On 20 August 2008, newspapers across Australia reported an ADF press release. It stated that: “…special forces had found ‘senior provincial Taliban extremist commander’ Mullah Akhtar Mohammed, ensured no civilians were nearby and called in an air strike to kill him in a remote part of Oruzgan province…”

On the face of it, there is nothing special about this press release, but a closer analysis of the action that took place reveals a fundamental shift in the modus operandi of conventional forces in the conflict against extremist non-state entities. Instead of the ground forces attacking and capturing or killing the extremist group, they have relied on the precision, responsiveness and discrimination that air power provides in the application of lethal force, in close proximity of their own positions. This has become the norm rather than the exception for Western militaries in recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is now generally accepted that the nature of warfare has changed radically in recent years, even though current events in the Caucasus have clearly demonstrated that conventional state-on-state conflicts are not improbable even today. Contemporary conflict produces a very different spectrum of threat that demands a completely new set of warfighting skills from the military forces of sovereign nations. Further, a majority of current conflicts encompass these unconventional threats, which will continue into the future. Military forces across the world have to be cognisant of this fact and develop their capabilities accordingly to continue to be relevant in the broader national security agenda.

Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention. The threats that NATO and coalition forces face in Afghanistan and Iraq are far from traditional; the adversary is ill-defined and diffused; the battlefield is not clearly demarcated and there are operational constraints imposed on them by moral, ethical and political considerations. This has resulted in direct surface engagement usually being initiated at the discretion of the adversary, thereby creating a situation wherein the coalition forces are perpetually reacting to emerging situations. While superior training and abundant firepower can win these encounters at the tactical level, it is difficult to achieve tangible success at the operational and strategic levels when the initiative is always with the adversary.

A definitive way to seize the initiative from such adversaries is to carry out strategic attacks on their command and control structure and communications systems, which would significantly reduce their capability to operate independently in small, cohesive but dispersed groups. The dispersed nature of the adversaries and their proclivity to operate in proximity to neutral and innocent civilians makes carrying out such attacks complicated in both planning and execution. They will also be time-sensitive and will need to be carried out within a finite window of opportunity. Ground operations to achieve this will require a very large number of troops and may not be able to meet the stringent timeliness requirement. Further, ground operations of this nature carry the very real danger of suffering a high level of ‘friendly’ casualties.

Air power’s inherent characteristics and capabilities can be tailored to carry out these actions efficiently without exposing ground forces to unnecessary attrition. There are two fundamental requirements for effectiveness and success in these missions: long endurance surveillance of very large geographical areas, and responsive, precise and discriminatory strike capability.

A number of technological innovations and breakthroughs have improved air power capabilities, especially in battlefield attack missions. Currently, air delivered weapon accuracy has improved beyond any precision capability that was envisaged even a decade ago. Attack-
enabling innovations such as satellite guidance, data links, multi-mode seekers etc have made battlefield air attacks the primary choice in engaging the enemy.

Battlefield attack platforms have also changed, with the classic fighter giving way to the strategic bomber and uninhabited aerial vehicles. The speed, range and loiter capability of the bomber allows it to stay overhead the theatre of operations for hours, striking several widely separated and very often fleeting targets in one single mission. Uninhabited aerial systems often carry out the same role while also being strategically tasked. In essence, the demarcation of targets into tactical and strategic which led to the traditional division of air assets along the same lines is no longer valid. The changing nature of warfare has brought in a situation wherein a battlefield air strike that neutralises adversary leadership will have rippling effects well into the strategic level. Today, independent, remotely operated air power assets that can stay airborne for days on end can, and do, strike fleeting targets of opportunity successfully, creating disproportionately large effects in the on-going conflict.

The use of air assets to carry out battlefield air attacks has reached unprecedented levels in the conflicts being prosecuted in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their success in engaging time sensitive targets with accuracy while avoiding collateral damage and minimising ground forces casualties has once again brought the concept of battlefield air attack into vogue. All competent air forces are taking note of the changed circumstances in the battlefield and the exceedingly important role that they can play in achieving joint objectives if air power capabilities are appropriately honed and employed.

This latest application of air power demonstrates its flexibility and reinforces the fact that whoever controls the air controls the battlespace below.

The success of the reported attack on Taliban leadership in Afghanistan is a signpost in the evolution of air power capabilities into a different domain, so far dominated almost exclusively by surface forces. A seamless force will take note of the clear success of the joint application of ground surveillance and air strike that has achieved spectacular strategic effects.

- There is a fundamental shift taking place in the application of conventional force in contemporary battlefields and against non-traditional adversaries
- The traditional distinction between tactical and strategic action is closing
- A seamless force will be able to leverage the inherent capabilities of different elements to achieve joint objectives with minimal risk and maximum effect

“We must read the picture and learn our lessons. But we must arrive at a situation in which we do not miss the forests due to the trees.”

Lt Gen Dan Halutz
Retired Israeli Defence Force Chief of Staff
20 September 2006