In a generic manner it is understood that national security involves the safeguarding of the sovereignty of the nation and protecting national interests. While most nations define national security with built-in nuances that are unique to their circumstances and perceived security needs, the fundamental appreciation remains the same. While national security is built on a number of elements of national power, military force is a crucial element that permits comprehensive integration of these elements to achieve national objectives. Air power, primarily resident in the Air Force of the nation, is an indelible part of the military forces and critical to the success of all military endeavours.

The military forces of a nation, including its air force, are expected to operate across a wide spectrum of conflict that spans multiple operations. These operations start with the almost benign use of military forces to deliver much needed humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to the other extreme end where they would have to fight and win a war of national survival, if and when necessary. Admittedly, in the contemporary world, the probability of the occurrence of a war of national survival seems minimal, although it can never be categorically ruled out. In these circumstances, military forces have to cater to and be prepared for such an exigency, however remote it may seem, for the force to discharge its duties effectively. This would require the force to possess credible high-end capabilities.

The broad spread of capabilities necessary to cater for the spectrum of conflict is perhaps most clearly evident in the case of air power. Air power’s ability to rapidly deliver humanitarian assistance into even contested battle areas is unique and a prized capability in the contemporary world. This is so because democratic governments across the world now subscribe to the theory of the ‘right to protect’ people who are in danger of being overwhelmed by either natural calamities or man-made disasters. This is only an example of air power’s contribution at the lower end of the spectrum and may not always be directly connected to national security.

A fundamental requirement of national security is to ensure freedom from attack—against the State and/or its interests. In this aspect, air power has a number of important roles to play. Freedom from attack can only be achieved by ensuring adequate control of the air. Control of the air is an absolute prerequisite that can only be assured by a competent air force with the necessary capabilities. There is, however, an interim step that needs to be initiated before achieving control of the air through the application of air power—the ability to demonstrate a deterrent capability. Even during times of relative peace, in the air domain the Air Force will have to create a credible deterrent posture in order to ensure that potential adversaries do not attempt to undermine national security through either overt and/or covert actions. This will require the high-end of the capability spectrum to be clearly evident in the operational capabilities of the Air Force. Essentially, from an air power perspective, national security imperatives form an ongoing continuum.

These days it has become common, and perhaps fashionable, to state that all conflicts in the future would be irregular in their conduct, and that the military forces must be tailored to fight similar conflicts to those waged in the recent operations in Afghanistan for over a decade.
This philosophy, if it can be called that, is short-sighted and fraught with danger because it is developed without a clear understanding of the fundamental requirements of national security and the orientation required of the nation’s Air Force to ensure it. The broad strategies within air power that could be applied towards achieving national security are the strategies of influence and shape, deterrence, coercion and punishment. The use of air power to influence and shape has already been discussed briefly in terms of the rapid provision of humanitarian aid. Deterrence and, if it fails, coercion, cannot be achieved in the air domain without resident high-end capabilities in an air force. Air power’s capability to achieve the desired end-state has been demonstrated repeatedly in the past decade in a number of operations. The political circumstances that prevail in much of the world today negates the use of ground forces in enforcing the will of the collective nations—normally through the resolutions of the United Nations—on a recalcitrant nation bent on initiating actions that are inimical to world order. The use of air power in a focused and deliberate manner has therefore become the first choice option of governments. This cannot be achieved without sufficient high-end air power capabilities within the Air Force. National security requirements transcend a narrow outlook that would have air power capabilities developed and focused purely on their application towards the conduct of irregular warfare.

At the highest point of the application of air power is the strategy of punishment that also sits at the extreme end of the spectrum of conflict. Whether in an irregular conflict, as some analysts tend to believe the future of conflict to be, or in a conventional conflict against another national air force, the only way the Air Force can deliver its responsibilities is to have the highest-end capabilities with which it can apply force with precision, discrimination, and proportionality that are fundamental requirements demanded with contemporary norms of the conduct of any air strike. These three requirements are inviolate in the application of force and the rules that govern them. The high-end air power capabilities have transformed these requirements into characteristics of air power—a triumph of sophisticated technology at the highest-end. An air force that does not possess these characteristics will normally be left standing on the sidelines when national security interests are being seriously threatened.

There are two fallacies that are regularly articulated when air power and its contribution to national security is debated. First, that all future wars will be fought against irregular adversaries who will not possess any air power capabilities and therefore high-end air power capabilities are now passé. This thinking does not take into account the broader aspects of national security; suffers from tunnel vision; and is a very biased understanding of air power. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Second, that high-end air power capabilities are far too expensive to acquire, maintain and operate and therefore, lesser capabilities could be substituted and could achieve the same results. Once again, this is an argument put forward by theorists who do not consider or understand the broader aspects of a whole-of-government approach to national security.

No single domain capability will assure national security. However, an air force without high-end capabilities and operating at the cutting edge of technology with precision, discrimination and proportionality will never be able to fully serve the nation’s interests.

Key Points

- The Air Force operates across a broad spectrum of conflict situations.
- Air Forces ensure control of the air and therefore the freedom from attack in the third dimension.
- Precision, discrimination, and proportionality are fundamental characteristics of a modern air force.