

Air Power and Strategic Thinking

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“Air power is the most difficult of military force to measure or even express in precise terms.”

—Winston Churchill

INTRODUCTION

Air power has emerged as a critical element of modern warfare and strategic thinking. It offers unique capabilities that can shape the outcome of conflicts and contribute to national security objectives. Air Force personnel, who are the primary practitioners of air power, with their specialised training and expertise, play a vital role in harnessing the potential of air power to achieve strategic goals.

Air power practitioners (air warriors), irrespective of rank and file, must grasp the significance of strategic thinking to capitalise on the full potential of air power. By aligning long-term objectives with tactical capabilities, air forces can achieve mission success, deter potential threats, and secure national interests effectively. Embracing strategic thinking enables air warriors to adapt to evolving challenges and maintain their position as a decisive force

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in the contemporary battlespace. By collaborating with the Army and Navy, embracing technological advancements, and managing calculated risks, air warriors, with an understanding of the role of air power in national military strategy can make significant contributions to national security. Their role becomes pivotal in ensuring air power remains critical to contemporary and futuristic warfare.

This article delves into the significance of air power in strategic thinking and highlights the key considerations and responsibilities of air warriors.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC THINKING?

Strategic thinking refers to the cognitive process of analysing and evaluating situations, considering various options and their potential outcomes, and formulating a plan of action to achieve long-term goals or strategic objectives. It involves the ability to think critically, anticipate future scenarios, and make informed decisions that align with an organisation's or individual's strategic objectives. Strategic thinking involves a broad and holistic perspective, considering both internal and external factors that may influence the success of a particular strategy. It requires assessing current affairs, understanding the competitive landscape, identifying opportunities and risks, and developing creative and innovative solutions.

There are numerous essential traits that distinguish the methodology of strategic thinkers. They take a long-term view and can clearly discern the future by looking beyond the immediate situation. They are excellent at critically analysing complex circumstances, comprehending cause-and-effect connections, and finding hidden patterns. They have a proactive, forward-thinking approach to successfully adjusting to change. Setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals aligning with the organisation's overarching vision and mission

is a key component of long-term planning. Their decision-making is driven by openness, which considers various possibilities and points of view. Resource allocation is carried out effectively, and risk analysis informs choices that maximise positive effects and minimise negative ones. They embrace innovation, question the status quo, and seek creative responses.

Figure 1: Key Aspects of Strategic Thinking



Source: Author's articulation.

Strategic thinking is a valuable skill in various contexts, including business, military planning, personal goal setting, and everyday problem-solving. It helps individuals and organisations navigate complex and uncertain environments by developing a clear direction and effectively allocating resources to achieve desired outcomes.

WHAT IS MILITARY (AIR POWER) STRATEGIC THINKING?

Military strategic thinking is the application of strategic thinking principles and concepts to the planning and execution of military operations. It involves formulating and implementing strategies that aim to achieve specific military objectives while considering the broader political, social, and economic factors enabling an advantage over an adversary that may influence the outcome of a conflict.

Strategic thinking in air power can be defined as the ability of air warriors to analyse, anticipate, and formulate long-term plans that align with broader military objectives. It involves a deep understanding of the operational environment, including potential threats, emerging technologies, and geopolitical dynamics. In the dynamic and complex realm of aerial warfare, Strategic thinking enables air warriors to execute coherent strategies, which is important for air forces to achieve their objectives efficiently and maintain a decisive edge over adversaries. Strategic thinking goes beyond tactical considerations and focuses on shaping the outcome of conflicts through intelligent, flexible, and innovative approaches from tactical to strategic levels. In the context of air power, it is the cornerstone of effective air power operations and is crucial for air forces to maintain a competitive edge.

Strategic thinking in the military incorporates a number of essential components for effective planning and execution. This includes aligning strategies with national security objectives established by higher authorities, utilising intelligence analysis to comprehend the capabilities and intentions of adversaries, and evaluating potential threats. Effective resource allocation takes into consideration limitations and constraints, whereas operational planning integrates multiple capabilities to achieve specific objectives. Risk assessment evaluates potential costs and benefits, while geopolitical and political factors influence strategies

to account for regional factors and broader objectives. Building alliances and partnerships, remaining flexible and adaptable, and understanding the psychological impact of actions are all essential components of military strategic thought.

Figure 2: Key Aspects of Military Strategic Thinking



Source: Author's articulation.

INCULCATING AIR POWER STRATEGIC THINKING

Inculcating air power strategic thinking involves developing a deep understanding of the principles and concepts underpinning air power's use in achieving strategic objectives. This kind of thinking goes beyond the tactical aspects of air operations and focuses on how air power can contribute to bigger strategic goals. It needs to be understood that strategic thinking and mindset cannot come from mere indoctrination but are a continuous

learning process. It requires a dedication to ongoing education, an open mind to new ideas, and a willingness to adapt strategies to meet evolving challenges. Some ways to foster air power strategic thinking are elaborated below.

In-depth Study of Air Power History. Understanding the historical use of air power in various conflicts provides valuable insights into its strategic impact. Studying the successes and failures of past air campaigns can help identify patterns and principles relevant to contemporary situations. While examining world case studies of air operations and campaigns is important, analysing how different air forces applied strategic thinking in various scenarios can enhance one's understanding of effective air power application. It is also necessary to carry out an in-depth study of local operations within India or in the Indian context. For a beginner, it is easier to relate to the local geography, terrain, challenges, political directions and vision, socio-economic conditions, etc., rather than just reading the global operations, which may not relate to the Indian scenario. Though the basic tenets of air power remain the same, employment and efficacy may differ significantly due to the above-mentioned reasons.

Infusing Air Doctrine and Strategy to the Core. It is of the utmost importance for air warriors to become thoroughly familiar with the doctrinal principles and strategic concepts related to air power. This includes understanding the control of air to the core and not getting carried away with closely interlinked and interrelated terminologies such as strategic bombing, support operations, coordinated air operations, control of air and other critical air capabilities. This can be further meaningfully infused through the simulation of case studies in war games involving air power scenarios in the integrated environment during various courses and workshops as part of the Professional Military Education (PME). A simultaneous focus on seminars and conferences on war studies would provide opportunities for young minds to get

inspired by strategic thinking. Apart from Air Force-level PME, regular brainstorming sessions, presentations, and discussions at the station level would have a more significant impact at the field level. These sessions could be two days long every month or once every two months to provide structured learning. These efforts would help inculcate the habit of thinking critically about strategic decision-making in a simulated, risk-free environment.

Cross-Domain Understanding. It is essential to develop an understanding of how air power integrates with other elements of military power, such as land, sea, and space. Understanding joint operations is essential for wholesome and meaningful knowledge gain and effective strategic thinking. It will help others understand how air power can be part of coordinated air operations and influence joint operations and strategic objectives. Cross-domain not only restricts to the domain of other services but also requires knowing and understanding other tenets and aspects of air power itself. Reading literature in the form of books, articles, and papers written by experts in the fields of air power and strategic studies is considered essential. Focusing on the latest updates in research and insights apart from the primary tasks will help enhance the knowledge base, which will come in handy in policy and decision-making. Cross-domain understanding will also tremendously help conduct regular reviews and assessments of air power capabilities and strategies to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This will ensure that the air power strategy remains adaptable and relevant in changing operational needs and geopolitical environments.

Mentorship and Collaboration. The present PME structure does not cater for the long-term *mentor-Mentee* culture in the IAF. This is an area that requires correct propagation and vision, especially in the inevitable integrated theatre environment. Seeking mentorship from experienced air power strategists and collaborating with colleagues who share an interest in strategic

thinking is a necessity now. Air warriors must engage in discussions, ask questions, and learn from their experiences and perspectives. Constant collaborative discussions can lead to new perspectives, ideas, and solutions in the complex operational fog.

While the IAF has a set pattern of Professional Military Education (PME), which has also been revised and reviewed periodically keeping the challenges of the service in mind, has it actually contributed to developing and nurturing strategic thinking and mindset is a debatable proposition. Most of the PME at varied stages of their career is 'indoctrination heavy'. While completing the time-bound scheduled curriculum, there are often challenges in facilitating optimum education, knowledge, and wisdom. Though the elite institutes of the services have the central theme of 'War with Wisdom', converting it into reality remains superficial.

Therefore, the gap between optimum education, knowledge, and wisdom is often filled with the experience gained by the commanders throughout their careers. Though there is an adage that "*The only source of knowledge is experience*", it is equally important to note that "Learning from experience and learning from education are both important. One's education and values decide how one learns from his experiences." There is hardly a place for indoctrination in all of these. It must be appreciated that '*Indoctrination*' is only to develop a required skill for executing the task (the primary profession). However, knowledge and wisdom are required to carry out the same task while handling multiple variables simultaneously. It is something like flying a machine, which is *indoctrination*, **and handling a contingency in the air, which is knowledge and wisdom.**

From a broader perspective, a strategic mindset is essential for all air warriors right at the early stage of their careers while learning the skills and getting indoctrinated into the primary professions. There is a requirement for change in the prevalent perception

that the strategic mindset can only be correctly practised after almost three years of service due to the experiences gained. It is important to note that critical thinking can only be nurtured with the required education through the indoctrination stage, and the best ideas and out-of-the-box thoughts can be best discovered at the tactical level. One needs to identify how these innovative ideas and thoughts can be best integrated at the operational and strategic levels. It would not be incorrect to say, "In the military, indoctrination instils discipline, knowledge breeds competence, and experience forges wisdom. The synergy of these three pillars shapes exceptional warriors, ready to face any challenge on the battlefield."

UNDERSTANDING 'MILITARY INDOCTRINATION' AND 'MILITARY KNOWLEDGE'

The essential terms '*military indoctrination*' and '*military knowledge*' sound similar but represent distinct concepts. Understanding the difference between these terms is crucial for comprehending how military personnel are trained and educated to fulfil their roles effectively and uphold the values of their organisations.

Military indoctrination refers to the process of instilling a specific set of beliefs, values, and attitudes in military personnel to align them with the core principles and ethos of their armed forces. Indoctrination aims to foster a strong sense of loyalty, discipline, and commitment to the organisation's mission and objectives. It is commonly employed during basic training or boot camp and extends throughout a service member's career. The key characteristics of military indoctrination are ideological alignment with the core values, principles, and mission of the military institution; emphasis on discipline through strict adherence to rules and regulations; building cohesion by promoting a sense of camaraderie; and inculcating values and obedience to hierarchical authority to ensure smooth command and control.

While **military knowledge** refers to the accumulation of information, skills, and expertise related to various aspects of armed conflict, defence, and national security. It encompasses a wide range of subjects, including military history, strategy, tactics, weaponry, technology, logistics, international relations and more. Military knowledge is acquired through formal education, specialised training, and practical experience. The key characteristics of military knowledge are intellectual capabilities, critical thinking abilities, specialisation with expertise, continuous professional development, complex problem-solving abilities, and decision-making abilities.

The primary distinction between military indoctrination and military knowledge lies in their focus and purpose. While military indoctrination centres on cultivating shared values, discipline, and loyalty within the organisation, military knowledge concentrates on acquiring specialised skills, theoretical understanding, and practical expertise related to military operations. The combination of these two elements ensures that military professionals are not only committed to their organisations but are also well-prepared to face the diverse and ever-changing demands of the modern battlespace.

The following examples will help ease one's understanding of the difference between interrelated terminologies and their effects on the environment.

CONCLUSION

The importance of strategic thinking in air power cannot be overstated. It forms the foundation of effective decision-making, enabling air forces to anticipate and respond to challenges, align operations with national objectives, integrate with other services, adapt to evolving situations, manage resources efficiently, and maintain technological superiority. Emphasising strategic thinking within air force training and leadership development is vital to

ensuring that air power remains formidable in safeguarding national security and contributing to global peace and stability. As the battlefield evolves, strategic thinking will remain the compass that guides air power to success in the face of ever-changing complexities and uncertainties.

Table 1: Illustration through Indoctrination-Knowledge-Wisdom Trinity

Indoctrination	Knowledge	Wisdom
Despite the lesser number of aircraft, the IAF enjoys an advantage in airlift and payload capability due to its airfields at lower altitudes compared to the PLAAF, which has airfields at higher altitudes.	OSINT indicates that the IAF's advantage is now negated due to the increased number of longer runways and the phenomenal increase in SAM launch sites by the PLAAF all along IB and LAC.	The IAF needs to procure and strengthen all kinds of offensive and defensive assets, from sensors to shooters all along the IB and LAC, to maintain its advantage.
Due to budget constraints, IAF needs to manage with the available resources, as procuring IAF assets is the costliest among the three services.	Optimal utilisation of the least available assets can only be achieved with sound tactics and audacious operational planning. However, such an arrangement cannot become a template for the operational philosophy.	IAF needs to convincingly put forth the ill effects of the outcome (higher attrition, casualties, jeopardising national security) in the absence of needed assets against the cost incurred.
Towards theaterisation, Air Power assets are to be divided on a pro-rata basis. The creation of an Air Defence (AD) Command is one such solution.	The efficacy of Air Power is significantly reduced by its divisibility. Air power cannot be tied up with geographical entities, especially when the numbers of air assets are marginally low.	The timely and correct awareness of the effects of air power in the integrated battlespace scenario led to the undoing of the earlier proposed AD Command.

Source: Author's articulation.

The Indian Air Force, like any other military organisation, places significant emphasis on the development of strategic thinking through training programmes, professional military education, and operational experience. However, these efforts aimed at equipping air warriors with the necessary skills to analyse complex situations, make informed decisions, and contribute to the overall strategic objectives of the force need to be improved at times. It is also essential to consider the broader context in which air warriors operate. The nature of military operations and the challenges faced by the IAF may impact the manifestation of strategic thinking. Factors such as resource constraints, operational demands, and geopolitical dynamics can influence decision-making processes. However, these factors do not absolve us of the need for a more robust strategic mindset amongst air warriors from the early stages of their careers. As emphasised in the article, strategic thinking is a complex skill that requires the right balance of experience, education, training, and exposure to various operational scenarios.