THE AIR POWER JOURNEY: AN OVERVIEW

‘Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.’

Giulio Douhet, The Command of the Air

Over the past few decades, Western nations have employed air power as the ‘first-choice’ military capability within the national power equation, in numerous disparate circumstances. Most conventional employment of military forces since 1991 have almost always begun with, or were fully comprised of, a well-planned air campaign that led to subsequent and/or simultaneous surface action. The century-long journey that air power undertook to reach this position of ‘first-choice’, which could also be called a position of primacy, has been described in detail in previous Pathfinders (Nos 325 & 326).

For a number of reasons, Western military forces engaged in contemporary conflicts have become extremely risk and casualty averse and these politico-strategic circumstances are unlikely to change. Therefore, the strategies, concepts and tactics developed for the employment of military forces have had to take cognisance of the altered paradigms and adapt them to suit the prevailing conditions. Accordingly, air power theories and strategies that have so far been found to be relevant and effective would also need to be reviewed and tailored to meet the changing needs of the time.

A century ago, air power came into prominence with its promise of avoiding the appalling attrition of the static trench war that was epitomised by World War I. However, the theories developed by air power enthusiasts at the end of World War I fell short of expectations in operations because air power did not have the capabilities to fully achieve the claims that were being made. Similarly, the industrial web theory—the concept of neutralising the adversary’s warfighting capacity through air attacks—developed by the US Air Corps, was also an exercise in wishful thinking at the time they were developed. It was only at the end of World War II that the employment of air power, as anticipated by the early theorists as a means to end the war and limit casualties with the use of ‘catastrophic force’ became a reality with the use of atomic weapons.

The availability of nuclear weapons, primarily delivered by aircraft, brought about a radical change in the concept for the employment of air power. For about three decades of the post-World War II era, the Western world led by the United States (US), neglected the development of tactical aviation and concentrated on strategic bomber forces in pursuing the theories of flexible response, gradual escalation and the debate regarding first use that finally led to the acceptance of Mutual Assured Destruction.

It took several limited wars in the 1950s, 60s and 70s for air power theorists to go back to the basics of air power and start to develop more sophisticated concepts of operations that fully encompassed the lessons from World War II. The ‘nuclear interlude’ would have to be considered an aberration in the development of air power theories and strategy. The Vietnam War was a watershed moment in the application of air power. While technology provided air power with capabilities that were unknown until then, and air power produced some spectacular battlefield successes, the Western forces lost most of the protracted campaigns and subsequently the long war. The efficacy of air power as a war-winning capability came under scrutiny—and rightly so.
Even though air power did not prove to be a strategic game-changer in Vietnam, at the operational and tactical level it developed into a capability without which combined/joint military forces could not function optimally.

Since the most significant developments in air power capabilities—both in terms of concepts of operations and technology-enabled systems—normally took place in the US, the end of the Cold War that brought about a re-orientation of the USAF, also affected the rest of the air forces of the Western world. Post-Cold War, air power was gradually adapted to become an instrument of coercion that was focused on avoiding casualties and collateral damage.

In the following few decades, the fundamental aspects of the employment of air power became embedded within the doctrine of not only air forces, but within the rapidly evolving concept of joint forces that was being embraced by all modern military forces. The need to obtain and maintain adequate control of the air became the *raison d’être* for the air forces around the world. Further, the strike, airlift and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance became accepted as the core roles of air power. The 1991 Iraq War, with its revolutionary concept of a dedicated air campaign preceding the ground campaign, demonstrated the war-winning capacity of resurgent air power capabilities and concepts. Air power had become a concept-driven capability supported by technological innovations, a fundamental change from its earlier technology-driven development.

The 1991 Iraq campaign and the subsequent air campaigns in the Balkans were, both individually and collectively, defining moments in the growth and influential spread of air power. At the turn of the century it seemed that air power had finally fulfilled its promises and also that its development was plateauing. The rate of improvement and the steepness of the developmental curve in terms of capability growth had started to reduce, while the sophistication of the application of air power to achieve strategic objectives had far surpassed any benchmark that had been so far established.

The so-called ‘Global War on Terror’ unleashed in the early 21st century provided yet another, if somewhat unanticipated, pivotal point in the application of air power. There was a distinct shift in the conduct and characteristics that continued to evolve as the conflict progressed—to an extent that in the nearly two decades after the initial actions in 2001, the conflict today has very little resemblance to the one that was initiated. One of the constant factors in this ever-changing scenario of irregular wars has been the criticality of air power to the success of battles and campaigns.

The global security environment is such that the possibility of large scale, conventional state-on-state conflict has receded to the background. At the same time the instances of irregular wars have increased rapidly. This trend is unlikely to change in the next two decades. In such a scenario, air power has become the central capability around which concepts of operations are developed for two separate but connected reasons. First, surface forces of an intervening nation are normally not welcome in the host nations because of the affront they would cause to nationalism and sovereignty. Politically such interventions have become unacceptable in most cases. Deployment of ground forces also carries the risk of mission creep and increases the chances of own casualties. The second reason flows from the first. In cases where external intervention is considered inevitable, then the first choice capability is that of air power since it has the ability to intervene rapidly without having to create a large footprint. Air power can also be employed decisively while adhering to the principles of proportionality, precision and discrimination. It is for this reason that irregular war campaigns are predominantly structured around the strike, airlift and ISR capabilities of air power.

In its one-hundred year journey, air power has become the central pillar of power projection capabilities—ubiquitous, agile and precise in its application.

**Key Points**

- Over the past few decades, Western nations have employed air power as the ‘first-choice’ military capability in a large number of disparate circumstances.
- In the aftermath of the limited wars of the late 20th century, air power developed into a capability without which a combined/joint military force could not function optimally.
- A constant factor in this ever-changing irregular war scenario has been the criticality of air power to the success of battles and campaigns.