THE CONTINUING CRITICALITY OF AIR POWER TO NATIONAL SECURITY

‘The modern way of war and other high-end security operations demand air superiority to permit effective land and sea force manoeuvres.’

—Air Marshal Angus Houston,
Keynote Address, 2004 RAAF Air Power Conference, 16 September 2004

In June 1996, the RAAF held a conference in Canberra with invited speakers of international repute to explore the theme of ‘New Era Security’ and investigate the position of ‘the RAAF in the next twenty-five years’. The proceedings of the conference are available at the APDC website—http://airpower.airforce.gov.au/Publications/list/35/Conference Proceedings.aspx?page=3

One of the presenters, a much respected academic, finished his rather provocative paper stating, ‘If present trends persist, thirty years from now most air forces will have dissolved into space commands on the one hand and some form of air cavalry on the other. In between, most major combat aircraft will have disappeared. Like dinosaurs, they will be confined to musea where they will no doubt be admired by gaping crowds. Pilots will have hung their pressure suits in the closet, never to put them on again. An age in military history will be gone. It was glorious while it lasted.’

In a more recent publication, A History of Air Warfare, (John Andreas Olsen (ed), Potomac Books, Inc, Washington D.C., 2010) in a chapter written by him ‘The Rise and Fall of Air Power’, the professor refers to his 1996 paper and makes the same point that the world is moving towards the ‘end of air power’ and argues that since all future conflicts will be of the low-intensity kind and irregular in nature, ‘there probably is no compelling case for independent air power at all’.

These assertions and the logic behind them, especially when they have been made by a respected academic, need to be analysed in detail and comprehensively repudiated.

First, in the 1996 paper a continuum of logic was put forward to assert that combat air power had seen the end of its day. It was reasoned that the ‘sheer expense and complexity’ of building and maintaining an air force made it possible only for nation-states to do so. From this flowed the idea that air forces could primarily be employed only against other states and since state-on-state conflicts are highly unlikely to take place in the contemporary scenario, air forces would be redundant. The use of air power against irregular forces with no clear borders was considered to be extremely limited and therefore not worth the resource expenditure required. A similar argument has been put forward in the aforementioned book.

It is apparent, even to a casual observer that since 1996 air power has continued to ‘rise’—to an extent that most governments consider it as the force of first-choice when responding to emerging challenges. First, the spectrum of conflict in which air power is employed in ensuring national security has broadened considerably in comparison to even two decades ago. It now encompasses humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) activities at the non-lethal end of the spectrum to waging a war of national survival at the other end. Even when engaged in HADR missions, it may become necessary for the combat element of the force to be involved in protecting the airlift and other assets being employed. In a globalised world, responsible nations need to be able to respond rapidly to evolving crises and air power is the only capability that can deliver within a realistic timeframe. The connection between national security and air power, predominantly vested in air forces, is direct and tangible.
More importantly, what needs to be analysed is air power’s contribution to the contemporary wars. First, the argument that air power lacks the ability to avoid collateral damage has been very clearly discredited in the past decade or so. Today air power can and does carry out proportionate, precise and discriminatory attacks that neutralise even small and moving targets without causing any noticeable collateral damage. In fact it is this very capability that makes it the weapon-of-choice for employment against irregular forces operating without readily identifiable centres of gravity. Air power has proven itself, time and again, to be more effective and lethal than the employment of surface forces in irregular warfare.

Second, the Western world has been engaged in conflicts against irregular forces for more than a decade, in places far away from home. The operations have all been expeditionary in nature and even the surface forces are compelled to rely on air power—both airlift and combat air power—for strategic sustainment as well as for efficiency at the operational and tactical level. There is now no concept of operations being developed that does not leverage the multi-dimensional capabilities of air power to ensure success in the battlefield. This is a far cry from the predicted demise of all combat air power.

Third, the application of lethal military force is now under extreme scrutiny and therefore the constraints in terms of impinging on the sovereignty of recipient nations when military interventions are contemplated have become important political considerations. Air power’s ability to deliver measured responses, repeatedly and with unparalleled flexibility, while not having to create a semi-permanent footprint in another nation is now a prized capability. No government can ignore the advantages and influence that come with the possession of truly expeditionary air power capabilities delivered by an air force. No other military or national capability can compare favourably with the rapid and effective response that air power provides to a government—in peace and in war.

There are some one-sided arguments that are being made questioning the necessity to have independent air forces. These opinions do not take into account the entire spread of air power deliverables and are more often the product of an incomplete understanding of the contemporary battlespace. Air forces provide the fundamental prerequisite for all other operations to succeed—they deliver control of the air. The arguments to dismantle air forces are more often than not made by Western thinkers. It will be necessary to mention here that this thinking comes from the fact that no multinational Western surface force has had to operate without air superiority delivered by their air forces, ever since the Korean War more than half-a-century ago. In the span of few generations it is easy to forget, even within a well-informed military force, the extreme discomfort when it has operate under enemy air attacks—one only has to ask the British military members who served in the Falklands War. Ever since air power became a weapon of war, control of the air has been and will continue to be the foremost quest of air forces.

In the contemporary scenario, governments have certain expectations of their military forces. A capable air force bridges the gap between expectations and reality by providing flexible and rapid response options to address emerging and evolving national security challenges. The so-called ‘fall’ of air power, being predicted since 1996, is not visible even in the far horizon. Arguments stating that air power has outlived its usefulness are not only naïve but also ill-considered vis-à-vis the security of a nation.

Key Points

- With increasingly sophisticated technology being available air power has become capable of proportionate, precise and discriminate application
- Contemporary conflicts rely more heavily on air power for their successful prosecution than ever before
- Predictions of the demise of air power have been made on incorrect assumptions and a lack of understanding of the requirements of national security.