As aeroplanes employed on such reconnaissance duties will encounter hostile aeroplanes with a similar mission to themselves, they must be prepared for attack and defence, or in other words, their means of destruction and defence against their own kind must receive consideration from the outset.’

Captain Neumann, Instructor, 1st German Airship Battalion, Article in Marine-rundschau, 1908
Translated in Journal of the Royal United Services Institution

At the end of World War I, air power analysts believed that the psychological impact of aerial bombing would far outweigh the physical damage that it caused. This theory was developed because the physical effect of aerial bombardment was relatively slight compared to the perceived psychological effect that it caused, especially on the civilian population of the adversary country. In the inter-war years, air power evolved in two distinct ways—spearheaded by Germany and Britain. The commonality between the two was that there developed a clear relationship between doctrine and the practical application of air power.

In a broad way it could be surmised that the Royal Air Force (RAF), formed as the first independent air force, adapted the developing and infant doctrine of air warfare to ensure that its independent status was assured. Lord Trenchard, who earned the sobriquet of ‘Father of the Royal Air Force’, did more than any other single person to steer the independent Service to embracing the fundamentals of air warfare—the ability to control the air, strike targets at will to create the necessary effect, collect intelligence and carry out surveillance and reconnaissance, and provide air mobility. He was also irrevocably committed to the concept of offensive action and also emphasised the need to concentrate the main offensive against the vital centres of the enemy. Air superiority was a critical element in achieving this objective.

Germany on the other hand had moved in a slightly different direction. The Treaty of Versailles and its protocols had eliminated the German Air Force and its supporting aviation industry. It took a great deal of subterfuge and the Nazi Party led by Hitler coming to power in 1933 for the German nation to announce the creation of the Luftwaffe in 1935. The Luftwaffe developed three primary missions—to combat enemy air forces, to support surface warfare and to disrupt enemy’s logistic supplies to the front line. Conspicuous in its absence was any reference to Douhet’s theories of strategic bombing since his works started to be translated into German only after 1935. However, in common with the doctrine of the RAF, the Luftwaffe also emphasised attack, or offensive action, as the principle to ensure dominance over the adversary.

At the outbreak of World War II, the two air forces that would dominate the early years of the conflict had individual concepts of operations based on doctrines that were fundamentally different to each other. However, offensive action was the basis for both air forces’ concepts of operations although neither of them fully understood the resource requirements to sustain offensive action and
the heavy attrition that offensive actions entailed. Air superiority, although considered an important element in the application of air power, was considered an elusive goal that depended on a number of extraneous factors, and therefore difficult to achieve.

There is no doubt that air power was a secondary capability during World War I. However, in World War II it dominated the fighting in most theatres. The concept of blitzkrieg, where tactical air squadrons swept ahead of the German armour thrusts into Poland, France and then Russia came as a shock to the land-centric operational concepts of the large armies. By destroying the opposing air forces (the Luftwaffe destroyed 1,811 Soviet aircraft within 24 hours), the German forces ensured unfettered air superiority and demonstrated the need to maintain control of the air. Towards the end of the War, the roles were reversed, but the cardinal principle remained the same.

Similarly, interdiction played a major role in determining the outcome of fierce land battles. It was not difficult for the planners and commanders to understand that control of the air was a prerequisite for the application of force, whether from the air or form the surface. Likewise, air power became the key to the outcome of naval encounters, with the command of the sea becoming dependent on control of the air. The famous Battle of Midway being the classic example of air power determining the outcome of what was essentially a naval battle.

As World War II progressed, the air domain assumed a status of its own, first in the European and subsequently in the Pacific theatre of operations. Two campaigns, primarily fought through the employment of air power, made it impossible for any strategic thinker to ignore the air dimension anymore—the Battle of Britain and the Bomber Offensive, both having been repeatedly and comprehensively analysed since 1945.

In the Battle of Britain, fought in the early stages of World War II, the failure of the Luftwaffe to gain air superiority over the English Channel and Britain has been rightly attributed to the change in target priority away from the RAF Fighter Command to London; a decision made personally by Goering himself. However, a contributory factor that played an equally important role was that of intelligence failure, which in turn influenced the decision-making and targeting process at the highest levels of the Luftwaffe. The lesson is that when the margin for victory is narrow, even the slightest mistake in decision-making and the application of air power will prove to be critically detrimental to success.

The Bomber Offensive is a campaign that is still mired in controversy regarding its efficacy, the prohibitive losses suffered by the attacking force and the morality of carrying out area-attacks. Strategic bombing is crucially dependent on two factors for success—the policy and direction of the campaign from a political perspective and target selection vis-à-vis its impact on the adversary. Air power is the most agile of power projection capabilities, but its inflexible application can make it seem a cumbersome capability. The signal lesson that emerged from the Bomber Offensive, stemming from the phenomenal losses that the allied bomber fleet suffered, is the supreme importance of obtaining and maintaining air superiority.

It was only at the end of World War II that a proper understanding of the concept of securing control of the air in order to ensure the unrestricted use of the air domain to carryout offensive operations against the enemy in all three physical domains—land, sea and air—became clearly enunciated. More importantly, it became accepted as a fundamental tenet for the success of all military operations. This central truth was repeatedly affirmed in the conflicts that followed World War II. Further, the ubiquity of air power became clear in the aftermath of World War II. Ubiquity in this sense means that air power is not only an ‘envelope’ capability, but one that is critical to the success of military operations in the domains in which other Services dominate.

In the first 50 years of the journey of air power as a military power projection capability, it had moved from what was essentially a secondary capability to one where its ubiquitous nature made it critical to success.

**Key Points**

- **In the inter-war years, the RAF as the first independent air force embraced the fundamentals of air warfare—the ability to control the air, strike targets at will to create the necessary effect, collect intelligence and carryout surveillance and reconnaissance and provide air mobility.**
- **During World War II, the air domain assumed a status of its own, first in Europe and subsequently in the Pacific.**
- **It was only at the end of World War II that a proper understanding of the concept of securing control of the air in order to ensure the unrestricted use of the air domain matured.**