Air power theorists and strategists use the year 1991 to mark a quantum improvement in the development and employment of air power—concepts of operations, demonstration of technological sophistication, the acme of planning and application, tactical excellence—essentially the efficacy and primacy of air power in a sort of ‘before’ and ‘after’ explanatory sense. The 1991 Gulf War between Iraq and a UN Coalition led by the United States is considered the high watermark in the employment of air power to achieve both political and military objectives through the application of force.

The Iraqi military forces were formidable—the army had a total manpower of nearly one million men, 5000 main battle tanks, 5000 armoured infantry vehicles and 3000 artillery guns larger than 100 mm; the air force had more than 700 combat aircraft, 11,000 missiles and more than 8500 anti-aircraft guns. Even though the United States’ military leadership predicted some aircraft loss in the air campaign, the Iraqi Army was pushed out of Kuwait by an exclusive air campaign initially, followed by a 100-hour period of ground engagement.

In all previous wars, the influence of air power on the final outcome had always been ambivalent and difficult to measure, making grounds for myriad unsolvable debates. In the 1991 Gulf War, air power was employed in a demonstrably overwhelming and decisive manner, clearly marking a turning point in its application as a war-winning force. The War brought to the fore the idea of a truly three-dimensional aspect to the conduct of wars and emphasised the unfettered dominance of air power, signalling the need to review the conduct of future wars. There was also a belief, especially amongst air power enthusiasts, that there needed to be a fundamental change in the way in which military operations were conducted.

While there remained no doubts regarding the efficacy of air power to conduct a strategic air campaign and that the air campaign was fundamental to the ultimate victory, the 1991 Gulf War also brought out the fact that it was the short ground campaign that finally forced the Iraqi forces to withdraw from Kuwait and agree to all UN resolutions. At the end of the War, there was a scramble to identify the ‘lessons’ and also to extol the virtues of air power. However, even though air power dominated the War, it did not automatically follow that the conduct and character of all future wars had irrevocably changed. An examination of the circumstances under which the 1991 Iraq War was fought brings out a somewhat different appreciation.

A number of factors came together, as never before, to make the air campaign the most spectacularly successful in the history of air warfare. There was an unusual degree of international support for the coalition; the geography, climate and weather favoured air operations; the coalition had massive technological superiority; and the coalition combatants were far superior to the opposition. In addition, the coalition commanders were able to optimally exploit the advantages to their benefit. International consensus...
planning objective was to reduce the Iraqi ground forces by battle damage assessment (BDA) was not possible. The permitted the operations to continue although accurate day ground war was consistently bad. Advanced technology inclement weather. Even then the weather during the four-air campaign had to be delayed by nine days because of in actual fact the coalition aircraft encountered double that. Although statistics predicted only a 20 percent cloud cover, it is estimated that the US Air Force alone consumed in excess of 15 million gallons (approx 60 million litres) of fuel per day. Another factor was assured access to pre-positioned stocks of stores and ammunition to the Coalition forces in the Middle-East, although access was conditional on the reaffirmation of the host country. The international consensus assured the availability of these stores.

In sharp contrast was the international isolation of Iraq. Although the Soviet Union had in the past resupplied and supported their client nations—North Vietnam continually, Egypt in 1973 and Syria in 1982—this time no spares or reinforcements were made available to the largely Soviet-equipped Iraqi forces. It has been speculated that the awareness of spares and ammunition limitations acted as a constraint on the free employment of the Iraqi Air Force. In fact even their pre-war training was curtailed rather than enhanced as should have been the case.

Two factors standout as having been critical to the scale and rapidity of the air campaign—the unprecedented international cooperation that was given to the US-led Coalition, which has never been replicated since 1991; and the abundant availability of fuel for unfettered operations to be conducted. In any future operations, these two factors would have the same effect on air campaigns as the ready availability of airbases—long-range deployment of air power may be constrained by limited international support.

There is no doubt that the weather in the area of operations directly affected the employment of air power. Although statistics predicted only a 20 percent cloud cover, in actual fact the coalition aircraft encountered double that. Further, the land war, planned to be launched after 30 days of the air campaign had to be delayed by nine days because of inclement weather. Even then the weather during the four-day ground war was consistently bad. Advanced technology permitted the operations to continue although accurate battle damage assessment (BDA) was not possible. The planning objective was to reduce the Iraqi ground forces by 50 percent before initiating the ground war. However, it was not possible for the command decision-makers to assess the degradation since the BDA was inaccurate.

The Coalition forces had access to superior technology, which was fully exploited—stealth, precision-guided munitions, Airborne Early Warning and Control, electronic warfare capabilities, and air-to-air refuelling. The optimisation of the employment of technologically superior assets was made possible by the intellectual mastery of the coalition forces. In addition, they enjoyed a numerical superiority calculated to have been very near to 5:1. Of course it was fortuitous that the Iraqi senior leadership were not fully conversant with the changes that had taken place in the Western air forces in terms of the development of capability and the completely altered concepts of organisations. They continued to cater for a war much like the one that had been fought with Iran and earlier with Israel.

The circumstances that came together in the 1991 Gulf War to create the spectacular campaign success could well be repeated elsewhere, but such an occurrence is highly unlikely. Yes, air power determined the outcome and it cannot be denied that it could do so again—however, the probability is very low. Technology brought air power very close to realising its full predicted potential, and again while it is possible to replicate, the likelihood is limited. The manner in which air power was employed in 1991 makes for a strong presumption for air power to become the instrument of choice for the conflicts of today. However, careful planning would indicate that in the face of a determined air opposition, the end-results may not be as predictable. The 1991 Gulf War and the employment of air power cannot be considered to have set a precedent for future wars—all wars are unique and so was the one fought in the Middle-East in 1991.

Key Points

- The 1991 Gulf War between Iraq and a UN Coalition led by the United States is considered the high watermark in the employment of air power to achieve both political and military objectives
- International consensus permitted the coalition to exploit air power’s ability to rapidly project power across the globe.
- The circumstances that came together in the 1991 Gulf War to create the spectacular campaign success could well be repeated elsewhere, but such an occurrence is highly unlikely.