The nature of war has not changed over the centuries—every war is initiated to achieve political objectives through the employment of military forces. However, the characteristics and conduct of war have been continuously evolving, a process influenced by the available technology, context of the conflict, and the cultural and behavioural ethos of the participants. War, or conflict, broadly means the employment of the military forces of a sovereign nation against adversaries who themselves may or may not constitute a regular military force.

For a few decades after World War II, war continued to be fought between the military forces of two or more nations. However, the Vietnam War altered this status quo conclusively. From the 1970s, most conflicts have been fought between military forces of a nation and non-traditional adversaries, labelled a plethora of names—guerrillas, irregular forces, terrorists, insurgents etc. This raises two factors that must be considered in order to predict the characteristics and conduct of future wars and understand their implications for air power and air forces.

First, wars can be classified broadly into either ‘wars of choice’ or ‘wars of necessity’. This classification holds true irrespective of the characteristics or conduct of the conflict. Wars of choice are the ones in which the national security interests of the participating nation(s) are only peripherally or indirectly influenced by the outcome of the conflict, and from which a nation could withdraw at any time without serious prejudice to national security. Wars of necessity are different. They are conflicts that a nation is compelled to fight because not doing so would directly impact the security of the nation. The consequences of losing such a conflict cover a broad spectrum, from limited and perhaps bearable to where a loss threatens the very existence of the nation. The extreme cases of ‘wars of national survival’ are thankfully rare, although wars of necessity are still distinct possibilities. Even though the world today is exposed to more regional conflicts than was the case during the Cold War, most of these conflicts are ‘wars of choice’, especially in the case of Western nations.

Second, most contemporary wars evolve into conflicts wherein one participant resorts to the use of non-traditional means, thereby introducing asymmetry and other irregular means to its conduct. Conventional military forces may struggle to adapt to such conflicts, since their doctrine, training and fighting ethos are oriented towards combating forces similar to themselves. In the past few decades, these conventional military forces have taken giant strides in adapting to the changed conditions of operations. It may be that, in some cases, the pendulum has swung too far in favour of irregular warfare in terms of training and the development of concepts of operations. A large military has the inherent capacity to train a certain part of the force to cater for the irregular aspects in the conduct of conflict while continuing to maintain a majority of the force oriented towards its raison d’etre—the defence of the sovereignty of the nation against any and all attacks.

Numerically smaller forces will be challenged to achieve this while still being able to perform their core function—to protect national interests in wars of necessity against a similarly arrayed adversary. A military force must be able to conduct and win a war of necessity against an opposing conventional force if it is to be able to fulfil its primary responsibility to the nation. The topical claim that ‘low tech’
irregular conflicts are the only foreseeable threat would seem to be short sighted.

Having said that, it is unlikely that the world will witness a significant state-on-state war in the near future. Irregular wars that have no fixed start or end time, and are of varying intensity and tempo, will continue to manifest in a number of areas globally. However, the assured intervention in these conflicts by a conventional military force also cannot be predicted, although it would be safe to assume that such intervention would take place. In these circumstances, it would be necessary to look at the expectations of a middle-power air force and how it could continue to be an element of strategic influence in national security. All middle-power air forces with credible capabilities are facing similar major challenges—lack of resources, a changing threat scenario, increased demands from the government to perform a much broader spectrum of operations than ever before, and longer deployment durations that tend to discretely impinge on the operational preparedness of the force. There is no single panacea solution that could be applied to address these issues. Each air force has to solve them individually, with no two contexts being the same, while taking into account the unique requirements of their national security.

When considering the future employment of air power there are two areas where a degree of commonality could be envisaged. First are the capabilities that must be inherent in air forces for them to continue to be of strategic influence. Only a full-spectrum capable air force that can carry out all air power roles—control of the air, strike, air mobility and ISR—can achieve this status. This means that an air force must have sufficient combat capabilities resident in it to assure the nation that its surface forces would be able to operate without undue interference from enemy air power at a time, place and duration of the nation’s choosing. Such an all-round capability can only be delivered by an air force capable of operating at the leading edge of technology, since air power is technology-enabled and empowered. There are many factors that influence an air force’s ability to achieve this outcome.

Second is the ability of such an air force to adapt the same capabilities for operations in an irregular war wherein the application of air power capabilities would be more nuanced and at times discrete. Medium-sized air forces need to tread carefully in achieving this adaptability because normally they do not have the spare capacity to transform for optimised use in irregular wars. Therefore, the limited quantum of air power capabilities resident in middle-power air forces would have to be such that they can be rapidly scaled for employment in the most probable conflicts of the future, while retaining the high-end ability to perform their fundamental job of defending the nation and its interests against all attacks. This is a tall order, especially within the constraints that have been mentioned earlier.

In simple terms the scenario is this: the probability of state-on-state conflict occurring is fairly low, although it cannot be dismissed outright; in order to remain strategically influential and to be considered a critical element of national security, air forces need to have full-spectrum capability; the same capability needs to be contextually flexible in order to be effective in irregular wars, the most probable kind of future conflict.

It will be an ill-judged move by a middle-power air force to neglect its capability to carry out its core responsibility to provide adequate control of the air in order to meet the unique demands of irregular wars. In the long-term, no air force will be considered a strategic asset if it cannot assure the security of the nation. The need of the hour is for middle-power, full-spectrum capable air forces to ensure that they are not reduced to a tactical tool of strategic insignificance.

Key Points

- The most likely wars and conflicts of the future will be irregular in their characteristics and conduct.
- Air forces will need to maintain full-spectrum air power capabilities to ensure defence of the nation while having to scale their capabilities to meet ‘low tech’ requirements.
- Middle-power air forces face a challenge in being able to meet the broad spectrum of conflict that span benign operations to full-scale warfare because the future is unpredictable.