects the Objectives for the IAF with the National Security Objectives. One of the national security objectives as defined in the Joint Indian Armed Forces Doctrine is to *expand and strengthen "Constructive Engagement" with other nations to promote regional, global peace and international stability. In turn, the IAF Doctrine mentions constructive engagement with other nations to promote regional, global peace and international stability*⁵ by means of aerospace power.

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AERIAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH INFLUENCE

The IAF Doctrine elucidates how as a modern aerospace power, the IAF provides tools for achieving India's foreign policy objectives and targets through aerial diplomacy. Aerial diplomacy through 'influence' utilises opportunities of global crisis and dynamics for furthering the nation's geopolitical agenda. It is developed using tools such as aid and solidarity at a time of global crisis. It cynically merges disaster diplomacy with the

3. "Foreword" by the Chief of Air Staff (CAS) in the Doctrine of the Indian Air Force (IAP 2000-22)

4. "Characteristics of Aerospace Power", Doctrine of the Indian Air Force (IAP 2000-22), pp. 5-6.

5. Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces, p. 3.

objectives of foreign policy and provides a platform to reach out to the masses directly, and affect public opinion through the following tools:

Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR): HADR capabilities and presence lie at an interesting juncture of geopolitics where presence and narrative is mixed with solidarity and empathy at a time when suffering populations require as much help as possible. Health crises and natural disasters provide opportunities to create narratives of friends and enemies in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of foreign audiences. HADR capacities remain one of the most effective tools to build capacities on a people-to-people level. Successful HADR and humanitarian assistance automatically feeds into diplomatic capital. The requirement to use this tool can occur in the following scenarios:⁶

- **Crisis Management:** The crises emerging from health emergencies or natural disasters require emergent response and aid. The international health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for nations to extensively deploy their aerial assets to provide humanitarian assistance in terms of medical supplies and rapid action teams.
- **Social Framework Distress:** Countries with fragile socio-economic frameworks as well as those dealing with issues of insurgency, terrorism and economic instability, typically including a breakdown of legitimate institutions and governance, widespread suffering and massive population displacements, often involve and require a range of responses from the international community, including intense diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts and the provision of multilateral and bilateral

Defence exports increase the dependency of buying nations on the supplying nation and show the industrial might of the latter. They indirectly influence the geopolitics and furtherance of a nation's strategic goals.

6. Study 3, "Humanitarian Aid and its Effects by ODI", London, UK, <https://www.oecd.org/derec/50189439.pdf>.

humanitarian assistance by UN policing actions or direct response by other nations.

- **Defence Exports:** Hard power defines the capability of a nation. The availability and maintenance of assets and a robust supply chain in case of hostilities are indispensable. Defence exports increase the dependency of buying nations on the supplying nation and show the industrial might of the latter. They indirectly influence the geopolitics and furtherance of a nation's strategic goals. India has utilised these measures to expand the domestic defence industrial base and boost exports like 'Made-in-India' aerial equipment, including the Tejas light combat aircraft and Astra missile. The recent US \$375 million BrahMos missiles deal with the Philippines is one such example. With a target of US \$5 billion for defence exports by 2024, India has intensified its efforts to sell weapons to Southeast Asia and Africa, where Chinese defence companies currently dominate.
- **Donations:** As brought out in the preceding paragraphs, a robust hard power inventory is an effective contributor to a nation's international importance. Countries with stronger economic positions extend the diplomacy of influence by donating assets or aiding in the building up of the required infrastructure for furtherance of strategic goals. It includes joint exercises, training programmes under students exchange (staff colleges) and peace-keeping missions. Currently, India is the third largest contributor to the UN in peace-keeping missions having participated in over 45 peace-keeping assignments in Korea, Congo, Egypt, Haiti, Lebanon, Rwanda and South Sudan.

INDIA'S EXPLOITATION OF AERIAL INFLUENCE

Air diplomacy bolsters national deterrence capabilities and acts as a subdued coercive influencing force for soft power projection.

The IAF has been an important contributor to India's diplomatic footprint which has risen steeply in the last few years. In turn, India's image as an effective responder to deal with traditional and non-traditional crises has been solidified on the international stage. The following operations carried out by the IAF stand testimony to the fact:

- **Operation Maitri:** In April 2015, Nepal was hit by a 7.9-magnitude earthquake, which left massive destruction in its trail. India was the first country to reach Kathmandu with aerial support and relief aid. The IAF's Mi-17s, C-17s and C-130s and the Indian Army's (IA's) Advanced Light Helicopters (ALHs) were pressed for rescue and relief operations on a massive scale. Additionally, the key factor of 'interoperability' due to the substantial presence of ex-servicemen in the Nepalese diaspora was extensively exploited for the successful conduct of the operation.⁷
- **Operation Rahat:** Hundreds of Indians and foreign nationals from 32 countries, including the US, were evacuated from war-hit Yemen utilising IAF and civil aircraft. The operation was successful due to synergised intelligence and quick deployment of aerial assets. Increased capabilities in terms of scope, scale and outreach were demonstrated through the Yemeni crisis.⁸
- **Operation Dost:** India extended HADR support to Turkey—a country that had adopted an adversarial position against India in the past—after a series of devastating earthquakes. India's HADR response to Turkey's disaster defied the perception that India's HADR efforts are limited primarily to its neighbourhood. The aerial assets were utilised to reverse the grammar of bilateral ties.⁹

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7. Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/34894_MEA_Annual_Report_English.pdf.

8. <https://www.indianairforce.nic.in/Yemen-evacuation>.

9. Press Information Bureau, "Indian Armed Forces Launch Operation Dost: IAF, Rush Relief to Turkey", <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=386>.

- **Operation Vaccine Maitri:** India supplied 'Made-in-India' COVID-19 vaccines to over 100 countries during the COVID-19 outbreak, through the medium of the air. The political will to emerge as the first and reliable responder in the region led India to develop indigenous medicines and deploy its aerial assets for distribution of vaccines to various nations.¹⁰

LESSONS LEARNT

Seamless execution of these operations promoted goodwill among the recipient nations and demonstrated India's intent to be counted as a first responder nation which possesses the capacity to deliver HADR to distressed nations anywhere in the world. The lessons learnt from these operations are as follows:

- o **First Response:** The speed of India's response took many international actors by surprise. The first response team arrived in Turkey within 24 hours of the disaster. As per the doctrine of the IAF, speed remains the key element in every operation.
- o **Coordination:** A successful operation involves seamless coordination at various levels on the domestic front. The very purpose of aerial diplomacy is extensive utilisation of the third dimension. A well-coordinated mission results in the achievement of the desired effects on the international front and increased cohesiveness on the domestic front.
- o **Comparison with Adversaries:** Pakistan, a key ally of Turkey, failed to deploy its disaster response force locally due to the paucity of vehicles. India's response helped in gaining the trust of Turkey which has been vocal about its support for India's western adversary.
- o **Self-Sufficiency:** The essentials of a successful HADR mission lie in providing crisis response and relief wherever required without being dependent on the suffering nation. India's Operation Dost was meticulously planned and well executed as the Indian rescuers

10. C Raja Mohan "Indian Military Diplomacy: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief", ISAS Working Paper, No.184.

were self-sufficient when it came to food and other essentials and the already overstretched local authorities were not burdened further.

- o **Interoperability and Strategic Understanding:** Operation Maitri utilised the availability of ex-servicemen amongst the Nepalese population for augmentation during relief operations. The clear understanding of culture boosted India's relief operation. The outreach included exploitation of the existing infrastructural assets such as helipads, etc.

WAY AHEAD

Aerospace power can best be exploited jointly with other components of the military, but independently in tandem with diplomatic efforts and other elements of Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which include everything from military to economic, social and diplomatic heft.

The new IAF Doctrine elaborates the position aerospace power occupies in national security and the nation's future, and that its strength lies primarily with the IAF. Nonetheless, the doctrine acknowledges that the air arms of the other Services, and civil aviation and space agencies contribute to this strength. The ability of the IAF to rapidly project military force towards the larger political objectives of the nation, can assist statecraft and diplomacy through its enormous soft power capabilities and outreach. Its inescapable and increasing role in regional security and stability in the government's larger Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) strategy, are part of its doctrine. Therefore, the following are suggested ways to implement aerial diplomacy through influence in achieving the nation's strategic goals:

- **Boosting Infrastructure Growth in the East:** Developing infrastructure such as runways, airfields, connecting roads, rails, etc. towards the borders of the country would boost India's and the IAF's capacity to undertake operations and assist neighbours in times of need.
- **Indigenisation and Targeted Defence Exports:** 'Make in India' has pushed the country's industrial growth. In the light of the successful achievement of missions like Chandrayaan 3, a rise in international

interest and trust in the capabilities of Indian-made defence assets can boost defence exports. Encouragement of defence exports will contribute strongly to India's economic growth and increase its influence in the recipient nations.

- **Space and Satellite Coverage:** The space assets could be shared and intelligence through reconnaissance in areas of interest could be offered to encourage strategic ties.

AIR DIPLOMACY AS A MODE OF PROJECTION

In a fiscally constrained scenario, when a large portion of the budget ought to go towards socio-economic development, air diplomacy through power projection is a far cheaper and more attractive option than engaging in conflict. It offers a proactive approach to conflict prevention. Power projection can be achieved through humanitarian relief (as mentioned above), peace-keeping operations, non-combatant evacuation operations, air demonstrations, joint- military exercises, showing the flag and capability demonstrations.

- **Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations:** The evacuation of Indian citizens or civilians from a foreign country when they are endangered by war or civil unrest is termed as an NEO (Non-combatant Evacuation Operation). Under Operation Rahat, 4,640 Indian citizens and 960 foreign nationals of 41 countries were evacuated from Yemen during the 2015 Yemen crisis. Under Operation Maitri, the Indian armed forces in a combined operation evacuated around 5,188 people, while nearly 785 foreign tourists were provided transit visas. Under Operation Ganga, the evacuation of an estimated 18,000 Indian nationals from Ukraine and other countries was another remarkable feat achieved by the Indian Air Force.¹¹

11. "Operation Ganga: How India Evacuated Over 18,000 Citizens from War Torn Ukraine", News18.com, March 15, 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/auto/operation-ganga-how-india-evacuated-over-18000-citizens-from-war-torn-ukraine-4877093.html>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

- **Humanitarian Relief:** The use of military forces abroad to assist in the aftermath of a natural disaster contributes towards projecting the nation in a positive light. The Indian Air Force undertook relief operations during the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.¹² During the 2004 tsunami crisis, the evacuation and relief operations were not only carried out in Indian territory but also neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka and Maldives.¹³ Relief operations and medical aid were provided to Turkey during the earthquake in 2023 (Operation Dost). Further, aid to Maldives was provided under Operation Neer when the country faced a water crisis in 2014.¹⁴
- **Peace-Keeping:** Military operations are designed to support diplomatic efforts to reach a long-term political settlement to an ongoing dispute. India has been one of the most significant contributors to UN Peace-Keeping (UNPK) missions. Involvement in UNPK operations is one of the most common ways of power projection.
- **Vaccine Diplomacy:** In a crisis, India supplied COVID vaccines to more than 100 countries. The contribution of air power, which included the IAF as well as civil airlines, in the supply of these vaccines was among the highest. The vaccine diplomacy enabled India to gain an edge over China amongst the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁵

12. "Operation Insaniyat: Indian Air Force Drops Relief Material For Rohingya Refugees In Bangladesh", *Indiatimes.com*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/operation-insaniyat-indian-air-force-drops-relief-material-for-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh-329794.html>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

13. "Role of the IAF in Tsunami Relief", *Indianairforce.nic.in*, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/role-of-the-iaf-in-tsunami-relief/>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

14. "Operation Neer", *Indianairforce.nic.in*, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/op-neer/>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

15. "Vaccines Diplomacy: How India is Gaining Edge Over China with Supplies to Neighbours", *The Times of India*, January 22, 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/vaccine-diplomacy-how-india-is-gaining-edge-over-china-with-supplies-to-neighbours/articleshow/80390314.cms>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

- **Air Shows and Demonstration:** The French-made Rafale aircraft of the IAF joining the Bastille Day celebration in France. India's aerobatic display teams Surya Kiran and Sarang presenting air shows along with the indigenous Tejas aircraft generated a positive image about India's capabilities and power projection.
- **Civil Aviation: A Force Multiplier:** The IAF Doctrine defines aerospace power as the sum of a nation's aerospace capabilities which include civil air resources. Air India's order to Airbus and Boeing for 500 aircraft worth \$100 billion has projected India's civil aviation sector as a big market.¹⁶ This deal was termed as "historic" by US President Joe Biden, and he personally interacted over the phone with the prime minister of India. The deal was also hailed by the British prime minister as well as French president as it will create thousands of jobs in these countries. While this shows India's growing heft in the international economy, these assets will prove to be game-changers in a conflict scenario, adding greatly to India's logistics and transport capabilities. Thus, civil aviation can work as one of the force multipliers in conflict scenarios.
- **Military Cooperation with Other Countries:** Cooperation with other countries in day-to-day military activities other than a war/conflict conveys a message to the international community about the depth of relationship with those countries. Mid-air refuelling provided by the UAE's MRTT (Multi- Role Tanker Transport) aircraft to Rafale fighter jets during their non-stop ferry from France to Ambala and to the SU-30 aircraft formation during the six-hour non-stop journey while proceeding to Egypt for a tactical leadership programme are such examples.¹⁷

16 "Air India Seals Record Order for Almost 500 Airbus, Boeing Jets", Reuters, February 15, 2023, at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/air-india-agrees-buy-250-planes-airbus-2023-02-14/>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

17. "After Rafale, IAF's Su-30MKI Fighters Get Mid-Air Refuelled By Emirati Air Force in Growing India- UAE Military Ties", *Eurasian Times*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/after-rafale-iafs-su-30mki-fighters-india-uae/>. Accessed on September 7, 2023.

HARD POWER PROJECTION

- **Showing the Flag:** This is the symbolic deployment of military forces to a region to demonstrate political interest and resolve to take forceful military action. For example, in June 1987, the Indian Air Force violated the Sri Lankan airspace when it undertook Operation Poomalai (Tamil: Garland), the forced airdrop of relief supplies to the ethnic Tamils during the siege of Jaffna. This action sent a clear message to the government in Colombo about New Delhi's desire to see a negotiated end to the conflict and helped lead to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord.¹⁸
- **Deterrence:** The use or the threat of military force against another state to induce it into, or dissuade it from pursuing, a given policy is known as deterrence. In this form, power projection acts as a diplomatic tool, attempting to influence the decision-making process and calculus of foreign actors. The primary shaping by aerospace power comprises multi-front deployment through rapid air mobility and ensuring deterrence through *posturing*.
- **Capability Demonstration:** Demonstration of aerospace power capabilities is an important aspect in the No War No Peace (NWNP) environment to deter potential adversaries and to ensure the desired military balance. This is achieved by developing the capability, undertaking tests, trials, demonstration through exercises, and development of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities. In 2018, the IAF conducted 'Exercise Gaganshakti' wherein 11,000 sorties were flown in a period of 13 days out of which 9,000 sorties were flown only by the fighter aircraft.¹⁹ The scale of the exercise was bigger than the 1971 War when 7,000 sorties were flown in 14 days. The scope and dimension of the exercise got attention from China and drew praise from the media of a country which is highly regulated by the state.

18. "Operation Poomalai: The Jaffna Food Drop", *Bharat Rakshak*, October 5, 2009, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1987ipkf/chapter01/>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

19. "Conclusion of Exercise Gaganshakti- 2018", Press Information Bureau, April 24, 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1530094>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

Joint exercises with other friendly countries are often used by nations to learn best practices from other countries' forces and enhance interoperability.

Additionally, with the increasing importance of space in civil and military applications and growing militarisation of space,²⁰ the space-based assets have emerged as modes of power projection. The conduct of an anti-satellite weapon test under 'Mission Shakti'²¹ on March 27, 2019, was an apt example of how India can project its technological prowess. The IAF as an aerospace power must develop the requisite capabilities to leverage this spectrum.

- **Joint Exercises with Other Countries:** Joint exercises with other friendly countries are often used by nations to learn best practices from other countries' forces and enhance interoperability. They also display military might by showcasing weapons, systems and the training quality of its troops. Hence, these exercises act as a deterrent to adversaries and bolster diplomatic postures.

PRINCIPLES OF CREDIBLE POWER PROJECTION

All projection strategies must be backed up with actions on the ground. For example, it took nine months of preparation to generate 11,000 sorties during Exercise Gaganshakti. The serviceability of all the assets was built upto 80 percent serviceability of aircraft. Post-completion of such exercises, the efforts to maintain this should continue.

The involvement with other countries in certain exercises/evacuation efforts/HADR missions is to be followed up with other diplomatic engagements to establish long-term relationships with these countries.

A well developed and capable civil aviation sector can work as a force multiplier and, thus, should be factored into the overall plan. The overall

20. "Wargame Wins Praise from Unlikely Quarters", *The Asian Age*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/180418/wargame-wins-praise-from-unlikely-quarters.html>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

21. DRDO Website, Mission Shakti, <https://www.drdo.gov.in/mission-shakti>. Accessed on August 31, 2023.

power projection strategy must factor in civil resources for better resource utilisation.

A quality training regimen and high level of preparedness are required before participating in any joint exercise; a sub-optimal performance during such exercises might prove to be counter-productive in image and power projection.

Proactive engagement with the national as well as international media is very important for power projection.

The principle of legitimacy in 'showing the flag' operations is imperative in order to convince the international players about the morality of own intentions.

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AERIAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH COERCION

*To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.*²²

– Sun Tzu

Coercion means “efforts to change the behavior of a state by manipulating on costs and benefits.”²³ Alexander George defines coercive diplomacy as “forceful persuasion” that focusses upon affecting the enemy’s will rather than negating its capabilities. If threats alone do not suffice and force is used, it is employed in a more limited, selective manner. Thus, coercive diplomacy intends to be an alternative to war; this is why it can only employ limited military power to accomplish an aim.²⁴ It must fulfil the following six criteria:

22. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 77.

23. Olga Aristeidou, “What is Coercive Diplomacy? Actors, Elements and Success,” *Kedisa*, July 26, 2016, <https://kedisa.gr/en/what-is-coercive-diplomacy-actors-elements-and-success/>, accessed

24. Paul Haenle and Nathaniel Sher, “How Pelosi’s Taiwan Visit Has Set a New Status Quo for U.S-China Tensions,” Carnegie Endowment for International Relations, August 17, 2022. Accessed on August 21, 2023.

proportionality between the nature of the objectives being pursued and the leverage being applied; **reciprocity** between the coercer's carrots and the target's concessions; **credibility** in that the target is certain that if it refuses to cooperate, it will face serious consequences; **capability** of the coercer to implement the threats it poses; the **necessary existence** of a **deadline**; and **assurance** that there will be no more demands for the same reason in the future.²⁵

Air power, by virtue of its responsiveness, offensive lethality, and trans-domain operational capability has emerged as the best means to carry out coercion through conventional or nuclear weapons. Coercive aerial diplomacy refers to the strategic use of air power to exert pressure on a target state usually by threatening or implementing use of military force to achieve specific political objectives.

Means of Aerial Coercion: Aerial coercion employs diverse methods, each tailored to the following specific objectives:

- **Strategic Bombing:** Targeting an adversary's industrial, economic and military infrastructure weakens its capacity to wage war. The objective is to induce capitulation through the destruction of critical assets and the disruption of supply chains.
- **Air Superiority Operations:** Denying an adversary freedom of movement and the ability to launch attacks can force it into submission or compel negotiations. Aerial dogfights, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic warfare, all contribute to establishing air dominance.
- **No-Fly Zones:** Imposition of no-fly zones prevents an adversary's aircraft from operating within a designated airspace. This tactic is often used to protect vulnerable populations or enforce international mandates.
- **Drone Strikes:** The advent of remotely piloted aircraft or drones has revolutionised aerial coercion. Drones offer precision strikes, reduced risk to pilots and extended operational endurance.

25. The Associated Press, "China Flies Fighter Jets Near Taiwan After the Leader's Trip to the U.S.," April 8, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/08/1168788896/china-flies-fighter-jets-near-taiwan#:~:text=BEIJING—China sent warships and, as part of its territory.> Accessed on August 21, 2023.

CASE STUDIES AND ANALYSIS

The following case studies examine several ongoing and historical instances of aerial coercion to gain insights into the effectiveness, challenges and consequences of this approach.

Analysis : Chinese Aerial Coercion of Taiwan and the USA

In August 2022, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was scheduled to visit Taiwan, a self-governing island democracy claimed by Beijing as part of its territory. The increasing demonstrations of support for Taiwan by the US had led Beijing to believe that Washington planned to use Taiwan as a strategic asset to contain the mainland within the first island chain in the Western Pacific, and Taiwan could move to declare *de jure* independence. In this context, Beijing opted to use military means short of war. Consequently, Taiwan faced unprecedented provocations, including ballistic missile launches over the island, air operations across the centreline and on the edge of Taiwan's territorial waters, and a volume of cyber attacks "23 times higher than the previous daily record." However, the US House speaker's state visit went on as planned although there was no declaration of independence by Taiwan. Later, in an interview in September 2022, US President Joe Biden said that US forces would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. In April 2023, international newspapers were again replete with reports of Chinese fighter jets in Taiwanese territory. These jets had been sent by China in retaliation for a meeting between the US House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy, and President Tsai Ing-wen, during the latter's visit to California. In addition, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced the start of three-day "combat readiness patrols" as a warning to Taiwan. "This is a serious warning against the collusion and provocation between the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces and external forces," said a PLA statement. After the visit, the US announced that it would continue to provide military support to preserve Taiwan's territorial integrity but deftly avoided any mention of Taiwanese independence. These incidents suggest that China, despite being a global

power, failed to alter the US' and Taiwan's decision-making calculus through aerial and military coercion. However, such coercive tactics sent a message to the US and Taiwan which led to the preservation of the status quo in the region.

Analysis: Russian Use of Aerial Coercion in Syria

In November 2015, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Air Force SU-24 Fencer bomber for violating the Turkish airspace on the border with Syria. In response, Russia pointedly deployed its most capable operational air defence system, the S-400 Triumf, to the Latakia air base.²⁶ When the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was asked about the potential threat from the S-400, he said that Moscow was deploying sophisticated “anti-access capabilities” which intended to constrain NATO deployments in the event of any crisis.²⁷ Consequently, the number of coalition strikes in Syria appeared to go down, with more of them carried out by drones. Subsequently, NATO and Russia continued to operate simultaneously in Syria with continued communication between the US-led coalition and the Russians to prevent any future escalation.

Analysis: Aerial Coercion by the US and its Allies Around the World

Aerial coercion carried out by the US and NATO forces has also produced similar results as highlighted below.

- **US' Aerial Coercion of China:** The United States regularly tries to coerce China by using the medium of the air in the South China Sea. However, it has been unable to prevent Chinese belligerence in the region.
- **Aerial Coercion in Kosovo:** The NATO-led aerial campaign against Yugoslavia displayed a mixed record of effectiveness. While it eventually compelled the Yugoslav government to withdraw its forces from Kosovo, the campaign's prolonged duration highlighted the

26. Justin Bronk, “Russia’s Air Defence Challenge in Syria,” RUSI, June 29, 2017, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/russias-air-defence-challenge-syria>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

27. Jonathan Marcus, “Russia S-400 Syria Missile Deployment Sends Robust Signal,” BBC, December 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537>. Accessed on September 5, 2023.

challenges of achieving swift results through aerial coercion. The extended campaign drew international criticism for civilian casualties and infrastructure damage, thereby impacting public opinion and complicating diplomatic efforts. The Kosovo intervention sparked debates on the legality and ethics of humanitarian interventions without explicit UN authorisation, raising questions about the long-term stability and governance of Kosovo post-intervention.

In cases where strong military powers are involved on both sides, aerial coercion serves to maintain the status quo rather than changing the decision-making calculus of the adversary.

LESSONS LEARNT

The analysis of these case studies illuminates the multifaceted nature of coercive aerial diplomacy. In cases where strong military powers are involved on both sides, aerial coercion serves to maintain the status quo rather than changing the decision-making calculus of the adversary. In cases where a militarily stronger state is trying to coerce a weaker state, aerial coercion can achieve immediate military goals, but its long-term effectiveness is influenced by factors such as clear objectives, international legitimacy, comprehensive post-conflict plans and the broader geopolitical landscape. Moreover, the cases reveal the ethical, legal and strategic dilemmas associated with utilising aerial coercion as a means of achieving political ends. These lessons must be internalised before applying them in India's context to make our aerial diplomacy effective.

INDIAN GEOPOLITICS AND AERIAL COERCION

The latest 'Doctrine of the Indian Air Force' proudly declares that the IAF has transformed into a modern aerospace power that is capable of controlling and exploiting the air and space environments to achieve India's national and security objectives.²⁸ It states that given its increased capabilities, India's

28. n. 1, p. 74.

Aerial coercion hinges on the synergy between air power and technological innovation. The IAF must develop and employ the following technologies effectively to demonstrate its aerial coercion capability.

aerospace power will provide a multitude of options in furtherance of the nation's foreign policy through air diplomacy. The doctrine envisages aerial diplomacy as a permanent task to be carried out during NWNP. It further goes on to say, "Diplomacy remains the first option for both power projection and conflict resolution. Military power provides the deterrence and coercive capability to wield national foreign policy effectively." In simple words, the doctrine, given the IAF's modern capabilities, sees aerospace power as an effective tool for diplomacy in support of India's foreign policy objectives and envisages aerial coercion as one of the means to that end. It also highlights India's geopolitical realities by clearly stating that the envisaged aerial diplomacy operations will be carried out under a "nuclear overhang." India, a nuclear power, shares its borders with China on its north and east, and Pakistan on its west. Both these countries are nuclear powers and have declared themselves as each other's "all-weather friends." Moreover, China has risen to the status of a global power and wields tremendous influence in the region. Hence, it is anticipated that any use of aerial coercion by India in the region will bring China into play. Case studies have shown that when two strong military powers are on opposite ends of the aerial coercion tactics, it most likely results in the preservation of the status quo. This is beneficial for India as it remains steadfast as a nation with no extra-territorial ambitions. Moreover, China is undoubtedly the stronger power at present. Hence, not letting China win will constitute a victory for India. Therefore, India needs to enhance its capabilities and formulate a comprehensive strategy for aerial coercion in furtherance of its goals in the region. Aerial coercion hinges on the synergy between air power and technological innovation. The IAF must develop and employ the following technologies effectively to demonstrate its aerial coercion capability:

- **Advanced Aircraft:** The development of advanced aircraft forms the backbone of aerial coercion capabilities. Advanced aircraft offer multirole capabilities, granting military forces the ability to dominate the airspace and strike various targets. Towards this, the IAF has recently updated its inventory with the Rafale, Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), Apache, and Light Combat Helicopter (LCH) aircraft and is also in the process of procuring more advanced aircraft such as the LCA MK-II, etc. The IAF must also try to reach its aim of possessing 42 fighter squadrons to provide credibility to its aerial coercion capability when the situation demands.
 - **Precision Munitions:** Precision-Guided Munitions (PGMs) minimise collateral damage and increase targeting accuracy. This precision significantly amplifies the coercive potential of air strikes, allowing for the selective destruction of critical infrastructure and military assets. The IAF is rapidly equipping itself with ground and air-based precision munitions which is a positive trend towards the development of aerial coercion capabilities.
 - **EW Systems:** Electronic Warfare (EW) technologies disrupt an adversary's command, control and communication systems. EW tools, such as jamming equipment and cyber capabilities degrade an adversary's ability to coordinate defences and launch counter-attacks. This disruption is a force multiplier that contributes to establishing air superiority.
 - **Surveillance and Reconnaissance Platforms:** Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft provide real-time intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. These
- Effective aerial coercion demands seamless communication networks that link aircraft, ground command centres and intelligence units. The IAF must work with the civil agencies to develop such modern communication networks to enable its network-centric warfare capability.**

platforms enable precise target identification, tracking and assessment, thus, guiding effective aerial coercion operations.

- **Communication Networks:** Effective aerial coercion demands seamless communication networks that link aircraft, ground command centres and intelligence units. Space X's Starlink internet access service has been a vital layer in Ukraine's overall communications network after the Russian attacks caused widespread degradation to the Ukrainian telecommunications network. It has been one of the major reasons for the prevention of Ukraine's capitulation in the face of the Russian military might. The IAF must work with the civil agencies to develop such modern communication networks to enable its network-centric warfare capability.
- **Space Assets:** Space is being increasingly militarised and space-based assets have become integral to modern military operations. Space assets link various domains (land, air, sea and cyber) enabling synergistic operations and comprehensive situational awareness. Moreover, technologies such as communication networks, ballistic/ cruise missiles, precision munitions, navigation satellites, etc. utilise space for their operations. Hence, aerial coercion in the modern era is dependent on the strategic utilisation of space for advanced capabilities like surveillance, communication, intelligence gathering and targeting. India has been making rapid progress in the field of space exploration, as demonstrated by the landing of the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO's) Chandrayaan-3 on the Moon's South Pole on August 23, 2023.²⁹ The IAF must increase its engagement with the civil sector to develop indigenous and advanced capabilities in space to provide teeth to its aerial coercion capability.
- **Cyber and Electronic Security:** While technology enhances aerial coercion, it also introduces challenges. Dependence on advanced systems makes military forces vulnerable to cyber attacks and electronic counter-

29. Geeta Pandey, "Chandrayaan-3: India Makes Historic Landing Near Moon's South Pole," BBC, August 23, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66594520>. Accessed on August 27, 2023.

measures. The IAF must continuously update its security procedures and technologies to keep its aerial coercion technologies and tactics safe. The creation of a specialist cyber branch would go a long way in ensuring this.

CONCLUSION

Aerial diplomacy plays a pivotal role in modern diplomacy. It is a potent tool in a state's inventory to achieve its political objectives without waging war. It can take the form of influence, projection or coercion. By analysing the interplay of these three factors within the realm of aerial operations, this study illuminates the multifaceted ways in which a state can employ its air power to shape international dynamics. The strategic deployment of aerial assets for humanitarian assistance, military demonstrations and coercion enhances a nation's diplomatic toolkit. The IAF has transformed into a modern and capable air force and, hence, the latest IAF Doctrine sees it as capable of contributing to the nation's objectives directly through aerial diplomacy. In India's geopolitical context, influence and projection through aerospace power will contribute positively to aerial diplomacy, whereas aerial coercion will help in the maintenance of the status quo in the region which also is a positive outcome for India in the current geopolitical scenario. Hence, the IAF must harness aerospace power effectively to enhance its aerial diplomacy capability and credibility through the following ways:

- Engage and coordinate effectively with the Indian industrial and space sector to build indigenous technological capabilities as a modern air force in today's multi-polar world.
- Maintain and develop additional capabilities to be a first responder to any requirement for humanitarian or military assistance by a friendly country in the IAF's desired area of influence.
- Increase air force-to-air force engagement with friendly countries in South/ Southeast Asia and the Middle East through joint exercises, joint training, exchange programmes and military sales.

- Develop the required capabilities and demonstrate intent effectively when the situation demands to increase the IAF's credibility as an aerial diplomat.
- Enhance professional military education and create a strategic thought process among all IAF personnel so that they understand the interplay between aerial diplomacy and national objectives clearly.