

INDIAN STRATEGIC MISADVENTURES AHEAD OF ELECTIONS: DEPLOYMENT OF MIG-29 IN IIOJK

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

India deployed MiG-29 aircraft at the Srinagar Air Base in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK). Many analysts had already predicted such a mischievous deed by India ahead of the elections to garner the support of the public. According to recent news that surfaced, the Trident Squadron also dubbed as ‘Defenders of the North’ has replaced the previously stationed MiG-21,¹ which the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) shot down during Operation Swift Retort of February 2019.² The Indian Air Force (IAF) seems to believe that the replaced jets would facilitate a prompt response to counter the potential threats from bordering countries, Pakistan and China. According to IAF, the MiG-29 fulfils all the necessary criteria for this task.³

The MiG-29 seems to be the choice for the IAF due to better avionics, long-range missiles, night vision, and air-to-air refueling. For combat purposes, the aircraft is equipped with air-to-ground

¹ “India Deploys Upgraded MiG-29 Squadron in Srinagar To Counter Pak & China,” *Kashmir Observer*, August 12, 2023, <https://kashmirobsrver.net/2023/08/12/india-deploys-upgraded-mig-29-squadron-in-srinagar-to-counter-pak-china/>

² “Cost of two Indian aircraft shot down by Pakistan is Rs 6.53 billion: report,” *The News International*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/438426-cost-of-two-indian-jets-shot-down-by-pakistan-is-rs653-billion-report>

³ “J&K: India Deploys MiG-29 Squadron At Srinagar Airbase To Counter Threats From Pakistan, China,” *APB News Bureau*, August 12, 2023, <https://news.abplive.com/news/india/j-k-india-deploys-mig-29-squadron-at-srinagar-airbase-to-counter-threats-from-pakistan-china-abp-live-english-news-1622449>

armament and has the jamming capability to disrupt communication. The IAF seems to believe that the advanced aircraft and the forward-base location provide them a strategic advantage. MiG-29 is said to have been flying over the occupied valley since January 2023. It is also believed that IAF has deployed Israeli Heron Mark II unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) at the Srinagar Air Force base in IIOJK that is equipped with laser guided bombs and diverse payloads.⁴ Heron Mark II UAVs can reach a height of 10,000 meters, remain in the air for 45 consecutive hours, and can fly at a maximum speed of 140 knots.⁵ Due to its satellite communication links and ‘beyond line of sight’ capability, Heron would play a prominent role in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions along India’s borders with Pakistan and China.

Ahead of Indian Elections

As the upcoming elections in India inch closer, it is becoming increasingly noticeable that the BJP government is attempting to do everything in its power to bolster its image in the general public. The IAF military modernization drive in IIOJK seems to be one such move to provide the public with a false sense of security and superiority. The BJP government appears very keen on providing validations for its power and ability to its public. By taking such measures, the BJP government is not only showcasing the upgraded military capabilities but also attempting to tighten its grip over the disputed territory of IIOJK. BJP’s desire to ace the next election may be justifiable; however, offensive moves to upset the delicate regional stability will further heighten tensions with unforeseen consequences. In a series of measures since 5 August 2019, this comes as another step in the wrong direction.

India has proven to be an irresponsible state when it comes to handling of advanced military weaponry. The misadventure of the post-Pulwama crisis caused the IAF to lose two jets and their pilots and in the fog of war, shot down their helicopter. The case of BrahMos alleged ‘misfire’ is another latest example of how India is ill-prepared to handle advanced technology. Although during both incidents, Pakistan took mature and prudent decisions that deescalated the tensions, subsequent blunders might invite an apt response. Indian military’s eagerness and its temptation to carry out so-called ‘surgical’ action will not only push Pakistan to take countermeasures but such acts will also be a bid for offensive posturing by Pakistan’s defense forces.

⁴ Ajit K Dubey, “India inducts new strike-capable drones at forward air base in Northern sector to cover both adversaries,” *ANI*, August 13, 2023, <https://aninews.in/news/national/general-news/india-inducts-new-strike-capable-drones-at-forward-air-base-in-northern-sector-to-cover-both-adversaries20230813071709/>

⁵ Anna Ahronheim, “India buys 4 Heron MK II drones for surveillance in Ladakh,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/india-buys-4-heron-mk-ii-drones-for-surveillance-in-ladakh-680589>

Regional Military Modernization

Despite the conventional asymmetry in the region, Pakistan has adapted to the emerging trends and changing character of warfare. In addition, to upgraded JF-17 Block III, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) is set to acquire the fifth-generation stealth multirole fighter jet KAAN from Turkiye.⁶ KAAN is expected to reach a maximum speed of Mach 1.8 and its engine will be manufactured by Eurojet, the manufacturer of the EJ200 engine that powers the Eurofighter Typhoon. China is also set on the mission of developing a new JH-XX Stealth Fighter Bomber Aircraft.⁷ During the past two decades, China has developed several combat aircraft in its '20-series' including J-20, Y-20, Z-20 and H-20.⁸ With these highly advanced jets in their surrounding India's modernization endeavors might go in vain. Although India has military superiority, PAF is superior in terms of its maneuvering strategies and highly trained and professional pilots, as demonstrated by PAF's response to India's aggressive action in February 2019. This dreads IAF, due to which, this time, it is said that IAF has handpicked the pilots for its advanced fighter jet MiG-29,⁹ which is yet to be proven. According to an interview with a PAF pilot, the PAF is rapidly advancing its tactics through the integration of platforms. The PAF is overlooking the integration of ground and airborne sensors, including its sister services. This provides Pakistan's defense forces with a strategic advantage that Indian forces still lack.

Conclusion

The deployment of MiG-29 in IIOJK ahead of elections is one of the much-touted moves by the BJP government. It is evident that IAF is displaying an excessively confident demeanor, which can be harmful for regional peace. The supposed belief that such measures would strengthen BJP and render PAF ineffective to counter the IAF may prove to be a grave mistake. This move rather increases the susceptibility of miscalculation and escalation of tensions between India and its nuclear power neighbours Pakistan and China. Therefore, it is crucial that the Indian government evaluates all factors associated with such measures and not solely rely on its short-sighted electoral calculations and craving for power.

⁶ "Pakistan, Turkey jointly produce 5th-Generation stealth fighter jets," *Islamabad Post*, June 24, 2023, <https://islamabadpost.com.pk/pakistan-turkey-jointly-produce-5th-generation-stealth-fighter-jets/>

⁷ Steve Trimble, "China Teases New Bomber, But Timing Remains Unclear," *Aviation Week*, October 13, 2023, <https://aviationweek.com/shows-events/ausa/china-teases-new-bomber-timing-remains-unclear>

⁸ Steve Trimble, "China Teases New Bomber, But Timing Remains Unclear."

⁹ "J&K: India Deploys MiG-29 Squadron At Srinagar Airbase To Counter Threats From Pakistan, China," *APB News Bureau*, August 12, 2023.