CONTINUITY IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF AIR POWER

Air power is the key enabler and force multiplier in counter-insurgency warfare because of its flexibility, speed of response and the ability to deliver weapons with precision.

— Christina J M Goulter

Air forces are integral and vital sub-elements of national defence and security, and are the principal repositories of the nation’s offensive and strategic air power capabilities. In the less than 100 years of independent existence, air forces have realised a status as a Service that collectively possess a high level of professional knowledge. This has been the result of concerted development of well-articulated doctrine and innovative concepts of operations that have facilitated the optimum employment of air power in direct contribution to the achievement of national objectives. However, with the changes in the characteristics and conduct of war brought about in the past few decades, there are doubts being raised regarding the adequacy of available air power theory and concepts to efficiently address the fundamentally altered conflict situations and emerging threats.

There is a direct, but generally not well understood, relationship between air forces and national security. The military force is a foundational element of national power directly supporting national security initiatives. Air force, as an indelible part of any viable military force, automatically contributes to ensuring national security and protecting national interests. Essentially, air power is a vital part of the wider range of elements that assure a nation the secure environment necessary for it to prosper.

The changing characteristics of war, wherein contemporary conflict is almost completely irregular in nature as opposed to the traditional force-on-force concept of warfare, has raised a fundamental question regarding the continued relevance of air power in emerging conflict situations. As a corollary, peripheral doubts regarding the need for air power projection capabilities—meaning independent air forces—have also been subtly articulated. There are two primary factors that clearly dispel both these erroneous lines of thinking.

First, the foundations for the employment of air power is based on cumulative professional knowledge that is continually building on evolving theories, concepts and practical experience. At the same time the guiding principles for its effective application remain the thread of continuity. Therefore, air power has the inherent strength and depth of professionalism to swiftly analyse and understand even rapid changes in warfighting characteristics and modality and to adapt to the altered conditions.

Second, air forces have matured sufficiently in their ability to interface with the other Services effectively, and to also operate with non-military national agencies. In effect, air power can and does contribute to a whole-of-government approach to containing contemporary threats.

In the current security environment, especially in conflict situations, the role and effectiveness of air power is constantly being analysed, questioned and at times denigrated, even though there is irrefutable proof of its efficacy. Barring a few notable exceptions, land forces have been seen as the primary military element conducting most contemporary, irregular conflict. The operations conducted by other military
Capabilities, particularly air power, without which none of the operations could conceive of success, are largely invisible. This invisibility is further exacerbated by the perception of combat air power not being available to the land forces when required. This discordance is not new and has existed from the time that air power became a military power projection capability. It can be explained as a result of a less than optimum understanding of the strategic role of air power even in the smallest of engagements, the limited air power asset availability in most cases, and prioritisation of their allocation at the highest levels.

Irregular wars are primarily characterised by decentralised and ever-changing battle spaces as well as the adversary’s preference for urban combat. Air power comes up against a number of challenges in this scenario. At the strategic level, air power’s ability to coerce, deny and punish is neutralised when combating irregular forces because they do not normally have a recognisable identity or command structure to coerce or deny. At the operational level it is difficult to distinguish combatants from non-combatants and friend from foe from the air. The probability of collateral damage—which is politically undesirable and could also have strategic repercussions—is much higher in irregular conflicts.

In this rather amorphous state of affairs, air power lacks a viable independent strategic role. However, it contributes in the critical areas of interdiction, close air support, air mobility and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Interdiction, while difficult in the context of an irregular war, is still effective in denying the adversary the resources necessary to continue the fight. Since irregular forces rely on speed and movement, they do not normally carry large amounts of ammunition and supplies. They are dependent on regular resupply and, therefore, are more vulnerable to interdiction. The provision of close air support is also more difficult in comparison to conventional conflict. This is so because of the dispersed nature of irregular combat operations and the difficulty in recognising potentially critical points. However, close air support can be extremely effective and a ‘game-changer’ when delivered at the right time and place. Air mobility is critical to the insertion, sustainment and extraction of Special Force elements, especially in a dispersed battle space where combat can erupt abruptly and at random. This is a particularly important capability in irregular conflicts, since it permits a numerically small force to influence and dominate a large geographical area.

The characteristics and conduct of conflict has undergone a sea change in the past few decades. Although faced with a number of challenges and the ongoing changes in the arena of conflict, air power has continually adapted and contributed effectively to national security as a critical element of the state’s military forces. This has been made possible through its entrenched and cumulative professional knowledge and competence. The guiding principles—drawn from accumulated experience and knowledge—are the visible threads of continuity in the employment of air power within the ever changing security environment.

**Key Points**

- Air forces are the principle repositories of a nation’s air power capabilities
- The cumulative and evolving core of professional knowledge of air forces provides them the ability to rapidly adapt to the changing characteristics and conduct of war
- Interdiction, close air support and air mobility are critical to success in irregular wars