Any discussion of war as a political instrument needs to be made with reference to war in theory and war in practice. For only an analysis of war in the abstract and war as waged in reality will provide the richness with which to examine the relevance and implications of the Clausewitzian paradigm of war.

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In any discussion of war, three factors are considered fundamental to understanding its nuances—the nature of war, its characteristics and its conduct. These factors, while being independent, are also indelibly intertwined and influence each other both directly and indirectly. To gain an understanding of the nature of war, it is necessary to explain war itself. In a very broad manner, war can be defined as a violent clash of interests between or among organised groups, normally characterised by the use of military forces. Traditionally, these groups have been established nation-states. However, throughout history, there have also been non-state groups who have waged war. These non-state groups, which have proliferated in the past six or seven decades, pursue their own political interests, mostly contrary to the state within which they operate. They wage war when they gather the ability to generate organised violence on a scale that is sufficient to create significant political consequences.

In today’s context, war and armed conflict are treated as synonymous terms, although there is a subtle difference between the two. Armed conflict implies the pursuit of objectives through organised violence by any group able to do so, whereas war can be described as an extreme form of armed conflict that usually takes place between states. Even though the recognised international community consists of sovereign states, armed conflicts are more often fought by a non-state group attempting to impose its will on another similar group or even the government of a nation-state. The result is a noticeable blurring of the lines that demarcate war, armed conflict, conflict, terrorism, crime and peace. The transition from war to peace is not a definable moment any more.

The famous strategist Carl von Clausewitz has described war as, ‘the continuation of policy by other means’. It follows that if war is an essential instrument of policy, then the military objectives of the war should support the political objectives, which also shape the scope and intensity of the military operations.

The nature of war describes its unchanging essence—it describes the fundamental differences between war and other human undertakings. By its nature, war is violent, interactive and fundamentally political. If even one of these elements is missing from a human undertaking, that action is not war, but some other endeavour. The character of war describes the way in which a particular war manifests directly in the physical domain and indirectly in the cognitive domain. As war is directly aligned with the political aims of a state or group, its character will be shaped by those politics and societies—by what Clausewitz called the ‘spirit of the age’. The conduct of war is undoubtedly influenced by technology, law, ethics, culture, morality, societal norms, type of government, military organisation and myriad
other factors that evolve and change in a contextual manner.

In recent times, a number of analyses and articles, primarily those examining the ‘revolution in military affairs’, have mentioned that technological advances are driving changes in the ‘nature of war’. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The nature of war is unchangeable and remains the pursuit of political objectives. While the conduct of war, the methodology employed to ‘fight’ it, will continually evolve and alter, and the character of war will be contextually different in each individual case, the nature of war will remain constant.

Ever since it arrived on the scene as an element of military power in World War I, air power has been an agent for change, by introducing technology-enabled capabilities that have altered both the character as well as the conduct of war. Its impact on warfare has been enormous, essentially brought about through technology. This impact and its indelible connection to technology could be the reason for the wrong perception that technology has been altering the nature of war.

At its inception during World War I, the observation and surveillance capabilities of air power very rapidly negated the manoeuvre options of the adversary. In turn, the inability to carry out flanking manoeuvres contributed to the now infamous ‘trench warfare’ and its appalling casualty rate. The face of war had changed for ever. Similarly in World War II, air power was employed as the only means to attack the German forces and territories in the initial years of the war. The concept of land borders and their defence by the army of the nation was proven to be unsustainable very quickly. The character of war once again changed irrevocably.

The concept of control of the air as a prerequisite for the success of any other operation also became apparent during World War II. Ever since then, every military force in the world strives to obtain and maintain control of the air to ensure that surface operations can be undertaken without enemy interference. The preponderance of lethal power vested in the military forces of the developed nations and the rapid response to emergent situations that air power provided were two of the catalysts that changed the character of conventional wars. They entrenched the idea of asymmetry and irregular wars, conceived to overcome the inherent disadvantages that non-state groups faced. This form of warfare has now become the norm.

Air power and Special Forces were the first to adapt to this new normal. Air power turned itself into an asymmetric asset for the military forces, becoming a critical element in prosecuting an irregular war. In the process, it once again dictated changes to the character of war as well as its modus operandi.

The core roles of air power—control of the air, strike, air mobility, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR)—continue to be optimised through technology-enabled advances. The changes to the operational and tactical application of air power brought about by these improvements, in turn, influence and alter the character and conduct of operations of military forces.

The nature of war has not changed—it remains eternally connected to the political objectives of the nation as an instrument of national policy. However, the character and conduct of wars, and all other forms of conflict, are in a continual state of flux, changing and adapting with time and context. In this evolution, air power has played a significant role and continues to do so.

Key Points

- War is an instrument of political policy and therefore its nature does not change.
- The character and conduct of war and armed conflict change with context and are evolutionary at all times.
- From its inception, air power has been an instrument of change both in altering the character and the conduct of war.