EDITOR'S NOTE

Wars across the world during the past two decades have repeatedly brought forth some abiding conclusions which clearly deserve serious objective attention. First and foremost is the unequivocal repeated demonstration of the preeminence of air power in achieving success/victory with minimum casualties to own forces as well as to the enemy. Surface forces are at the mercy of air power unless they are also protected by similar air power. But, at the same time, it also must be noted that in all the recent wars, air power was available asymmetrically, with the result that the US-led coalition forces, which in any case possess high-technology weapons and systems, undertook operations with total air superiority which could be termed close to the concept of "Command of the Air" which has now been adopted by China in its official defence strategy to win wars. What happens when you have to contend with a hostile air force? The obvious answer is that a degree of air effort and priority (depending upon the enemy's capabilities) would have to be devoted to contesting control of the air above if the field is not to be left free for the enemy air force to impose its will and restrict our freedom of action on the ground and in the air.

The second recurring theme in all the wars has been that they have been mostly what have come to be called asymmetric wars and/or 4th Generation wars, but which in essence are best described by the term *sub-conventional* wars (though the war that Hezbollah conducted against Israel in 2006 comes close to be termed as semi-conventional war). Air power certainly has been found to be very effective and accurate in such wars, and

one of the mistakes that Israel had made in respect of the 2006 War was to have started believing that air power by itself was the prime instrument against such threats. This, of course, was easier to believe in a country whose survival in the past has depended heavily on air power. But this mindset delayed a coherent joint action where the land forces were used too late and in too small numbers. The increasing use of UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), especially the UCAVs (Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles) has provided even greater capability in targeting moving and fleeting time-critical targets, especially when the target consists of an individual vehicle or even a person; but this also runs the risk of over-estimating their role and effect.

The third element that we need to take into account is that air power is intrinsically technology intensive, and, consequently, practitioners of air power place a heavy reliance on technology. We have seen that many of our air force leaders honestly and earnestly believed that force multipliers (based on high-technology) would not only achieve greater effects, but flowing from that logic, we could do more with less. This is true only in absolute terms, and not when seen in relative terms with an adversary who also acquires similar technology and force multipliers. But the more important point is that empirical evidence tells us that while technology and force size are crucial in war, and an advantage in either or both could be crucial in deciding the outcome of the conflict, the real factor that leads to that decision is how force is employed. It is in this context that we need to understand the dynamics of air power and warfare, whether the classical force-on-force or sub-conventional war, whatever name we ascribe to it.