



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

Report: 8th Jasjit Singh Memorial Lecture

Theme: “*Strategic Autonomy in a Heteropolar World*”

Event Overview

The 8th Jasjit Singh Memorial Lecture (JSML) was organised jointly by the **Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)** and the **Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS)** on **Monday, 04 August 2025** at the **Air Force Auditorium, Subroto Park, New Delhi**.

The event commemorated the life and legacy of **Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retd)**, a visionary soldier-scholar and the founder of CAPS, whose intellectual contributions shaped India’s national security and strategic thought. The theme of this year’s lecture was “*Strategic Autonomy in a Heteropolar World*”, delivered by **Dr. Ram Madhav**, President of the India Foundation, renowned politician, author, and thinker.

Opening Remarks

Air Vice Marshal Anil Golani (Retd), Director General, CAPS, formally welcomed the gathering on behalf of CAPS. He extended special greetings to **Dr. Ram Madhav**, the guest speaker, **Shri G. Parthasarathy**, Session Chair, senior veterans, members of the diplomatic community, colleagues from academia and think tanks, and representatives from the media.

AVM Golani recalled the extraordinary legacy of Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, who founded CAPS in 2001 with a vision to nurture India’s intellectual capital in national security. He highlighted that CAPS has since grown into a credible institution addressing issues of aerospace security, nuclear policy, neighbourhood challenges, and the Indo-Pacific.

Tracing Jasjit Singh’s career, AVM Golani described his role as a decorated fighter pilot who participated in the 1965 and 1971 wars, earning the Vir Chakra for gallantry. After retirement, he became the longest-serving Director General of IDSA (1987–2001) and later the founder director of CAPS, shaping Indian strategic discourse through over 300 books and publications. AVM Golani also reminded the audience that the day of the lecture marked the 12th death anniversary of Jasjit Singh.

He concluded by underlining how the Jasjit Singh Memorial lecture series keeps alive Air Cmde Jasjit Singh’s vision of linking scholarship with national security imperatives.



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

Session Chair's Remarks

Shri G. Parthasarathy, Trustee of FNSS and Chancellor of the Central University of Jammu, then addressed the gathering. He contextualised the theme of *Strategic Autonomy in a Heteropolar World*, stressing its relevance to India's contemporary geopolitical environment. Drawing upon his rich diplomatic experience, Parthasarathy emphasised the importance of balancing India's national interests while navigating great-power rivalries in an increasingly fragmented global order.

Lecture by Dr. Ram Madhav

Dr. Ram Madhav, President of the India Foundation, delivered the keynote memorial lecture. At the outset, he paid tribute to Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, describing him as a rare blend of "scholar and soldier," who embodied Plato's idea of philosopher-statesmen but in the military domain.

Multilateralism and Its Origins

Dr. Madhav began by analysing the history of **multilateralism** as it emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. He argued that the multilateral order, represented by institutions such as the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and later the World Trade Organization (WTO), was largely designed by Western powers to preserve their dominance. While these institutions promised global governance, their very structure carried inherent flaws.

He pointed out that leadership of organisations like the World Bank (always headed by an American) and IMF (dominated by Europe) reveals how global governance mechanisms were built on unequal premises. India, though a founding signatory of the UN in 1945, entered as a colonial state under British rule, highlighting the lack of real agency for many nations in the early multilateral framework.

India and the World Trade Organization (WTO) Experience

Turning to trade governance, Dr. Madhav narrated how efforts to create an International Trade Organisation (ITO) in 1948 failed due to American resistance, leading instead to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Only decades later, in 1995, did the WTO come into existence, largely as a response to the rise of Asian economies like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

India, he recalled, resisted Western attempts to impose unequal trade regimes. He mentioned Mr. Murasoli Maran, India's Commerce Minister in the late 1990s, who vocally defended developing



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

countries' interests during WTO negotiations. By 2005, developing nations had forced a more equitable arrangement, though Western powers soon began to dismiss the WTO as “useless” once it no longer served their dominance.

Failures of Multilateralism

Dr. Madhav was particularly critical of the UN Security Council veto system, which has paralysed global governance. Citing examples, he noted that between 1948 and 1971, 18 resolutions were passed on Kashmir, none of which had any real impact. Similarly, in the case of Palestine, dozens of UN resolutions were blocked by vetoes from great powers. He pointed to the Russia-Ukraine war (2022) as further evidence of the UN's inability to act decisively.

He quoted UN Secretary-General António Guterres' 2023 speech admitting that “*multilateralism has failed*” and warning of “reform or rupture” as the only choices.

The Need for Strategic Autonomy

Against this backdrop, Dr. Madhav argued that India must pursue strategic autonomy, not in the sense of non-alignment of the past, but as a dynamic approach that allows India to engage with multiple power centres while safeguarding its own interests. He emphasised that the world today is no longer bipolar or unipolar but heteropolar, characterised by multiple power poles, issue-based coalitions, and shifting alignments.

He warned against nostalgia for the “old order” of multilateralism, stressing instead the need for new institutional frameworks that reflect contemporary realities. For India, this means both pushing for reforms in existing structures and building alternative mechanisms with like-minded partners in Asia, Africa, and beyond.

Q&A Session

During the Q&A, participants sought Dr. Madhav's views on India's role in reforming multilateral institutions, balancing relations with major powers, and leveraging regional partnerships. He reiterated that while India should continue advocating reform of existing institutions, it must also be prepared to create parallel frameworks if reforms remain blocked.

Closing Remarks

In his concluding remarks, AVM Anil Golani (Retd) summarised the key messages of the lecture. He praised Dr. Madhav for his incisive analysis of the failures of multilateralism and his articulation of India's strategic options in a heteropolar world. He reiterated that self-reliance in



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

technology, defence, and governance models will be central to India's pursuit of strategic autonomy.

AVM Golani reminded the audience that Air Commodore Jasjit Singh's vision was rooted in precisely such self-reliance and intellectual independence, making the lecture a fitting tribute to his legacy.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

1. The **multilateral order created after WWII** was structurally flawed and dominated by Western powers.
2. **India's experience at the WTO** demonstrates the capacity of developing countries to challenge inequitable systems.
3. The **UN Security Council veto system** continues to undermine global governance.
4. The world has entered a **heteropolar phase**, with multiple power centres and shifting alliances.
5. **India must pursue strategic autonomy** by reforming institutions where possible and creating new ones where necessary.
6. The legacy of **Air Commodore Jasjit Singh** continues to inspire strategic thought and national security debates in India.