THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTROL OF THE AIR IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

‘Complacency in military thinking of control of the air being an expected right rather than a privilege that has to be fought for and won does not serve one’s own national strategic interests.’

-Sanu Kainikara, Essays on Air Power, p. 36.

The first dedicated role that air power undertook as a military power projection capability was that of observation, which has over the years developed into the sophisticated capacity to carry out intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). However, simultaneous to the development of the observation role, it was recognised that control of the air was a prerequisite for its success, since the safety of the Observer platform could only be ensured by controlling the air around it. From the very beginning of aerial warfare, the need to fight for, obtain and then maintain control of the air was understood by both tacticians and strategists.

From the need to protect a crucial asset in the air to ensuring that own surface forces were not subject to attacks from the air was a small step during the initial phases of World War I. By the time World War I came to an end there was an implicit understanding within the military aviation community that the fundamental role of air power, its raison d’etre, would be to establish control of the air over the battlespace. In the inter-war years that followed, the battlespace by itself started to be defined in different ways and the concept of control of the air also started to become a more sophisticated idea. This was bound to happen with the technology-enhanced improvements taking place in the application of air power.

So what is control of the air? The Air Power Manual defines control of the air as ‘the ability to conduct operations in the air, land and maritime domains without effective interference from adversary air power and air defence capabilities’. Control of the air provides a military force with the freedom to attack, freedom from attack and freedom to manoeuvre, achieved through the disruption, degradation and/or destruction of the adversary’s air power and air defence capabilities. Control of the air, therefore, is an essential criterion for the success of all military operations. This fundamental premise has been a tenet of military planning since World War II.

The nature of war—the quest to achieve political objectives through the application of force—has not changed over the years. However, in the past few decades the characteristics and conduct of war have altered significantly. Nations do not legally declare war anymore even when their military forces are engaged in brutal combat. More importantly, contemporary wars are in no manner similar to the wars that were fought up to the 1990s. Today, wars are better termed conflicts and are normally fought between the military forces of a nation-state and some amorphous non-state entity (ies) who pursue objectives that are intangible and adopt warfighting methods that pay no heed to the universally accepted laws of armed conflict. This new kind of conflict has been clubbed under the generic term ‘irregular war’.

The normal adversary in an irregular war, which typifies contemporary conflict, does not always possess significant air power capabilities. On the other hand, the regular military forces of the nation-state tend to use their air power capabilities as the first-choice weapon, emphasising air power’s ability to apply force with discrimination,
proportionality and precision. Air power’s rapid reaction capability also becomes an asset in combating irregular forces. Under these circumstances, control of the air is not contested and the air assets of the nation-state are free to roam in a benign environment without having to fight to obtain the necessary control of the air. This has been the case nearly for the past three decades.

This situation has led to the need to obtain and maintain definitive control of the air to being questioned in the planning and execution of normal military operations. The inference from the current state of affairs in the battlespace is that the assets that have been specialised for achieving control of the air are better utilised elsewhere. There are also viewpoints, often vociferously expressed, that air forces themselves could be abolished, based on the premise that control of the air is a given and therefore air power only needs to ‘support’ the surface battle through strikes when required.

This view is completely incorrect. It is indeed true that the current set of adversaries do not have significant air power capabilities that could contest control of the air. However, developments in air power have made it possible for irregular forces to contest control of the air through the concept of denial of the use of airspace in a designated area and for a pre-designated period of time. In an asymmetrical manner this is also control of the air delineated in time and space. It will be necessary for the nation-state’s air power to neutralise such defensive bubbles and gain control of the air. This is only one aspect of irregular warfare.

The proliferation of missile technology and its ready availability to the non-state actors have created another challenge. Surface-to-surface missiles create a situation where friendly forces come under fire and could be denied freedom to manoeuvre. Again, control of the air needs to be obtained in these circumstances with the degradation or destruction of the missile-launch facilities. The increasing sophistication of air defence systems that have also become available to irregular forces makes the need to establish control of the air a critical factor. The air losses inflicted by air defence systems to the Soviet air forces in Afghanistan during the erstwhile Soviet Union’s ill-fated, decade-long intervention there from 1979 is a classic example of the critical need to obtain control of the air before launching air or surface campaigns.

Control of the air may not be contested by state-of-the-art, technologically sophisticated airborne systems in irregular wars. However, control of the air is an asymmetry that conventional military forces leverage in combating non-state entities. Therefore, the irregular adversary will always attempt to degrade the asymmetric advantage through multifarious activities. The proliferation and easy access to highly sophisticated and effective air defence systems aid the adversary to contest control of the air, in an asymmetric manner. In turn, one asymmetric advantage is being neutralise by another asymmetric capability.

The characteristics and conduct of war have changed; conventional air power ranges through benign airspace in unquestioned control; but control of the air and the need to fight to obtain and maintain it at the required level can only be underplayed at the one’s own peril.

Key Points

- The need to fight for, obtain and then maintain control of the air was understood from the very beginning of aerial warfare.
- Control of the air is defined as ‘the ability to conduct operations in the air, land and maritime domains without effective interference from adversary air power and air defence capabilities’.
- Developments in air power have made it possible for irregular forces to contest control of the air through the concept of denial of the use of airspace.