At no time in history has the above observation by Clausewitz, the Prussian military philosopher, been more apt than in contemporary conflict. Even though the fundamental aspects of war have not changed—it remains a combination of violence, probability and politics. However in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, war has started to take forms that were hitherto unfamiliar as new characteristics that combine some features of regular and irregular military forces have started to evolve. Military analysts have started to posit the emergence of a new type of warfare—‘hybrid warfare’. The term ‘hybrid warfare’ by itself is not new and has been part of the military lexicon for some time. Even so, there is no universally accepted definition of hybrid warfare, which often leads to ambiguity in understanding it as well as in its usage.

Hybrid warfare can be defined as a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars—guerrillas, insurgents and/or terrorists—which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose. This definition is adapted from Peter R Mansoor’s ‘Introduction’ in Hybrid Warfare, published in 2012. In a broad sense, the term attempts to blend conventional and irregular warfare, at times superimposed by belligerent activities in the cyber domain. In hybrid warfare, irregular forces need not be centrally controlled or even directed, although in a number of cases, they form part of a coherent strategy especially when employed to oppose invading or occupying forces. Further, hybrid warfare plays out at all levels of war, from the strategic to the operational and tactical, although this interplay need not take place simultaneously or in any predetermined sequence.

Hybrid warfare is characterised by the following: operations are conducted by both state and non-state actors; normal conventional military capabilities are used while employing irregular tactics; the conflict could, and normally does, involve indiscriminate violence against non-combatant civilians and it fuses multi-modal activities. Military forces that are not agile and remain mired in the traditional mode will find their effectiveness reduced continually when operating in hybrid warfare scenarios. Clausewitz wrote in his famous treatise On War that, ‘Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions and its own peculiar preconceptions’. Hybrid warfare is the kind of warfare that contemporary military forces will have to contend with for the near to mid-term future.

So where does air power fit into this complex scenario of hybrid warfare? From the outset, it must be understood that the tactical application of air power possesses an inherent advantage over other forms of force projection capabilities—it does not need additional training to adapt the application to a particular kind of warfare. At the fundamental level, the training required for the application of air power remains the same. The roles that air power undertake will also remain the same—control of the air, strike, air mobility and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). The difference in its application will only be the emphasis placed on the roles, which will vary contextually.

The inherent flexibility of air power, in combination with its ability to respond rapidly and simultaneously to emerging strategic, operational and/or tactical situations can be leveraged as a short-term substitution for ground forces in volatile circumstances. This is particularly applicable in hybrid warfare, where the presence of ground forces could exacerbate an already hostile situation. The success of the application of air power in hybrid warfare is based on four factors—its capacity to
generate timely and accurate intelligence; its capacity to enable decision-superiority for the entire force; its ability to match weapons-to-target in order to generate the desired effect, both kinetic and non-kinetic; and its proficiency to respond rapidly across the full spectrum of hybrid threats.

The conventional employment of air power is fairly clear and not overly complex. In hybrid warfare, the employment will have to be both innovative and contextual. Essentially, control of the air remains unchanged in this context. In recent times, Western military forces have been operating unchallenged within an uncontested airspace, where their own air superiority is assured. This has led to a less-than-optimum understanding of the need to fight for, obtain and maintain the necessary level of control of the air. Air power capabilities, necessary to achieve control of the air, are not part of a ‘good to have’ set, but form an indelible part of the ‘must have’ set, irrespective of the kind of war that is being fought. Control of the air, and the ability to achieve it, remain critical to the success of all other operations.

Strike operations in hybrid warfare will be restricted by the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) principles of precision, proportionality and discrimination. The demand for precision or accuracy might require the cancellation of a strike mission at the very last minute to avoid collateral damage. Although LOAC states that there must be an acceptable relationship between the legitimate destruction of a ‘military’ target and the ensuing collateral damage, the current geo-political environment, especially when viewed through the gaze of the media, is almost intolerant of any collateral damage. In hybrid warfare, air power will have to be cognisant of the need to carefully manage this perception challenge.

Air mobility is at the centre of hybrid warfare. The ability to insert, sustain and extract small teams of special forces is a prized capability that is largely dependent on air mobility. Through the effective employment of air mobility, a numerically small force can enforce its will over a large geographical area. Similarly, ISR is a pillar of all hybrid warfare operations. Persistent airborne ISR that creates continuous situational awareness through wide-area sweeps, the provision of spot, as well as detailed, moving target indicators (MTI) and radar imagery is critical to the discovery of adversary targets and centres of gravity. This in turn facilitates a rapid decision-destruction cycle, which is a fundamental requirement in the successful prosecution of hybrid warfare.

Contemporary warfare is gradually fusing to become a single hybrid form—a new model that is being embraced by both state and non-state actors. Air power, through control of the air, precision strike, air mobility and persistent ISR, will provide the foundation to successfully conduct hybrid warfare.

Key Points

- Hybrid warfare is one involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars, which could include both state and non-state actors.
- The roles that air power undertakes in hybrid warfare will remain the same as in a conventional war—control of the air, strike, air mobility and ISR.
- Air power brings to the conduct of hybrid warfare its inherently unique characteristics.