**Short and swift: A reality check for India**

[Air Marshal Shahid Alvi (Retd)](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/air-marshal-shahid-alvi-retd/)

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The Indian Air Force Chief, Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari recently discussed the possibility of a “short and swift war”. He said, “In the IAF, there would be a need for us to prepare for short, swift wars as well as be ready for a long-drawn standoff akin to what we are seeing in eastern Ladakh.”

On its own, the statement does not ring any alarm bells as service chiefs routinely talk about the contours of future warfare in their regular addresses. However, in a span of just ten days, his statement was followed by threats from authoritative segments of the Indian government at a time when Pakistan finds itself in the grip of political turmoil. The chain of inflammatory and derogatory statements began with the Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, who said, “India will not hesitate to cross border if terrorists target country from outside.” To add to his sentiments General Manoj Pande, Indian Army Chief, declared that “Narco-terror nexus is being pushed from Pakistan side, Army ready to counter any hybrid threats” and finally Amit Shah, the Home Minister of India, came with his characteristic diatribe by claiming “Pakistan k ghar ma ghuss k marain gy.” (“We will intrude and beat them inside Pakistan.”)

These statements could be interpreted in several ways given the uncertainty at the global and regional level; however, I would restrict myself to the implications of the IAF Chief’s remarks about a short and swift war. The concept of such a war has become a popular plausible objective since the nuclearisation of India and Pakistan. Its objectives can only be achieved by air power because of its speed, reach and extraordinary power of destruction achieved through accurate long-range air delivered heavy loads that cannot be matched by any other service. While air forces around the world are fully cognisant of the implications of swift wars between two operationally well-prepared adversaries, however, the gravity of consequences have yet to be seriously weighed beyond air force circles. In a short and swift war, all resources of the fighting air forces on both sides would be put at the disposal of the respective commanders who would employ them in a most aggressive way to inflict extreme pain on the enemy considering the brief time at their disposal before escalation reaches intolerable limits.

The astounding vertical developments and proliferation of technologies and weapons systems has expanded exponentially at the cost of human lives and the horrific images emanating from the Middle East, Yemen and Ukraine speak volumes about the destruction caused by a single air attack. It is mainly the civilian population who pay the price of such devastation.

Although treaties ban certain conventional weapons, but recent wars have seen those inventories popping out of bomb dumps. The city of Sa’ada which was heavily hit by airstrikes during the conflict in Yemen in 2015; and the latest US drone attack that killed innocent children are just a few examples out of numerous in the past two decades. Air Force Commanders having the above-mentioned weapons at their disposal and a resolve to inflict maximum damage in a short and swift war would generate, round the clock, huge raids of loaded aircraft and drones/UAVs on hard as well as soft targets. Cruise missiles would reach deep targets that were otherwise considered safe due to depth in defence. Armed drones would impair military/high value industrial targets. Most industrial units in the closer belt and some major industries in the depth would be razed to the ground. Experience from Kosovo and the Gulf War tells us that electric grid stations are key targets to disrupt electric supplies, which would in turn make life dysfunctional. Railway stations and goods trains would be furiously attacked to disrupt supplies. Bridges, that take years to build, would cease to exist in a matter of very short time. They remain the most attractive targets to impede the advance of ground forces. Ordnance and defence related manufacturing factories would attract the attention of the opposing air force to cripple the targeted state’s capability for decades to come.

All this is not a figment of imagination. It is an attainable task for any professional air force in a very short time and the world has witnessed these in recent wars. The only difference this time, compared to one-sided Gulf wars, is the fierce fight to gain control of air, which would come at the cost of attrition of opposing air forces.

The writer is Deputy President, the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Lahore.

It is easy to start a war, but exceedingly difficult to stop one.