The term ‘air power’ was first used by H. G. Wells in 1908 in his novel *The War in the Air*. However, it became common usage only in the 1920s after air power had been extensively used as a military capability during World War I. At that time it was generally accepted that understanding air power theory was a complex issue and its optimum application even more so. Even now, although air power has matured into an indispensable military force within a single century, the complexity in its employment is profound. Air power has now become integral to the conduct of modern warfare and in certain instances in the recent past the central element in conflict. Therefore, a clear understanding of its employment and the effects it can create is necessary at the strategic level of national security.

Air power encompasses all the uses of aviation and related capabilities in the pursuit of the security interests of a state, and in some cases non-state entities. Although air power is primarily considered an instrument of national military power, under certain conditions it transcends the purely military realm and affects national security directly. In these cases it becomes an element of national power *per se*. As a corollary, a number of non-military factors within the nation influence the development of air power capabilities. In this context, some of the broader considerations that have a salutary impact on a nation’s air power are national technology base, sociological dimensions, economic considerations and cultural orientation of the population. All of these factors significantly affect a nation’s ability to generate, employ and sustain air power.

The military and foreign policies of a nation, in combination with its intelligence and other policies, support the national security policy. These policies provide the means to seek an end that secures the nation. The primary concern should always be to deter all potential adversaries and if that fails, to be able to fight and win the ensuing war. Air power provides two fundamental inputs to this broader national security equation, over and above its principle use as a military force in conflict. First, it can support or assume a lead role in enhancing the deterrent posture of the nation. Second, air power can be very effective when employed in a coercive role.

In its simplest form deterrence aims to prevent someone from doing something that is contrary to one’s own inclinations. From a national security perspective, deterrence starts with attempts to avoid conflict through the employment of appropriate elements of national power and further steps that provide graduated responses to emerging situations. A nation that adopts a strategy of deterrence must ensure that its response capabilities, in case of attack, are extremely robust and demonstrated, and that potential adversaries perceive them as such. This must be reinforced by the national will to employ the forces available.

In a deterrent role air power encompasses the four cardinal principles on which a strategy of deterrence is based—intelligence, credibility, perception and applicability. Airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities provide major inputs to the enforcement of a deterrent strategy by collecting...
and disseminating timely and accurate intelligence on adversary manoeuvre and capability. Credibility of a strategy of deterrence is dependent on the adversary being convinced that they will be attacked if actions inimical to the state are initiated. Air power’s ability to carry out lethal attacks with precision, discrimination and proportionality directly reinforces this credibility.

Deterrence is a matter of perception. Air power incorporates the ability to detect, deter and defeat adversaries and these same attributes can be tailored to emphasise the deterrent capabilities of the nation. Further, they can also be employed to alter the perceptions of the adversary through both kinetic and non-kinetic operations better than many other types of military forces and thereby uphold the strategy of deterrence. In fact non-kinetic actions that indicate to the adversary that their centres of gravity and value systems have been identified and can be targeted at will are potent tools of deterrence. Applicability of deterrence is dependent on the quantum of influence that a state can bring to bear on an adversary. Sustained operations, with the inherent risk of high casualty levels, will detract from the effectiveness of deterrence.

While deterrence aims to avoid the use of force, coercion requires the ability to achieve a systematic and escalating level of destruction, if required, of the adversary’s warfighting capabilities and other centres of gravity. In other words the necessity is to compel the adversary to accept the demands placed on them. Air power could achieve this through graduated non-kinetic action, such as show of force, although the success rate of these operations may not be high. However, the concept of coercion through the application of force is particularly suited to the employment of air power because of its inherent ability to carry out precision strikes against high-value targets.

The application of lethal force has become a last resort in the current global security environment. Accordingly, deterrence and coercive strategies, based primarily on non-kinetic actions, have become more predominant and acceptable. These strategies have also become heavily dependent on influencing and shaping the environment rather than adopting a more belligerent posture. Air power comes into its own in these circumstances through the delivery of humanitarian aid in a responsive manner and by demonstrating the nation’s innate ability to secure its interests. While these actions contribute directly to achieving national objectives and indirectly to national security, they have to be clearly underpinned by the ability to respond rapidly with force when necessary. Therefore, in order to be effective, air forces need to be flexible and retain a balanced force that can create the necessary effects across the full spectrum of conflict.

Under these circumstances, air power can be considered an element of national power. National air power therefore could be defined as the ability of a nation to assert its will through the medium of the air. This is a broad and overarching definition but provides an insight into the capacity of holistic air power to influence national security imperatives.

- Air power can enhance or be the lead agency in applying a strategy of deterrence.
- It is effective in implementing a coercive strategy if and when necessary.
- National air power is the ability of a nation to assert its will through the medium of the air.

Air power has become predominant, both as a deterrent to war, and—in the eventuality of war—as the devastating force to destroy an enemy’s potential and fatally undermine his will to wage war.

General Omar Bradley