The independent employment of air power during World War II ushered in a new era in the conduct of war. It was made abundantly clear to all strategists that air power could directly attack the enemy’s centres of gravity—the vital assets that provide the means to wage war, as well as economic infrastructure—without having to defeat their surface forces. This capability in turn made it necessary to develop the basic principles of air warfare that would guide the application of air power.

The questions that emanate from the independent application of air power are: ‘what is its purpose and what is it meant to accomplish?’ In turn, the secondary question that has to be answered is ‘what are the specific objectives that must be realised in order to most efficiently achieve that purpose?’ The answers to these questions will provide an overarching view of an air campaign.

The employment of air power is complex starting with the decision-making process at the level of the commander, who has a wide choice of secondary objectives that will support the higher, strategic purpose to be achieved. Since the options available are numerous, the chances of making a wrong decision is also much greater.

Over the past century of the use of air power as a military power projection tool, air power strategists have developed some well-established principles to guide its effective employment. However, air power itself has developed in leaps and bounds through technology-enabled capabilities, so much so that step-change functions have been more common in its development than in the case of land or maritime capabilities. As air power capabilities improve, the range of choice for its employment also increases and the existing principles—no doubt distilled from the limited experience regarding the application of air power—may not be adequate to ensure the veracity of the decision-making process. It will then become necessary to examine the combination of the available as well as emerging spectrum of capabilities and application of air power in its entirety to deduce the correct principles for its employment vis-à-vis selection of the correct objectives.

Such an examination, if carried out with sufficient integrity, will lead to the formulation of an appropriate strategy and, perhaps more importantly, to the articulation of a forward-looking concept for the employment of air power. This step is significant because from the concept for its employment, the specifications for the development of capabilities and the air power systems that support them will be derived. In other words, the capability-driven development of air power derives from the result of a clear analysis that examines the principles of its employment.

Since the lead-time required to develop and operationalise air power systems can be inordinately long, the overall capability of the force cannot be materially altered within a span of a few months. This is a disadvantage in the development and employment of air
power capabilities that has to be ameliorated by forward planning and the creation of forward-looking concepts.

From a warfighting perspective, air power can be considered to be the ability of a nation to wage an air campaign, which means that it refers to air power in-being and not future air power that can be built over a period of time. There is no scope in this equation to bring up a defensive air power ‘wall’ behind which state-of-the-art air power can be developed to counter the immediate threat. An air campaign will be fought with air power that a nation has got at the time of going to war and not with air power being developed for the future; a ‘come as you are’ approach.

In the context of the above explanation and the warfighting definition of air power, air campaign, in a very broad manner, means air operations wherein the achievement of strategic objectives is based on air power capabilities and their independent employment. However, achievement of strategic objectives does not mean winning the war by air power alone. It is conceivable that the strategic objectives of an air campaign could well be to further the progress of an ultimate strategic success of the surface forces. On the other hand, an air campaign may or need not include the direct assistance that air power provides, at the tactical and operational level, to the success of surface forces.

The subtle difference and separation of an air campaign and other air operations that assist surface forces was clear from the first instances of the employment of air power. The first air warfare campaign was the German Zeppelin raids over London that commenced in January 1915. Although the raids, which carried on well into 1916, were completely ineffective and did not create any significant damage, they conclusively proved the efficacy of an independent air campaign at the conceptual level of planning. However, considering the precision, discrimination and proportionality that contemporary air power brings to bear in an air campaign, the results in a similar situation could be catastrophic.

While the Zeppelin raids proved the concept of independent air attacks on adversary centres of gravity and modern air power has the capabilities to carry out such attacks, the other side of the coin in an air campaign is the quest for control of the air. Only a nation with credible air power capabilities can conduct an air campaign and from it derive sufficient control of the air. As early as the 1930s, air power theorists realised the need to have adequate control of the air to have sufficient and continuous freedom of action in all domains of warfighting—air, land, maritime and cyber. From this requirement to ensure freedom of action stemmed the need to carry out other offensive activities such as counter-air campaigns aimed at restricting the adversary’s ability to contest control of the air. In turn air defence campaigns, the corollary to offensive counter-air, became the fall back option for smaller forces.

The concept that sufficient air power capable of waging an independent air campaign, when required, to win the next war is not a new concept. Airmen have long been making this argument, effectively stating that such an independent campaign would be conducted within, and in consonance with, the overall objectives of the Joint Campaign. However, an independent air campaign could also be conducted to deter or coerce an enemy in war or a potential adversary in times of relative peace. The concept of an air campaign is not outside the purview of a joint campaign, but sits well within the overall strategic calculation of ends, ways and means of such a campaign.

**Key Points**

- World War II made it clear that air power could directly attack the enemy’s centres of gravity without having to defeat their surface forces.
- From a warfighting perspective, air power can be considered to be the ability of a nation to wage an air campaign, which means that it refers to air power in-being and not future air power that can be built over a period of time.
- An air campaign can create catastrophic damage to adversary centres of gravity because of the precision, discrimination and proportionality that contemporary air power brings to bear.