



## Vignettes of the Indian Air Force– 2024



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As one year fades into memory, there is excitement and hope for a brighter and more prosperous future ahead. At the same time, one must also look at the milestones in the year gone by so that not only are valuable lessons derived but also to ensure that the same gets recorded for posterity in the journey of the Indian Air Force (IAF). The year 2024 was a year of many firsts as far as the IAF was concerned. The year began with an all-women contingent participating in the Republic Day Parade on January 26, 2024 at the Kartavya Path in New Delhi. It also was the year Agniveer Vayu women joined the frontline squadrons of the IAF. The esteemed President's Standard was conferred to the 45 and 221 Squadrons, and the President's Colours was given to the 11 Base Repair Depot and the 509 Signal Unit by the President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu, on March 08, 2024. It is the highest honour that can be conferred on a military unit and is the first time in the history of the IAF that four units received the President's Standard and Colours in one event simultaneously.

Following the approval for the creation of the Weapon Systems (WS) branch of the IAF in 2022, the Weapon Systems School was inaugurated on July 01, 2024 by the IAF Chief, Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, and the first batch of officers of this branch passed out in December 2024. This new branch comprises four streams: the flying stream for operating weapon systems on airborne platforms, the remote stream to operate remotely piloted aircraft, a stream for mission commanders overseeing surface-to-air and surface-to-surface weapon systems, and the intelligence stream for processing space-based intelligence and imagery.

In another first, a Rohini radar was towed in a barge and deployed at the Lakshadweep and Minicoy islands to bolster the region's air defence. On 26 December 2024, an AN-32 of the IAF successfully carried

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out the first night landing at Agatti airport, showcasing remarkable skill and professionalism. In March 2024, an IAF C-17 aircraft, in a remarkable display of jointness and integration, carried out a precision drop of two Combat Rubberised Raiding Craft (CRRC) and MARCOS of the Indian Navy, 2600 Kms from the western coast of India. The operations were to rescue the crew of the bulk ship MV Ruen, seized off the coast of Yemen by Somali pirates.

On February 17, 2024, the Indian Air Force conducted Exercise Vayushakti on its Pokhran Range in Rajasthan. Live shooting was a part of the exercise, witnessed by a mixed audience, including the diplomatic corps of allied nations, which showed IAF's offensive capability. Indigenous Tejas Mk1 aircraft, Dhruv and Prachand helicopters were part of the drill along with Jaguars, Rafale, Mig 29, Su 30 MKI, Mirage 2000, Hawk, C-130J, Apache, and Chinook, both day and night operations. The indigenous surface-to-air missile systems, Akaash and Samar, demonstrated their capability to detect and intercept intruding aircraft. The exercise illustrated the IAF's ability to simultaneously conduct operations from several locations and accurately deliver ordinances on designated targets.

Exercise Gagan Shakti 2024 began on April 1, 2024, wherein the entire air force was deployed in two phases simulating two front exigency potential threats. During day and night, the IAF flew extensive exercises with a large force to test all the key attributes of airpower – speed, precision, flexibility, reach and responsiveness. They also conducted high-tempo operations for 10 days. The IAF conducted the largest international exercise, 'Tarang Shakti 2024,' with participation from 11 countries with their aerial assets and 27 countries as observers from all continents globally. The exercise was done in two phases at the Sulur and Jodhpur air bases, with over 1000 sorties flown during the exercise and many air force chiefs personally taking part in the exercise.<sup>1</sup> This exercise tested the mettle of the IAF in planning and executing an international exercise as well as demonstrating its indigenous defence capabilities on the sidelines with an international defence exposition at both venues.

The Indian Air Force, on the sidelines of 'Tarang Shakti 2024,' also conducted a symposium on air domain awareness. The theme of the seminar was "Collaborative Approach to Facilitate Air Domain Awareness Towards Enhancing Regional Security." With participants from over 27 countries comprising 50 delegates, spanning all the continents of the world, the symposium generated debate on an important issue that governs the sovereignty and security of the aerospace domain. This symposium marked the tentative first steps by the IAF in its journey to become a catalyst and a net security provider of the aerial domain in the region.<sup>2</sup>

In January 2024, the IAF took part in Exercise Desert Knight with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Air Force and the French Air and Space Force at the Al Dhafra air base in the UAE. The exercise, apart from IAF aircraft operating from Al Dhafra air base in the UAE, also involved IAF aircraft operating from bases within India over Indian FIR in the Arabian Sea. This exercise enhanced synergy and interoperability between the three air forces. The IAF also participated in the second edition of Red Flag 2024, held at Eielson Air Base, Alaska, from June 04-14, 2024. The exercise witnessed the participation of the IAF, along with the Royal Netherlands Air Force, Royal Singapore Air Force, German Luftwaffe, Royal Air Force of the United Kingdom, and the US Air Force. This was also the first time the Indian Rafale aircraft participated in Exercise Red Flag. The IAF participated in Exercise Udara Shakti with the Royal Malaysian Air Force from August 05-09, 2024 at Kuantan, Malaysia. Exercise Eastern Bridge between the IAF and the Royal Oman Air Force took place at Masirah, Oman, from September 11-22, 2024. The IAF took part in the 12th edition of the Joint Military Training exercise with the Royal Singapore Air Force at Kalaikunda Air Base during October-November 2024.

During the year, the IAF lived up to its role of being the first responder during HADR missions, fighting forest fires through Bambi Bucket operations in the Nilgiris in March 2024, Nainital and Dindigul in April 2024. The IAF transport and helicopter fleet carried out herculean rescue and relief operations in coordination with NDRF and the state administration when massive landslides created mayhem in Wayanad on July 30, 2024.

The IAF also played an important role during five of the seven phases of the General Election 2024, flying over 1000 hours in more than 1750 sorties, lifting electronic voting machines and deploying personnel of the Election Commission of India to remote corners of the country and to places where movement by road posed security risks. The Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, gifted four Arogya Maitri cubes to Ukraine in August 2024, which were transported to Poland by an IAF C-17 and thereafter sent to Ukraine by rail. These cubes contain medicines and equipment which can be rapidly deployed in disaster and conflict zones.

Meanwhile, the Warfare and Aerospace Strategy Programme (WASP) of the IAF, aimed at inculcating critical thinking on aerospace, geopolitics, international relations, and national security issues, continued to gain traction during the year. As a part of the programme, the External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar interacted with the course participants, discussing his book, 'The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World' at Air HQs on April 30, 2024.

The year 2024 was seminal in many respects for the IAF. Successfully hosting an international air exercise at an unprecedented scale in the region bore testimony to its growing diplomatic reach and heft globally. With growing challenges in a region beset with confrontation among global powers, the IAF needs to keep its powder dry while collaborating with friendly foreign air forces to ensure peace and stability in the region.

*(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:

<sup>1</sup> Anil Golani, "How the IAF has strengthened India's strategic edge", *The Tribune India*, October 08, 2024, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/how-the-iaf-has-strengthened-indias-strategic-edge/> Accessed on 01 January 25.

<sup>2</sup> Anil Golani, "Air Domain Awareness and Regional Security", *The Chanakya Forum*, September 16, 2024, <https://chanakyaforum.com/air-domain-awareness-and-regional-security/>. Accessed on 01 January 25.