The 1990s saw the emergence of air power as the military capability of choice for effective power projection. Air power demonstrated that it had an acceptable footprint when employed in an expeditionary mode rather than boots-on-the-ground because of the inevitability of mission creep, extended commitment and the accompanying increased financial overheads. Although air power was successful in achieving the desired end-states in a number of independent air campaigns that were conducted by US-led Western coalitions, especially in the Balkans, it was seen that coercing a recalcitrant adversary through the use of air power alone was an uphill task.

The inability and/or the unwillingness, of the international community to intervene on the ground tempered with the overarching need to rein in genocidal autocrats bent on committing crimes against humanity continued to rely on the ‘cleanliness’ of air power to make the difference. Considering the great improvements in air power performance that had been brought about by technological innovation, it was not surprising that air power theory also moved forward, much faster than it had in previous decades.

By the turn of the century, air power weapons had demonstrated assured precision, proportionality and discriminatory capabilities and were also capable of responding to fleeting threats at long range. Capitalising on these air-weapon characteristics, theorists evolved the idea that a judicious combination of precision and rapid response, or speed, could create a mass of its own. Further, it was realised that the mass thus created could be applied to create the ‘effect’ necessary to achieve the desired objectives. The actions initiated to create these effects could be non-kinetic or kinetic and need not involve the traditional destruction of materiel and fielded forces or the support of the land forces. This concept came to be labelled, in a rather straightforward manner, an ‘effects-based strategy’.

An effects-based strategy for the application of air power is a sophisticated concept that goes beyond the traditional activity of destroying the opposing forces and links the application of force to the grand strategic objective of going to war, which will always be political in nature. To achieve this direct connection, an effects-based strategy adopts a cycle of strategies that start from influence and shape, deter, coerce and only as a last resort adopt the strategy of punishment. The core of the strategy rests in the actions initiated to deter and if necessary coerce an adversary to stop actions that are inimical to one’s own interests. Essentially, the entire process of planning an air campaign—the selection of targets and the employment of air power to neutralise the targets—is oriented towards creating the necessary effects to ultimately achieve the political objective of going to war.

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, air power was once again seen to be the instrument of...
national choice to embark on what was then termed the ‘Global War on Terror’, starting with Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. While the strategic concept for the employment of air power remained founded on an effects-based approach, at the operational and tactical level there was a subtle shift in the concept for its application. Air power took on the dominant role of being the strike element, supported by combat controllers embedded within Special Forces ground teams, which enhanced the accuracy of the air strikes.

This methodology, when combined with assured and overwhelming air superiority created devastating effects on the adversary. In the irregular war scenario that developed in Afghanistan, destruction of time-critical targets had an overarching effect on the adversary, the Taliban in this case. Air power had once again tailored its capabilities and adapted to changed circumstances to create the effects necessary to achieve the desired end-state. The flexibility that air power has demonstrated in the past few decades has always been underpinned by the precision, proportionality and discrimination that have become inherent characteristics of lethal air power.

Since air power has proven its capacity to tailor its application in order to achieve the desired political end-state, it has moved to the vanguard of national power projection capabilities, especially in cases where military intervention is warranted. Traditionally such interventions were invariably land-centric, supported by air and maritime assets. Historically it was seen that such interventions invariably led to mission-creep—risking the possibility of a prolonged and tangled engagement—and were resource-intensive in nature. Further, the changing political environment no longer favours ‘boots-on-the-ground’ and the associated socio-political backlash that comes with undertaking expeditionary, land-centric military interventions. The combination of political expediency and the need to retain the option of a quick withdrawal, if and when necessary, made air power the instrument of choice.

Military interventions can only be undertaken if sufficient capabilities exist and the nation has the will to intervene in an altruistic manner. The will of the nation can be fickle and in contemporary times could be said to balance on collateral damage, particularly when air power is employed and is considered the lowest-risk military capability. Since the intervening nation itself is not under direct threat, collateral damage—either accidental or as a result of adversary’s actions such as using human shields—will invariably inhibit the further employment of lethal force. The fear of collateral damage constrains the employment of air power, especially in irregular wars, where ‘winning the peace’ is of paramount importance. In this scenario, the adoption of an effects-based strategy through the employment of air power is more likely to succeed than other strategies that resort to purely lethal application of force.

Another factor that influences the planning and conduct of postmodern military operations is casualty acceptance or tolerance limit of a nation. In this calculation ‘casualty’ does not mean only own casualties, but also the casualties suffered by the adversaries. In irregular warfare, civilian casualties, of any kind, have the potential to become a choke point in the application of force. When there is no direct threat to the nation and the military intervention is an exercise in humanitarian assistance and based on the responsibility to protect, collateral damage and civilian casualties will become limiting factors.

In such an environment, air power’s ability to apply force—both lethal and non-lethal—with precision, discrimination and proportionality, to create the necessary effect becomes a vaunted capability. The projection of national power, without any disadvantages has always been a prized capability. In the prevailing security environment, wherein irregular wars and military interventions have become the norm, air power—functioning within an effects-based strategy—provides the strategic decision-makers with a viable capability to be employed as an instrument of state.

Key Points

- Capitalising on the air-weapon characteristics of precision, proportionality and discrimination, theorists evolved the idea that a judicious combination of precision and rapid response, or speed, could create a mass of its own.
- An effects-based strategy for the application of air power is a sophisticated concept that goes beyond the traditional activity of destroying the opposing forces and links the application of force to the grand strategic objective of going to war, which will always be political in nature.
- Since air power has proven its capacity to tailor its application in order to achieve the desired political end-state, it has moved to the vanguard of national power projection capabilities, especially in cases where military intervention is warranted.