At the end of World War II, General Carl A. Spatz, the first Chief of Staff of the independent United States Air Force stated, ‘World War II might have ended differently had our enemies understood and made correct use of Strategic Air Power’. In 1942, Germany was at the height of its power and had made Europe into an impregnable fortress, immune to attack by any time-tested method of warfare. The situation pointed to the need to develop a new concept of warfare in order to avoid what would otherwise have been a prolonged war of attrition at an enormous cost in blood and treasure. The new technique that was chosen to take the war to an ascendant adversary was the concept of strategic air power.

In World War II, the concept was built around the conduct of an independent air campaign that was directed against the war-making capacity of the adversary. The air campaign did not have any direct connection to other surface battles and campaigns that were being conducted simultaneously. From the basic process of attacking the adversary’s potential to wage war, the concept has evolved to being a primary mission of air power in war. While the ability to conduct a strategic air campaign is a critical capability in conventional wars, the concept has been adapted to suit irregular wars that have become common in recent decades.

There are three principles regarding the application of military power that is inherent in air power, which in turn makes a strategic air campaign easily tailorable to contextual requirement. First is the principle of mass. Air power has the ability to bring to bear forces from widely distributed bases onto a single target simultaneously. The capability to concentrate force rapidly is unique to air power. Second is the principle of economy of force. Air power can neutralise selected target systems with minimal waste of effort, leveraging off the characteristics of its weapons systems—precision, proportionality and discrimination. Even within a target system, air power can select the vital point for destruction, achieving the effect of neutralising the system. The third is the principle of objectives. The ability of air power to penetrate and reach far into the interior of enemy territory facilitates the destruction of selected objectives that are vital to the war making capacity of the adversary. These objectives are the centres of gravity of the adversary and the ability to neutralise them from a great distance is unique to air power.

A strategic air campaign is an element of air power that manifests as an instrument of national power that is capable of paralysing the adversary’s military power in a responsive manner. More important is air power’s ability to create effects that will have long-term implications for the war-making ability of the adversary through targeting industrial and manufacturing capabilities. In addition, technology has facilitated air power to be able to deliver tremendous striking force with unprecedented swiftness in parallel—deliberately destroying communications facilities, supply chain and transportation hubs and fuel storage and plants.

The success of a strategic air campaign is dependent on the air force being able to obtain and maintain adequate control of the air. Control of the air is a prerequisite to conduct a sustained strategic campaign. Since the strategic campaign would inevitably have to be carried out over enemy territory, obtaining control of the air will itself necessitate an independent air campaign. Further, there will also be the need to continually ‘fight’ to retain the necessary level of control of the air as long as the strategic air campaign is in progress. The resource requirements to conduct two
independent air campaigns simultaneously—one for control of the air and the other the strategic air campaign—may not be available to some air forces, in which case the objectives would have to be suitably altered downwards.

The concept of strategic air power is not new, it stemmed from World War II and was refined through repeated analysis and adapting to the evolving character of war. Strategic employment of air power was, and even today is, not as readily understood as the traditional tactical application of air power. After more than 60 years of developing the concept of strategic air power, experience provides few pointers that will directly influence its effectiveness as a strategic instrument. One is the lead-time required to acquire and bring together the hardware, operational concepts and tactical training to create a system of systems that can effectively carryout a strategic campaign. There is also a requirement for the force to possess the technological sophistication to accept the capability and readily operationalise it.

Two, the efficient application of air power requires a unique understanding of the third dimension that only comes with adequate professional mastery of the individual and collective force. Air power has a strategy and operational concept of its own, peculiar to functioning in the third dimension. It follows that the principle guiding the command and control of air assets would vary from those of surface forces. The post-World War II period saw the entrenchment of the air power tenet of ‘centralised control and decentralise execution,’ where the centralised command is left unsaid as being understood. With the advent of 5th-generation air power systems, this tenet has started to evolve more towards ‘distributed control and decentralised execution.’ Only a professional airman will be able to assimilate the nuances in employing air power.

Three, military forces have not only got to be ‘joint’ in operations but starting at the planning stage itself. Within this joint calculations, the air force must be given its independent campaign of strategic importance. An integrated approach to the application of force does not mean that individual Services and their operations are subsumed into one holistic plan. It only means that the objectives of independent campaigns must be aligned to support the ultimate goal of the war, first military and then political victory. The need to conduct a strategic air campaign gets emphasised in this calculation.

Four, whatever the circumstances, control of the air is the primary pre-requisite for the success of all other operations.

In contemporary campaigns, most of the irregular adversaries do not have any credible air power capabilities. Therefore, the need to carry out a dedicated campaign to obtain and maintain control of the air has gradually been forgotten. It has to be reiterated that sustained operations of any kind cannot be carried out without first having control of the air.

The concept of a strategic air campaign does not invalidate the requirement for a surface campaign. Wars will only be won by an optimised, jointly planned, and integrated application of land, maritime and air power. Air power however provides the wherewithal to avoid a lengthy war of attrition and may even be able to decide the outcome of a campaign even before surface forces have to engage the enemy in major battles. This is the unique ability of air power.

Key Points

• The concept of strategic air power is built around the conduct of an independent air campaign that is directed against the war making capacity of the adversary.

• There are three principles regarding the application of military power that is inherent in air power—mass, economy of force, and objective.

• Irrespective of the circumstances, control of the air is a pre-requisite for the success of all other operations.