



## THE ASYMMETRY OF AIR POWER

Military forces have historically relied on asymmetry—the capability to surprise an adversary with unpredictable and innovative actions—to win battles and wars. However, the use of the term ‘asymmetry’ to describe a methodology for the conduct of war is a recent development. There are two main reasons for this. First, traditional warfare has generally been considered a relatively orderly or symmetric process which translates to a range of predictable options and manoeuvres on the battlefield. Second, the asymmetry associated with innovative manoeuvre and rapid action in an historical sense has not been equated with the asymmetry of unconventional modern warfare. Both these factors are underscored by the fact that until the mid-twentieth century, wars were mostly fought between the fielded forces of nation states, operating within the norms of international law.

The evolution of non-state or sub-state actors injected a new element into the equation of warfare. They gave asymmetry a new dimension by the use of non-traditional means to neutralise the advantages of a conventional force. Therefore, the contemporary use of the term asymmetry actually conveys a combined meaning of surprise as well as the employment of even non-military assets against military forces.

The current use of asymmetric means to wage war can be traced to the overwhelming conventional military superiority that democracies of the western or developed world normally wield. Faced with this technological, economic and conceptual superiority in the conduct of warfare, adversaries of these forces sought to balance this inequality by adopting methods of combat that were beyond the conventional. Asymmetry as a concept means the redressing of lesser capability by its innovative use, thereby making the concept itself a force multiplier. Creating this asymmetry through conventional and unconventional ways is ‘the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century operational art’.

In contemporary conflict, asymmetry is normally used to describe actions against the conventional military forces of nation-states by adversaries who are viewed as operating outside the confines of international law. This has given the term itself a negative and only partially correct connotation. However, if the concept is analysed objectively as a viable construct to achieve the desired effect and end-state in a conflict, its many merits will be clearly discernable. Of

all the conventional power projection capabilities, it is air power that can most easily be adapted to shift asymmetry in favour of conventional military forces in any given situation.

In the global security scenario, a number of states are either failing or have already failed, thereby increasing the risk of guerrilla/insurgent/terrorist groups initiating irregular warfare in their regions. Irregular forces are by design asymmetric with no conventional trappings. State-based military forces are traditionally designed to secure the nation and therefore must innovate and adapt to generate their own asymmetry when faced with such an adversary.



*RAAF Wedgetail*

In irregular warfare the environment is shaped by the adversary who can easily create asymmetry by operating unconventionally on their favoured ground. Under these circumstances air power has the capability to carry out surveillance and also respond lethally, if required, without having to take recourse to putting troops on the ground. This is classic asymmetry wherein the security of a state can be ensured without large scale military actions.

Air power contributes to three basic military roles in the pursuit of national security—the ability to find, the capability to shape and deter, and the capacity for timely response. These roles are not exclusive to air power but the advantage that air power has is that these roles can be conducted with enough flexibility and discretion to shift asymmetry in the user’s favour. Such asymmetry is critical to creating the necessary effects to resolve a crisis.

Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities resident in air power are at the forefront of finding and identifying the sources of threat both at the tactical and the strategic level. This can be done by uninhabited aerial vehicles with extremely long endurance, manned platforms that have the capability to facilitate time-sensitive targeting and space based assets that are discrete and have a very wide coverage. Adequate ISR is critical to decision superiority that is, in turn, the foundation for asymmetry.



**RAAF F/A-18 fighter aircraft**

Air power assets operate outside geographical constraints and directly influence the deep battlespace because of their inherent reach, speed and flexibility. By the same token, they can also operate in different theatres simultaneously, creating a deterrent effect both physical and virtual. Constant monitoring of the battlespace and timely actions to shape the environment create asymmetric effects, especially against adversaries who do not have the same level of sophistication either in capabilities or concepts of operations.

Equally important as the other two roles and more effective in the short-term is the capacity of air power to respond, lethally if required, to emerging situations in a time-critical manner. This capacity can immediately create asymmetry of an order that will overwhelm the adversary. Time-critical precision attacks have the capability to produce strategic effects far in excess of the actual destruction caused. This is true asymmetry, not just because the adversary cannot respond adequately, but because of the potential for the effects to be catastrophic.

By focusing on operating asymmetrically in relation to the adversary, an adaptable conventional force can retain the initiative and force the adversary to react to emerging situations that it has created. Shaping the environment through information superiority and response decisions and actions that create proportionate and discretionary effects are the asymmetric advantages that are resident in air power.

As the world is moving towards increasingly complex security scenarios, the ability of a military force to ensure the nation's security needs is becoming restricted. To ensure that the capability envelope is kept at an acceptable level, military forces the world over are looking for force multipliers and other nuanced concepts. Asymmetry remains a concept that is crucial to victory. Many adversaries employ unconventional techniques to create asymmetry on the battlefield. The challenge for conventional military forces is to adapt their operational art to create asymmetry while using conventional means against these adversaries. Such an approach to the application of conventional military power will deprive the adversary of a powerful tool and help conventional forces regain the initiative. Air power will be at the forefront of this innovative move.

- *Asymmetry is a concept that acts as a force multiplier*
- *Air power has the flexibility and discretion to shift asymmetry in favour of conventional forces*
- *Well founded operational art will only be successful when employed within a sound security strategy.*

*"I don't think they play at all fairly," Alice began in a rather complaining tone... "and they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you have no idea how confusing it is..."*

Lewis Carroll  
Alice in Wonderland



**Air Power Development Centre**  
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street  
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041  
Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)  
Web: [www.aaaf.gov.au/airpower](http://www.aaaf.gov.au/airpower)

