Conventional wisdom is that an air force of calibre must be inherently balanced, meaning that it will be the repository of all air power capabilities in order to carry out its mandated function. In other words, it must have a sufficient balance of air power capabilities resident within it. The term ‘balanced’ is now almost common usage in contemporary discussions of air power capabilities. So what exactly does a balanced air force mean?

Air forces have traditionally been platform- and system-centric organisations, measuring their competence in terms of the number of aircraft that could be fielded as demonstration of their capability. However, in the contemporary information age, with the increasing sophistication in the concepts of operation, facilitated by technology-enabled application of air power, this measure is no longer indicative of the actual capability of a force. The effectiveness of a force is now measured in terms of the effects that it can create through the synchronisation and synergistic application of its capabilities of the required quality, in adequate quantity, and in the appropriate mix. The efficiency of such application is dependent on the force being able to employ the inherent advantageous characteristics of air power in such a way as to mitigate the limitations. It is in this context that the need for balanced air power becomes critical.

A balanced air force must be able to carry out four fundamental roles. First, it must obtain and maintain control of the air, delineated in terms of a predetermined quantum of time and space. The ability to do this is paramount to being balanced. The level of control of the air could vary vastly—from parity to supremacy. However, a balanced air force should normally create the minimum necessary control of the air for other operations to be conducted in a relatively safe manner, even if opposed by an equally competent air force. Another aspect of control of the air is that it is the product of the synergistic application of the other primary roles of airpower. This means that, in a cyclical manner, achieving adequate control of the air will require the air force to be balanced.

Second, a balanced air force should be capable of carrying out strike at all levels of war. The distinctions between strategic and tactical strike have blurred in the recent past. Even then, a balanced air force must have the capability to strike with reasonable assurance of success at the centres of gravity of the adversary, exercising the inherent characteristics of reach and penetration. These centres of gravity could be the fielded forces, maritime force elements or national infrastructure. Strike capability is one of the distinguishing elements between military and civil air power capabilities. Therefore, an air force without adequate strike capabilities cannot be considered balanced.

Air mobility is a unique capability of air power, one that is used by governments to meet a number of challenges. An air force needs to have air mobility, spread sufficiently between large, medium and small airlift capabilities to be considered balanced. Air mobility is a term that encompasses general airlift, aeromedical evacuation, search and rescue, air-to-air refuelling, as
well as specialist capabilities such as airborne operations and Special Forces insertion and extraction. While having the spread of capabilities is important, it is critical for a balanced air force to provide the flexibility for rapid deployment of a minimum amount of forces sufficiently removed from home base. The size of the force to be deployed and the distances involved would be a function of the national security policy and the posture developed from it.

Fourth, it must maintain the ability to gather, analyse and distribute information and intelligence in a timely manner. In an air force this function comes under the aegis of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). The ISR capabilities of an air force must have the minimum capacity to provide adequately analysed and high fidelity information to all who require it with minimal time delay. Airborne ISR capabilities have improved incrementally in the past few decades and now have the capacity to carry out observation continuously for extended periods. To optimise the use of this capability an air force needs a robust command and control network and a number of associated high-technology systems that are integrated. The ability to provide the right information to the right person at the right time and location is a primary requirement for a balanced force. Further, in a dynamic combat situation, requirements of timeliness and accuracy of information may be conflicting. The ISR capabilities of a balanced air force must be able to meet this challenging demand.

In addition to the four primary roles already stated, there are a number of secondary enablers that also have to be integrated into the functioning of the air force. A balanced air force therefore is a complex organisation that requires significant resources to be dedicated to it. Since air power capabilities are technology-enabled, the training required to achieve a minimum acceptable level of competence is complex and lengthy. Further, sustaining the necessary quantum of air power, both in relative peace and conflict, requires substantial resources to be made available. This may not always be within the reach of all nations and therefore, there are now only a limited number of balanced air forces world-wide.

There are two overriding facts that must be considered whenever the issue of a balanced air force is discussed. First, a balanced air force does not mean a large air force. Even a small air force can be balanced and the numerical size of the force will be dependent on the threat perception and other broader security issues within the overarching geo-political environment. Second, is more nuanced and establishes the need for a balanced air force. It is now an accepted belief that wars can only be won by a joint force and that single Services do not win campaigns or wars by themselves. Therefore, the national requirement would be to have a balanced defence force that can achieve the desired objectives. For a defence force to be credible it will always be necessary to have a balanced air force as an integral element within it. A balanced air force is critical to national security.

• A balanced air force must be able to carry out the four fundamental roles of air power.

• Sustaining a balanced air force is resource intensive.

• National security is dependent on a credible defence force within which a balanced air force is a critical element.

Air control can be established by superiority in numbers, by better employment, by better equipment, or by a combination of these factors.

General Carl A. ‘Tooe’ Spaatz