The term ‘bomber’ in the above quote could well be replaced by ‘fighter’ in a contextual manner and it would still hold true. If the latest news reports are true, it would seem that the US Air Force is preparing to spend more than $60 billion on a large stealth aircraft that will eventually replace the existing fleet of strategic bombers, other than the Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit. Does this indicate that the largest and most formidable air force in the world is on track to build the next and the most expensive strategic bomber? It also brings into focus the relevance of the concept of strategic bombing.

There are a number of factors and issues that must be analysed both independently and in combination to judge whether or not the concept of strategic bombing is still valid for the application of lethal air power in the pursuit of national objectives. At the heart of this analysis is the understanding of what ‘strategic bombing’ as a term means to the air power professional.

The origin of the term can be traced back to World War II when systematically organised and executed attacks from the air came to be referred as strategic bombing, since the attacks were meant to defeat the enemy and ensure their surrender by destroying their morale as well as their economic and industrial ability to produce and transport materiel to different theatres of war. In total war this would mean that all aspects of the adversary’s war-making potential, including human resources engaged in any nation-supporting activity, become legitimate targets for air attacks. In the initial stages of World War II, strategic bombing of continental Europe was also the only means by which the Allies had of taking the war to the home of the enemy since the ground forces were only in contact with the German military deep inside North Africa. The combination of these two factors forced the accelerated pace to develop the concept of strategic bombing as a war-winning strategy.

From this understanding a broad definition can be coined: ‘Strategic bombing is the methodology used to diminish or neutralise the enemy’s overall war-making capability through sustained attacks on targets that may be located deep inside the adversary-state.’ In World War II, such attacks led to the complete destruction of whole cities since the accuracy of bombing was nowhere near what was required to exclusively target the war industries. It is from these indiscriminate (with hindsight) attacks that the issue of collateral damage evolved, which in turn led to the development of the internationally accepted laws regarding aerial bombardment.

Although not directly connected to the development of international standards regarding the employment of strategic bombing, the use of atomic ordnance against Japan could be considered the ultimate operation within this concept. If the defeat and total surrender of the adversary is the final aim of a war, then the use of catastrophic force is perhaps the surest way to achieve it. However, the employment of nuclear weapons has not occurred since its initial use in 1945 and is a subject of a different stream of debate, not germane to this discussion.

When viewed dispassionately the concept of making an enemy surrender, because their war-making capability has been neutralised, is an attractive proposition. The reason for going to war may be political, but the optimum
military end-state that facilitates the achievement of further political objectives is the unconditional surrender of the adversary. Therefore, strategic bombing is not an obsolete or dying concept. Then what has changed from World War II to contemporary conflicts when the term seems to be rarely used?

The nature of the employment of air power has remained a constant, it is only the characteristics of the conduct and the methodology that have altered visibly. New terms have arisen to indicate this change—strategic interdiction, strategic attack etc.—but at the core the concept has remained the same; the degradation of the adversary’s war-making capability.

The improvements, made possible by advances in technology, in both weapon performance and delivery capabilities of modern fighter platforms, has now made ‘strategic strike’ the favoured term for the same concept. There are two noticeable differences in the conduct of strategic strike as compared to strategic bombing.

First, is in terms of the platform. Strategic bombers are extremely costly to develop/procure, maintain and operate effectively, and therefore may not be an option available to middle-power air forces. Only the United States and Russia currently maintain a viable strategic bomber fleet. The use of strategic bombers to deliver a few bombs on a target would not stand the test of an honest cost-benefit analysis. On the other hand, the long range of modern ‘tactical’ fighter aircraft— further enhanced through air-to-air refuelling, multi-mission capabilities and enlarged bomb carrying capacity—makes them ideal mid-range strategic strike platforms. Global reach can off course be achieved only by strategic bombers like the B-2 or the in-development Long Range Strategic Bomber (LRSB). Targets that would have required large formations of strategic bombers to attack with the required assurance of destruction in a World War II scenario can now be attacked and neutralised by a single tactical fighter aircraft carrying precision-guided munitions, while also ensuring that collateral damage is optimally minimised. The cost factor and the demonstrated capability of fighter platforms make the notion of the employment of strategic bombers somewhat obsolete, in most cases.

The second difference is the issue of collateral damage, which has now become politically unacceptable and distasteful. This has led to a paradigm shift in the manner in which lethal air power is employed. This altered perception regarding the infliction of ‘unnecessary’ destruction has also provided impetus to technological innovations that have produced revolutionary advances in weapons capability and delivery accuracy. There is a clear understanding within political and military decision-making circles that dual-use infrastructure and facilities of an adversary should only be targeted in extreme cases. The overriding principle of the humanitarian application of force is of paramount importance for all responsible nations. With the inadvisability of neutralising dual-use or pure civilian centres of gravity and weighing-up the need to neutralise targets which are embedded within civilian population centres, the modus operandi invariably is of using ‘smart munitions’ delivered from a fast attack jet fighter rather than a large number of bombs from a so-called strategic bomber. The modern jet fighter can deliver the desired kinetic effect with precision, discrimination and proportionality.

The United States Air Force has demonstrated the ability of strategic bombers to drop precision guided-bombs independently on different targets in the same mission. However, the cost-effectiveness of using a strategic bomber to neutralise a target that could have been attacked with equal efficiency by a ‘tactical’ fighter operating in theatre becomes questionable, especially in middle power air forces operating under stringent resource constraints. It would seem that the days of the ‘strategic bomber’ as a platform are numbered, while the concept of airborne strategic attack continues to remain of primary importance in prosecuting a military campaign successfully.

**Key Points**

- The concept of ‘strategic bombing’ was a major innovation in the application of air power that was brought about in World War II for a number of reasons.
- Diluting the adversary’s war-making potential through air attacks connects directly to the political objectives of a campaign, conflict, or war.
- Strategic bombing/attack as a concept is still valid, although the characteristics and methodology of delivery have changed considerably.