The joint, or integrated, employment of air, land and sea power in modern warfare blurs the demarcation of the effects created by the air force, army or navy to an extent wherein only joint effects are noticeable at the operational and strategic levels. However, it is possible to determine the positive effect created by each Service in its own role and the influence that is brought to bear on the overall campaign. The easiest way to analyse the contribution of individual Services would be to calculate or predict the result of the joint campaign being studied, if one of the three elements were missing.

It is an axiomatic fact that total victory can be achieved only by physically dominating the land, sea and air domains while achieving virtual supremacy in space and cyber domains. However, achieving such a state of superiority may not be possible in all circumstances, especially in the currently prevailing global security environment. Even so, the contribution of air power to all kinds of campaigns can be listed and described. Air power’s contribution to achieving the desired end-state in a campaign is critical and of such importance that the core roles of air forces have been developed based on this requirement—control of the air, strike, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and air mobility.

The employment of air power in a military campaign is based on the two fundamental requisites to victory in the battlefield—manoeuvre/movement and firepower. In turn, the ability to manoeuvre and to deliver the necessary firepower, at the right place and right time, is dependent on air superiority. In this context, manoeuvre is being mentioned as a holistic requirement for surface, maritime and air forces engaged in prosecuting the joint campaign. Freedom from air attack becomes a non-negotiable requirement for joint forces to manoeuvre or move rapidly and efficiently. There is no ‘defensive’ aspect to gaining and maintaining air superiority. The term ‘air superiority’ is used to indicate that, of the several different levels of control of the air that can be obtained, the optimum would be air superiority, which would permit unrestricted manoeuvre opportunities to the joint force. This state of freedom is necessary irrespective of whether the joint campaign is land-centric, amphibious, or maritime.

While gaining and maintaining air superiority is an offensive effort, denying the use of airspace to the adversary also forms part of the broader air campaign, which fits in as a sub-set of the joint campaign. Here, the term air campaign needs a brief explanation. An air campaign is only the actions initiated by the air element, within a joint force and within the guide-lines of the joint campaign plan, to produce the unique effects that air power has to produce to ensure the progress of the joint campaign. It is not to be construed as an ‘independent’ campaign being mounted by the air force on its own—it is the equivalent of the land or the maritime campaign plans constructed by the land and maritime commanders, within the joint force.

It was in World War II that air power was used for the first time as a prelude to, and preparation for, surface
operations. From the success of such application developed the fundamental theory of the employment of air power and air warfare. The use of air power to strike targets that could otherwise become obstacles in the advance of surface forces was refined to its pinnacle in the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. However, the other side of the coin is that it is doubtful whether air power alone could conquer a strong adversary. An understanding of this aspect at the apex of the joint forces is important to the concerted employment of air power in conflict situations.

If air strikes are fundamental to the success of a maritime, amphibious or land campaign, then the most effective manner of employment would be against the adversary’s military forces that are opposing one’s own forces. On the other hand, if air power is being employed to bring about a decisive result by itself, then the attacks should be aimed at less tangible strategic targets such as the political and administrative controls of the state, enemy economy and other centres of gravity that would undermine the will of the adversary to resist. In both cases adequate measures must be undertaken to ensure air superiority. In the air campaign plan, strikes will have to be tailored based on the role that air power is expected to play in the broader joint campaign. Air power can, and when optimally employed, does make a decisive contribution to the surface campaign. The effectiveness of the application of air power is directly proportional to the ability of the joint forces to exploit the air superiority that would have been obtained.

ISR provides air power the information necessary to identify the target that would, when neutralised, debilitate a selected centre of gravity. ISR is not a kinetic role of air power in combat, but provides the background that is critical to the effectiveness of the pointed end of the spear. The increasing importance of ISR in modern combat has evolved from two factors—the changing character of war that has become asymmetric and irregular, moving into combat within the civilian population; and the political requirement foisted on the military forces to avoid ‘all’ collateral damage, even though the Laws of Armed Conflict do permit unavoidable collateral damage in combat situations.

Rapid manoeuvre and highly mobile surface operations often stretch the capability of ground forces to logistically sustain them. Air mobility, through both fixed-wing and rotary assets, can support these operations through air supply so that the momentum of advance is not lost. Air supply and evacuation, when required, can assume an importance out of proportion with the actual total lift carried out. In an irregular warfare scenario, air mobility also facilitates the operations of Special Forces through insertion, sustainment and extraction carried out at short notice. The added advantage of such operations is that a numerically small force will be able to ‘control’ a geographically large area when sufficient air mobility is made available.

In the conduct of a joint campaign, air power is a critical element that could determine its success in the battlefield as well as in achieving the desired end-state. In the integrated application of a military force, no one element is superior, supporting or supported. The modern battlefield dictates that each capability has its own unique contributions to make and if one is found wanting, the joint campaign is unlikely to succeed.

Key Points

- The employment of air power in a military campaign is based on the two fundamental requisites to victory in the battlefield—manoeuvre/movement and firepower.
- Air superiority permits unrestricted manoeuvre opportunities to the joint force, a state of freedom that is necessary irrespective of whether the joint campaign is land-centric, amphibious, or maritime.
- In the air campaign plan, strikes will have to be tailored based on the role that air power is expected to play in the broader joint campaign.