The concept of long-range or strategic bombing was implemented in the early years of World War II. Essentially it implies that aircraft carrying bombs can attack an adversary’s ‘vital centres’ and undermine their ability and will to fight. As a concept this seems straightforward. However, no other military power projection capability or concept generated so much controversy and aroused such emotional intensity during and after the War. The arguments for and against the concept are still on-going, and the issue remains as contentious today as it did when the early air power theorists—Douhet, Mitchell and Trenchard—proposed in the inter-war years that it would be possible to bomb an adversary into submission without having to defeat their surface forces or invade their territory.

The idea of strategic bombing was developed based on certain assumptions, which in turn brought about a set of expectations. It was championed by the United States and Britain who relied heavily on this modern concept during World War II as a central mode of modern warfare. There are three primary reasons for this. First, both these nations had built their defences based on powerful naval forces founded on their mastery of science and technology. It was not surprising that the advent of the aircraft—a technological marvel of the day—as a weapon of war automatically made its use for deterrence and offensive power projection an acceptable option.

Second, bomb-carrying aircraft were seen as a means of fighting and winning a war without having to undergo the trauma of the enormous number of casualties suffered during the Great War of 1914-18. At the beginning of World War II, both sides were unwilling to accept a repetition of the horrors of trench warfare. Further, although strategic bombing was not successfully carried out during World War I, the initial seed for the generation of the concept was laid by the Zeppelin raids on London and the civilian reaction to it. Third, at the end of World War I, the first independent air force was formed in Britain. However, the inter-war experience of the newly formed Service was that it was constantly at peril of losing its institutional independence. For a fighting Service, independent status is predicated on it having a role that no other Service can fulfil; although there was no precedence to commend it, strategic bombing was considered the best option to be advanced as a unique role.

The concept of long-range bombing had started to be discussed long before heavier-than-air platforms became a reality and was fundamentally based on the perceived behaviour patterns of modern society. This became fundamental to the thinking about and development of strategic bombing as a war-winning concept. It was asserted, without any real empirical proof, that modern, urban-based societies were fragile and vulnerable, easily broken psychologically through disruption brought about by aerial bombardment. This was based on the presumption that modern societies have only limited political loyalty to the ruling regime and that modern economies are highly susceptible to disruption of any kind. These arguments also gave credence to the air force claim of its efficacy as an instrument of coercion, further bolstering its independence. In an indirect manner the concept of targeting the industry, economy and population of an adversary from the air made it imperative for a nation to maintain an air force, for both defence and offence, if it wanted to survive in the case of...
a war. This further cemented the independent status of air forces. There were two flaws in this concept development process. First, was that assertions of human vulnerability and the effects that strategic bombing would create on the national ethos rested squarely on wishful thinking and not on facts. Second, it was buttressed by the overriding belief of the time that the bomber would always get through to the target.

Three major factors proved to be the undoing of the claim of the primacy of strategic bombing to winning the war at a low cost. First, modern society was found to be very resilient and robust with the inherent capacity to accept tremendous punishment and yet not capitulate. Second, the bombers themselves were found to be vulnerable to both airborne and ground-based air defences that inflicted heavy damage on them; and third, the accuracy of aerial bombing was nowhere near what was needed to make an impact on the economy of industry of the adversary. It can be said that the concept of strategic bombing, as applied in World War II, did not verify the claims that were made by air power advocates.

In the aftermath of World War II, both the Korean and Vietnam Wars made extensive use of air power, primarily as an attack element. However, these wars failed to establish a connection and satisfactory balance in the crucial relationship between strategic bombing and political outcomes. The air campaign of the 1991 Gulf War radically changed air power employment beliefs. It brought to the fore the concept of air strikes on selected targets to achieve strategic, operational or tactical effects as a prominent element in warfare. Thereafter, air attacks on the adversary’s vital centres of gravity have become standard modus operandi to elicit concessions from or remove recalcitrant regimes.

The evolution of the concept of air attacks has to be understood in terms of developments in air power efficacy. First, the perception that long-range strikes create ‘strategic’ effects has become redundant. In contemporary warfare, creating the right effects at the right time is critical to success. These effects could be created to achieve very short term tactical goals, medium term operational objectives, or long term strategic aims, in line with the broad political imperatives that initiated the conflict. Second, these effects can be created through actions at the tactical, operational or strategic level of combat. The fundamental change in the concept has been that purely tactical actions can now create strategic effects. This revolutionary change has been made possible through technology-enabled weapon systems that assure the necessary precision, proportionality and discrimination in their application.

Since air power has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to strike with precision, the concept of strategic air attacks—as opposed to strategic bombing—has once again become an idea that is being pursued by military forces. This is so because a single missile is now capable of creating more damage than a number of World War II era bombs, and aircraft are also capable of attacking multiple targets in the same mission. Precise and discriminate attacks on leadership, command and control facilities and economic targets that would produce the desired effects on the adversary are now within the ambit of air power. This has resulted in creating a mode of warfare—essentially based on air attacks—that could produce the desired results with minimal probability of own casualties. Further, such air attacks also provide a viable alternative to physical ground intervention and the associated political conundrum that emerges.

Current air power combines technology, like stealth, and innovative ideas to make strategic air attacks capable of delivering on the promises of early air power theorists. It can now create effects to achieve political end-states through precision attacks. The concept of strategic bombing, it seems, has come full-circle.

Key Points

- The concept of strategic bombing to win wars was developed without any empirical information to support it
- World War II demonstrated that modern, urban societies were robust enough not to capitulate to incessant aerial bombardment
- Strategic air attacks can now be carried out with precision, proportionality and discrimination to create the necessary effects and achieve political objectives