

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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AIR POWER WHY IS IT SO CONTENTIOUS?

In the wake of the success of the Wright brother's three-minute flight in 1903, the birth of air power as a military instrument was inevitable, and because of its ubiquity across all domains of combat operations, so was the consequential debate about its organisation, command and control.

Human beings have always been fascinated by the concept of flight, very clearly demonstrated by the preoccupation with flight visible in all ancient mythologies—both Western and Asian. Throughout recorded history, human beings have also been consciously developing increasingly sophisticated means to wage war against adversaries. Therefore, it is not surprising that even as one set of inventors and scientists were coming to grips with the idea of heavier-than-air flight, another set was already contemplating its use as a military capability.



Air power and its possibilities became a bone of contention vis-à-vis its command and control as soon as military strategists realised its enormous potential. Even though this acrimonious debate between the three main branches of a defence force is an on-going issue, and clearly not conducive to true jointness at the strategic level, it also indicates the acceptance of air power as an absolute necessity in creating a military power projection capability.

Mainly because of the contentious issue of its command and control, it took a world war and more than fifteen years of military flying experience to create the first independent air force. The acceptance of air forces as a third entity in creating a triumvirate of military

capabilities was even more delayed and to an extent has not been fully achieved even today. This can be seen in the thrust of some contemporary surface forces to 'own' their independent air arms.

Both soldiers and sailors accept the need to have years of experience and training in their chosen professions to be reasonably sure of success as a commander, thus making the position completely unavailable to anyone but an 'insider'. It is, therefore, surprising that some of these very same people feel easily capable of running an air force. Surface force commanders demand air power

effects in conducting operations and equate this to organic command of air power assets. However, this discounts the professional mastery of air power required to command air force assets effectively. As a corollary, airmen do not, as a norm, demand the command of surface forces. The effectiveness of a joint force is critically dependent on

professional mastery at the joint level, which can only be achieved through mutual respect of professional mastery of individual domains. Such individual domain mastery cannot be subsumed at the joint or seamless level because it is the essential building block for joint professionalism.

Even though the initial air power theorists were fanciful in their appreciation of the effects that air power could create, it was not their concepts that were at fault. In fact with hindsight, they could be considered visionaries because their theories have been proved possible by technological advances. Throughout its history, air power theorists have demanded greater capabilities from the scientists in order to fulfil their futuristic concepts regarding the employment of air power. This dovetailing

of capability with technology has been raised to an art form in military air power.

Air power transcends the limitations of surface forces and is capable of operating over large areas, unconstrained by geography, time or distance. Its freedom of action in the third dimension bypasses physical barriers and permits concurrent non-contiguous operations across the entire conflict space. Technology has also provided it with the capability to engage a target with precision, discretion and proportion. This is not to say that surface forces are not capable of similar actions. The difference is that air power is capable of optimally combining its ubiquity with the current need for accuracy and proportionality in such a way that it becomes the preferred option, especially in politically charged situations that demand immediacy of action.

A quick glance at the ten principles of war that are enshrined in the ADF's doctrine will reveal that the employment of air power in a planned and coordinated manner would support each one of them, perhaps in a more holistic manner than any other form of force projection. However, it must also be understood that no one force projection capability can ensure that all laid down objectives are achieved. It is the appropriate combination of all available capabilities that will achieve objectives in the most cost effective manner. Air power is a critical element in all such endeavours.

While all the arguments brought out allude to the overarching capabilities of air power, it is in improving jointness within the whole force that it achieves its full potential. Jointness between surface and air forces straddles the entire range of operations and the effectiveness of generating joint fires, which is critical to success in offensive response actions. In the conceptual move of the ADF from a joint force to a seamless force, the capabilities resident in air power and first-rate joint command and control would become the binding glue that works the seams.

Air force achieves the necessary balance to operate within a joint force and support the progression towards becoming seamless by ensuring that it provides optimum



performance in three key areas. First, the capability to understand the characteristics of the operating environment and the ability to know and share the information, aspirationally in real time. Second, the ability to shape, that is, influence and manage the conflict space, where and when necessary and to the desired degree. Third, the ability to respond with carefully tailored, proportional, accurate and timely application of air power as part of a seamless force in a joint or multi-agency campaign to create the needed effects.

From its very inception air power has demonstrated its capability to be a crucial element in military capabilities, even though there still are different points of view regarding its efficient organisation and control. It will be prudent for all military forces with limited resource availability to clearly understand that the air power employment tenet of centralised command and decentralised execution was arrived at after careful analysis of historical experience. This is definitely not a call for only airmen to command air forces. This is a call to all who are in the profession of arms to recognise and respect the professional mastery of airmen required to employ increasingly sophisticated weapon systems that have overarching impact on the conduct of surface operations and to create strategic effects in their own right.

“General Carl Spaatz once commented in exasperation that soldiers and sailors spoke solemnly about the years of experience that went into training a surface commander, thus making it impossible for outsiders to understand their arcane calling. Yet they all felt capable of running an air force.”

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