CLASSICAL THEORIES AND AIR WARFARE

‘The air ocean and its endless outer space extension are one and indivisible, and should be controlled by a single homogeneous force in consonance with the military axiom of economy of force and unity of command.’

Major Alexander P. de Seversky, In The Air Power Historian, 1958

The exploitation of the third dimension for military purposes, brought about by technology, rapidly changed the manner in which the industrialised nations practised the art and science of warfare. Early air power theorists sought to fill the conceptual gap the new technology created drawing on the limited experience gained in World War I. The classical theories of air warfare started to be considered on the merit of their logical persuasion only after a century of air power application as an instrument of military power. The foundations for the application of air power were formulated on visions rather than practical experience. In sharp contrast, the theorists of the armies and navies have distilled several centuries of historical experience to bring forward eclectic views on the characteristics and conduct of surface warfare.

The ability of a military force to directly attack an enemy nation’s civil population, its war economy and even the political structure, as well as its military forces deployed on land and at sea, has been an advancement without precedent and parallel. This ability revolutionised the conduct of warfare.

The advent of air power provided war-planners with the wherewithal to strike at the heart and centre of the adversary—the centres of gravity that when destroyed or neutralised diminishes the adversary’s ability to make war to an extent where victory is easily achieved. The other aspect of air power is its demonstrated ability to create attrition on a scale that was never before possible, as demonstrated during the attrition-based World War II. The bombing of Dresden is a classic example of such a capability. There is good reason for the on-going and acrimonious debate regarding the ethics, morality and legality of the employment of air power in a war of attrition.

The early theorists—notably Douhet, Mitchell and Trenchard—like all prophets, were guilty of being ahead of their time. Even though they tended to be dogmatic in their arguments, they established the basic assumptions that have subsequently created an appreciation of the critical role of air power in the conduct of all, and any, kind of wars. However, criticism of the classical theorists have focused almost exclusively on what they are perceived to have got wrong, rather than what they got right. The ascendancy of air power as a crucial element of national power has also been based on the intellectual outpourings of the early theorists. The comprehensive philosophy that now underpins the employment of air power to ensure national security, considered in its broadest description has also stemmed from the theories and concepts that were advocated in the 1920s and 30s.

The early theorists recognised four factors as being the driving force for the development of air power in its infancy. These factors continue to be the foundation for the rapid improvements in air power capabilities that have become almost routine. First, the need to obtain ‘mastery of the air’ and to keep it for the duration of the campaign/war, which automatically means having to fight for it continually. This requirement has to be tailored within a given context to the level needed and in terms of time and...
the capability to meet the initial needs in such cases. Sea to deliver humanitarian aid is critical. Air power provides or human-created, the need to transport items required demands in peace and in war. In times of calamities, natural to place is an enduring requirement to meet emerging need to rapidly transport much needed items from place commerce are the mainstays of a nation’s prosperity. The transportation, or airlift. In the modern world, trade and application. This contribution is in the realm of air power early theorists formulated the concepts of air power in a manner that was not readily apparent when the contested air environments.

The third is the ability to destroy the adversaries’ centres of gravity, whether they are production centres, communications hubs, or leadership targets. This ability is built around the capacity to ‘strike’, leveraging air power’s inherent characteristics of speed, reach and perspective that combine to produce a rapid response to emerging threats. Further, the ability of air power to create precise, discriminate and proportionate effects gives it the ability to be a strategic weapon of great flexibility. Fourth, is the ability to carry out one’s own disruptive activities, so that the adversaries are unable to support their efforts at prosecuting their own campaign. This would mean cutting off the adversaries’ supply chain and lines of communications at nodal points.

The current combat requirements of air power have emanated from these basics. Air power’s capacity to achieve the above fundamental objectives have been greatly enhanced over the years through technological sophistication. Technology has added other force multiplying capabilities to air power, such as: Airborne Early Warning and Control systems that enhance situational awareness at all levels of combat; air-to-air refuelling aircraft, which greatly increase the reach and loiter time of combat platforms; and uninhabited aerial vehicles that reduces the risk to human crew, especially in contested air environments.

Air power further contributes to warfighting in a manner that was not readily apparent when the early theorists formulated the concepts of air power application. This contribution is in the realm of air power transportation, or airlift. In the modern world, trade and commerce are the mainstays of a nation’s prosperity. The need to rapidly transport much needed items from place to place is an enduring requirement to meet emerging demands in peace and in war. In times of calamities, natural or human-created, the need to transport items required to deliver humanitarian aid is critical. Air power provides the capability to meet the initial needs in such cases. Sea transportation will continue to be the long-term solution to ‘moving things’ across the world. However, in times of dire necessity, in war or peace, airlift provides the answer.

Although the classical theories and their strong advocacy by the early theorists were responsible for the creation of independent air forces, the demands being placed on a nation’s air force today are very high. In fact, there are only a handful of air forces across the world who will be able to meet all the demands every time. Therefore, air forces have to nurture the inherent flexibility that they have in order to switch focus at very short notice. The early theorists did consider this possibility and very strongly advised against the tendency to penny-packet air power assets by dividing their command and control to small groups in an attempt to meet disparate requirements. Analysis of air campaigns has repeatedly proven that flexible application is the answer to inadequacy in the quantum of air power assets and not penny-packeting.

A holistic analysis demonstrates that the theories and concepts put forward by the classical theorists, even though some of them were considered heretical at that time, have withstood the test of time. The basic requirements of an air force has remained the same: ability to control the air and strike the centres of gravity; rapid transportation of personnel and materiel through airlift; and the creation of adequate situational awareness by carrying out intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and disseminating information gathered. The art and science of air warfare owe their robustness to the visionary concepts that early theorists developed and propagated. Without those foundations, air power may have continued to be a secondary capability, especially considering the animosity that was displayed against independent air forces in the early years. Like the technology that made air power the current ‘weapon of first-choice’, the theories and concepts of the classical air power thinkers cemented it’s position at the vanguard of power projection capabilities.

**Key Points**

- Air power’s ability to attack targets of choice changed the conduct of war irreversibly
- The early air power theorists were quick to establish the theories and concepts for the application of air power as a military force
- The foundational requirements for the success of an air campaign has remained the same through more than a century of its application as an element of national power.