Air power can no longer claim to be the youngest sibling in a triumvirate of military capabilities. Modern military forces have already ventured into domains that were in the realm of science fiction just a few decades back. Space and cyber have now become entrenched as domains in, and through, which ‘attacks’ are carried out by adversaries. Accordingly, nations attempt to protect themselves from these attacks by creating both defensive and offensive capabilities in all five domains. Of the five domains, four are physical domains and only cyber remains a virtual one, with its own unique characteristics. Although space is a physical domain, internationally there is at least an overt reluctance to accept that the domain has been militarised. This leaves the three traditional domains for the military forces to develop means to dominate, both in times of relative peace and during war.

A nation’s ability to physically project power at will continues to be predominated by land, maritime and air power capabilities. Other elements and factors will contribute to the employment of these capabilities in an optimum manner, although these extraneous factors will remain at the periphery of power projection. Over centuries of the application of force, military forces have learned that success in operations is easiest to achieve when the force is employed in a joint manner. Joint, in this case, does not mean that the three domain-centric warfighting capabilities are subsumed into a single homogenous entity; it means that the three independent capabilities are moulded in a contextual manner to achieve the operational objectives of the task force. The ratio in which the different capabilities come together will always be a function of the situation, contingency and context in which power is being projected and the desired military end-state.

Land and maritime forces have a long history of warfighting, whereas air power has a relatively short history to back its conceptual development. History also provides numerous examples of both land and maritime power being utilised individually to wage war and prevail over an enemy, and to protect the sovereignty of the nation. Arguably, the concept of jointness between these two dominant warfighting capabilities was not a consideration in military thinking and strategies until well into the 20th century. So what changed? What was the catalyst that probed military thinkers to come up with this idea of ‘jointness’? It can be argued that the advent of air power as a military capability was the headline event that brought about discussions and analysis of the concept of jointness in military operations.

The figure given above (published in the Joint Studies Paper Series 2, The Four Aspects of Joint: A Model for Comparatively Evaluating the Extent of Jointness in Armed Forces by Aaron P. Jackson, Canberra, 2018. p.14) reflects the arguments put forward in this Pathfinder regarding the need felt by land and maritime forces to embrace ‘jointness’ at the advent of air power as an integral part of military power projection capabilities.

Both land and maritime power are functional in physically separated domains. Although air power also functions in a different domain, it envelopes both the other
domains and can be brought to bear directly on either of them. During World War I, air power was employed over the land domain. The experiments with naval aviation in the early days of air power is being consciously omitted from this discussion. The first role that air power performed is that of observation, to facilitate the manoeuvre of the army. This was also the first ‘joint’ role that was undertaken by two domain-centric capabilities. Today, control of the air is accepted as the raison d'etre for air force operations. However, it would be well worth remembering that this role came about because it became necessary to deny airspace to the enemy to ensure the protection of the observation balloons from marauding ‘fighter’ aircraft of the adversary. This was the first step in the development of the joint concept.

The idea of attacking ground forces from the air was also conceptualised during World War I. While the actual capability of aircraft during this time was limited and therefore could not deliver the effects that the concepts promised, the concept of air-to-ground strikes was steeped in jointness. During the past century, the use of air power to provide fire power to the ground forces has not only become a corner-stone of joint operations, but at times also led to acrimonious debates regarding the ‘ownership’ and command and control of air assets. The fact remains that from its very inception, air power has been joined at the hip with land power. Along with the arrival of air power, jointness could not be denied.

Air power is an envelope capability, since it covers the other two basic physical domains without needing to be divided. It follows that the application of air power will therefore have to be seamless and unified, catering to the needs of the other domains. In other words, air power from its inception as a military capability has been inherently joint in nature.

As the concept of operations from, and in, the air developed, air power strategists realised that there was a need to carry out a campaign to obtain and maintain control of the air to the required degree so that surface operations—both land and maritime—could be conducted without enemy interference. This air superiority campaign is not often ‘visible’ to the land and maritime forces and therefore a myth of the air force fighting a war of its own has evolved. Nothing could be further from the truth. The air campaign to control the air is as joint as any other campaign and fundamentally meant to provide freedom of manoeuvre to the surface forces.

The clear distinction between strategic strikes and traditional interdiction strikes has somewhat blurred in recent times. Strategic strikes are meant to diminish the adversary’s war-making and war-fighting capabilities so that one’s own land and maritime forces can prevail in battle, campaign and war more easily. An examination of air power’s contribution to a conflict demonstrates the jointness of the application of air power in all contexts. From the strategic level to the tactical, air power is aligned to meet joint objectives.

Of all the power projection capabilities, only air power has been consciously joint from its very inception. In its infancy, the capabilities resident in air power systems were not technologically developed enough to deliver on the promises that were made by visionaries who conceptualised its forward trajectory. In a little over a century, these promises have been delivered and air power has established its truly joint credentials, across the entire spectrum of conflict. In the contemporary world, there can be no doubt that air power functions as an essential element within a joint force.

Key Points

- The first military role undertaken by air power was ‘observation’ for the land forces, which was an inherently joint endeavour
- The air campaign to control the air is as joint as any other campaign and fundamentally meant to provide freedom of manoeuvre to the surface forces
- During the past century, the use of air power to provide fire support to ground forces has become a corner-stone of joint operations