



AIR POWER IN URBAN OPERATIONS

There is a prevalent thought that the zenith of air power glory has been achieved, and that now the capabilities that made it so pertinent in combat have lost their effectiveness. This has come about because there is pervasive evidence that threat trends have changed over the past few years and that a conventional or traditional conflict is highly unlikely to occur. It is generally agreed that today a nation's security forces will be faced with challenges emanating from adversaries employing unconventional methods to neutralise and counter traditional advantages that a regular defence force enjoys—irregular threats. The security situation becomes extremely complex when these threats combine with the disruptive challenges that an adversary's use of advanced and breakthrough technologies may bring about. Under these circumstances security imperatives almost completely move out of the overarching umbrella of traditional combat power.

It is gradually becoming apparent that these threats are more likely to manifest in urban areas rather than in areas that are more traditional battlegrounds. Dealing with the complexity of applying judicious military force in a complex urban environment while ensuring minimum or no collateral damage is a daunting prospect. There is a school of thought within the strategists that this basic requirement rules air power out of the equation completely. But recent developments have proved otherwise.

In theatres of ongoing conflict it is seen that air power, when employed in an innovative manner, is capable of carrying out missions that only a few years ago would have been fully undertaken by land forces. Within the urban context air power is now used effectively for anti-infiltration and curfew enforcement duties. The very use of air power capabilities in low intensity conflicts challenges the traditional notions of ground warfare. This could not have happened even a decade ago. It is a combination of factors that have brought about this evolution.

Urban combat, even against a traditional adversary, is fraught with complications. When the adversary relies

more on terrorist and guerilla tactics, the problems are amplified by a magnitude. Three elements combine to enable air power to assist and relieve the burden so far shouldered almost entirely by ground forces. They are:

- the increasing availability of advanced technology that provides the wherewithal to have adequate ISR capabilities, C2 networks and precise, responsive, lethal strike capabilities;
- unique operational concepts that bring together the responsive characteristics of air power to produce significant effects; and
- the seamless coordination of the process of intelligence collection, collation and dissemination.



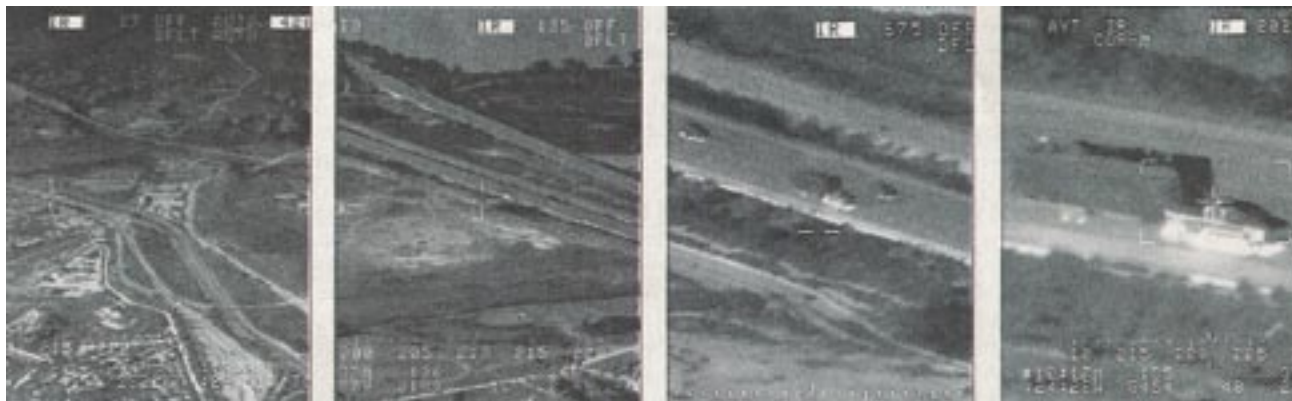
Applying judicious force in an urban setting with minimum collateral damage is daunting.

In the case of low intensity conflicts, the biggest advantage that the use of air power bestows is that it overcomes the need for prolonged occupation of neutral or adversary territory by ground forces. International opinion currently does not approve of such an action, even if it is accepted as a necessity from a security perspective, since the legitimacy of positioning ground forces in foreign territory is questionable.

The key to success in urban operations is the ability to have an almost unlimited loiter time to observe and react to emerging threats. Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles, both unarmed as well as armed, are ideally suited for this purpose. By having uninterrupted

reconnaissance capabilities and combining them with time-sensitive strike options, air power brings a completely new dimension to the conduct of urban, asymmetric warfare. The escape route for irregular threat perpetrators, that of merging into the complex terrain, is almost completely blocked if this concept is effectively employed in conjunction with high calibre intelligence. In this manner it is possible to close many loops in a matter of minutes or even seconds and successfully prosecute extremely elusive targets.

From a security perspective, the world is going through changes at a pace faster than ever before. Internationally, it is now an age where society has become so sensitive to loss of human life that it does not look kindly on any nation that does not minimise collateral damage and avoid casualties. This is also a period of rapidly altering security threat scenarios wherein entire defence forces may be forced to reconstitute themselves in ways never tried before, to ensure the achievement of national security paradigms.



Uninterrupted UAV reconnaissance—the key to success in urban operations

The principal contribution of air power to urban conflict is the greatly improved perspective that it brings to the arena. Air power is able to ‘see’ more with greater clarity, analyse and understand the evolving threat faster and strike more rapidly and precisely at a far greater range than with the use of only ground forces. This enhanced perspective makes air power a winning element in operations against irregular threats in complex terrain.

Long-range strike capabilities of air power produce significant strategic deterrent effects even when ground forces do not occupy the area of operations. In reality, when these capabilities are optimally merged with other air and space power capabilities, maritime capabilities and ground force projection (where it is a viable option), threats in complex urban terrain can be effectively contained. Theorists are already coining terms such as ‘Environmental Air Control’ and ‘Envelope Force’ to encapsulate this forward-thinking concept.

It is also a fact the world over that defence forces are being pushed to do more, at further ends of the conflict spectrum, within stringent resource allocations. Air power has always been a dynamic concept! It has always been the harbinger of change and has been at the forefront of positively innovative concept development. Today, air power is in the process of embracing new ideas and is once again proving its flexibility by effectively adapting to a fast-changing warfighting environment.

National safety would be endangered by an Air Force whose doctrine and techniques are tied solely on the equipment and process of the moment. Present equipment is but a step in progress, and any Air Force which does not keep its doctrine ahead of its equipment, and its vision far into the future, can only delude the nation into a false sense of security.

- General Henry H. (“Hap”) Arnold, USAAF, 1945



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