A CENTURY OF AIR POWER THINKING
PART II: PRECISE, PROPORTIONATE AND DISCRIMINATE POWER PROJECTION

‘Strategic Air Warfare: Air combat and support operations, designed to effect, through the systematic application of force to a selected series of vital targets, the progressive destruction and disintegration of the enemy’s war-making capacity to a point where he no longer retains the ability or will to wage war.’


The overarching employment of air power during World War II ensured that the fundamental roles of air power became clearly enunciated. It was realised that control of the air was an absolute prerequisite for the success of any other operation. This fact was underscored by statements by illustrious army commanders such as Field Marshal Montgomery who stated, ‘If we lose the war in the air we lose the war and lose it quickly’. Further, World War II also made it easy to understand the necessity for army-air cooperation in the delivery of close air support to troops in contact and for efficiency of interdiction missions. It could be surmised that, even though reluctantly, post-World War II air power was accepted as equal to both land and maritime capabilities and critical to the success of all military operations. In turn, this acceptance led to most major nations creating independent air forces.

Almost immediately after the end of World War II and the onset of what came to be called the Cold War, the Korean War broke out. From an air warfare perspective, the Korean War was the last time that a Western Military Coalition fought a war without having assured air superiority, which meant having to fight to obtain and maintain control of the air. It also saw the introduction of jet engines that improved the effectiveness of air power. However, the development of air power theory was stagnating with the acceptance that strategic bombing equated to the employment of nuclear weapons with bombers on 24-hour alert and the subsequent introduction of nuclear ballistic missiles. Tactical air power remained a support arm of the land forces—providing close air support and interdiction.

In the initial days of the Vietnam War, air power continued to be used in a similar manner to the Korean War and the earlier World War II. However, as the War progressed, the distinct line that divided strategic and tactical air power gradually started to get blurred. This was reflected in the renewed importance that was given to targeting and destroying the adversary’s ‘war-making capacity’ and thereby neutralise the ability and/or will to fight. This was a subtle acknowledgement of the purely deterrent capability of strategic nuclear weapons and the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction in a nuclear exchange.

By the late 1980s, the Air-land Battle concept that envisaged substituting and/or supplementing land power...
with the concerted employment of air power had become the accepted modus operandi. The concept was aimed at employing concentrated and synchronised firepower at the critical time and place so that an adversary’s quantitative advantage could be limited. Clearly this US concept was created to counter the advantage the Soviet Union had in the European theatre, at the height of the Cold War. For the medium and smaller air forces of the world, the Airland Battle concept indicated the need to have a combined arms approach to the conduct of operations.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the politico-strategic environment into a unipolar system proved to have a lasting effect on the concepts of employment of air power. The conceptual developments were aided also by rapid technological advances that permitted air power to deliver on what had been mere promises even a decade back. The 1991 Gulf War could be considered the ‘high noon’ of the employment of air power. The precision, proportionality and discrimination that air power could now bring to bear in its application was unprecedented in the annals of warfare. In Operation Desert Storm, while air power conducted all its traditional roles, it also assumed the responsibility to carry out strikes against a number of strategic targets and battlefield interdiction, independent of, and prior to, the land campaign. Air power had conclusively emerged from the shadow of land power in a role reversal that was to forever comprehensively alter the application of military force.

Although the 1991 Gulf War had been described as the acme of air power employment, it was after its culmination that air power once again demonstrated a new concept—that of aerial occupation. By enforcing no fly zones over Iraq, air power was employed in a nuanced manner to control Iraq and its recalcitrant dictator, Saddam Hussein. This was a first for air power and made possible by the technological improvements that had taken place in the decade preceding the War. Such an aerial occupation would not have been possible without the advanced air power capabilities that facilitated the operationalisation of a very sophisticated concept. With this act, air power had proven its potency and ability to achieve masterful control over territory without having to resort to physical invasion.

The success of the air campaign that was at the vanguard of the 1991 Gulf War led to a number of air power-led campaigns primarily aimed at peace enforcement in troubled spots around the globe. Both Operation Deliberate Force and Operation Allied Force were conducted under the aegis of the United Nations with mandates to enforce peace. The recourse to air power as a first-choice capability to enforce the collective will of the international community was reinforced not only by its strategic success but also by the imposition of humanitarian constraints on military operations. The ground invasion of troubled regions became difficult to justify and also was seen to lead to greater destruction of the area of operation as well as making the local population turn against the intervening forces. Further, collateral damage suffered in the course of a military operation, although legally acceptable within laid down limitations, had become socio-politically unacceptable. The assured precision, discrimination and proportionality that air strikes can now deliver made air power the obvious choice to be used as a deterrent, for punitive strikes and employment in the case of more direct action.

A classic air campaign such as the one conducted at the beginning of the 1991 Gulf War is highly unlikely to be replicated. However, the template that was used in 1991 continues to be a useful guide to the employment of air power, especially when an air campaign is being mounted as the lead element in a joint operation. By the turn of the century, air power had reiterated all its core roles and moved forward to employ concepts of operations that catered to the enhanced demand for ‘no’ collateral damage and a less intrusive intervention for peace enforcement.

**Key Points**

- Post-World War II air power was accepted as being equal to both land and maritime capabilities and critical to the success of all military operations.
- During the Vietnam War the distinct line that divided strategic and tactical air power gradually started to get blurred; reflected in the renewed importance that was given to targeting and destroying the adversaries’ war-making capacity.
- The recourse to air power as a first-choice capability to enforce the collective will of the international community was reinforced not only by its strategic success but also by the imposition of humanitarian constraints on military operations.