‘Aircraft enable us to jump over the army which shields the enemy government, industry, and people, and so strike direct and immediately at the seat of the opposing will and policy. (Emphasis in the original)


Almost a century ago in 1921, Giulio Douhet, the renowned Italian air power theorist, stated that the aeroplane was an inherently strategic weapon. In the contemporary world this statement still holds good and can be expected to mean that air power is a strategic capability. This means air power, because of its ability to operate in the third dimension, is able to bypass the counterforce battles that the armies and navies have to fight and directly target the centres of gravity of the opposing nation. Dependent on the context of the battle, campaign or war being fought, these centres could be industrial, military, economic or political loci of the adversary group. This routine ability to create strategic effects has been a central characteristic that had guided air power employment over the years.

The differences in the application of air power have come about not because of any dissonance in understanding its strategic capabilities, but by the selection of targets that when neutralised would create the desired effect. The process of identifying and selecting the appropriate target is influenced by a number of factors, with most of them being outside the immediate control of the air campaign planners. However, it is important for everyone associated with the application of air power—from the highest level of political leadership to the operational level air commanders—to understand the diversity of the strategies that can be supported by air power through the selection of appropriate targets, for collectively they define the boundaries of strategic air power capabilities.

They clarify the relationship between air power and its role in national security.

Almost immediately from its first use as a weapon of war, air power and air warfare were recognised as being fundamentally different to land power and surface warfare. Over the past several centuries, surface warfare has evolved in a somewhat steady manner, resulting in centuries-old theories dealing with firepower, manoeuvre, logistics, administration, command and control, technology and many others that collectively entrench a doctrine that has needed refinement only at the operational level and in the development of concepts of operations. The operational techniques of the ‘Great Captains’—starting from Alexander, through Fredrick, Napoleon and Guderian, all the way to Schwarzkopf—employed in winning their battles and campaigns are surprisingly similar in their purpose and execution.

Air power is different. Given that air power was ‘invented’ rather than arrived at as a progression, it was only natural that its theories would also be revolutionary rather than the product of long-drawn-out evolutionary processes. Further, air power did not have the luxury of being able to reach back to experience when confronted with a challenge, having to innovate a new theory of warfare and strategies to support it. In the initial stages of this development, the horrendous human losses of World War I was a credible influence, making the leading thinkers search for a direct connection to strategic defeat of the adversary through the identification and neutralisation of their centres of gravity rather than
tactical and operational defeat of the military forces in the battlefield.

This does not diminish the crucial role that air power plays in the actual battles on the ground. In fact, there was a school of thought, at the very infancy of air power theory development, that advocated the destruction of the enemy military forces, both on land and at sea, as a prerequisite for victory. The argument was that air power could achieve this end-state far more rapidly and effectively than the slugging match that land warfare had deteriorated to in World War I. Even at the beginning of World War II, the destruction of the enemy army was considered the first priority for air power by some theorists. Indeed, there are some who, even today, claim that it was the tactical air campaign against the Iraqi Army in Kuwait that led to the Coalition victory in the 1991 Gulf War and not the air campaign against the strategic centres of gravity in Baghdad.

The truth is that air power must be employed in a contextualised manner and the selection of targets also will have to be done with the desired end-state in view. Further, as the conduct and characteristics of war have continued to evolve over the decades, the clear distinction that existed between strategic and tactical targets—which meant that their destruction would create strategic or tactical effects upon the adversary—has now become ambiguous. This has translated to a situation wherein a target in the battlefield could be of strategic importance in the wider view of the effects that its destruction would create. However, this kind of situation is still infrequent.

The central assumption in the application of air power is that the adversary is built around a complex system comprising of centres of gravity with varying importance. The ability of air power to target any one of them at will makes air power the ultimate strategic capability, from a military point of view. In addition, the non-lethal capabilities of air power produce a completely different set of strategic effects that are politically highly valued. The reach of air power, the ability to ‘touch’ that is optimised through a combination of range and speed, is a potent tool of diplomacy when a nation decides to assist another in times of natural or man-made catastrophes. The delivery of humanitarian aid and disaster relief through airlift is a powerful message of solidarity that can turn even recalcitrant recipients to friends. Contemporary air power has the innate capability to become the preferred tool for projecting a nation’s intent—benign or lethal.

Air power is a strategic element of national power. Its use as a tactical tool will always limit its full potential to produce the desired effect. Air power is best employed when the desired strategic end-state has been defined at the national security level and thereafter it is employed by air power professionals to create the necessary strategic effects to achieve that stated end-state. Any deviation from this process will invariably lead to the dilution of air power effectiveness. Considering that balanced air power capabilities are cost-intensive to acquire, operate and sustain, such employment would be an unpardonable waste of national resources.

Key Points

- Air power is an inherently strategic capability
- Air power has the ability to identify and neutralise the strategic centres of gravity of an adversary without having to defeat the opposing military force
- Air power must be employed in alignment with national security priorities to achieve strategic effects