As a security strategy development process, the linear extrapolation of current trends to predict the future has been historically proven to be a poor way to judge emerging threats. Military forces that structure around current threats are soon out-maneuvered by those who perceive and exploit new asymmetries.

Currently, popular opinion is that the chance of a major conventional state-on-state conflict is extremely low and there is general acceptance at the strategic level that most conflicts—present and future—will be fought to curb terrorism or insurgencies. This would automatically pit the military forces of a state against non-state, irregular and/or insurgent forces. The clear dominance of the state military forces in conventional conflict causes the irregular forces to resort to asymmetry in an effort to even the disparity in capabilities. This has resulted in a debate regarding the optimum force structure and capability spread that the military force of a nation must possess.

In countering these irregular threats state military forces have to, at times, employ high-end equipment at the lower end of the technology spectrum, leading to strident calls for military forces to tailor their capabilities to the low end, and structure to fight the lower-level battles. No doubt there is merit in training and equipping for the fight in hand, but changing the entire structure of the force to cater for these contingencies alone would be fraught with risk. Preoccupation with lower level conflict can also provide the opportunity for adventurism by a belligerent state that could in turn generate second order effects, such as forced migration, spread of disease, natural resources scarcity etc, leading to instability.

Even if the majority of future military involvements are likely to be in irregular warfare, the probability of a state-on-state conflict can never be completely discounted. The recent Russian clash with Georgia is a sharp reminder. The solution, therefore, is to have a force that has both high-end and low-end capabilities, resident in differently equipped and trained units and formations, each tailored for a specific purpose. This is not a practical solution, even for a military force as large as that of the United States.

The next best would be to have an adaptable force that is capable of dealing with the evolving conflict situation by transitioning fairly easily from one end of the spectrum to the other, as required.

If the need to have an adaptable force is accepted, the question is then its balance: whether to tailor the force to transition from high-end to low-end or vice versa. The optimal solution would be different for the three environments of land, maritime and air. From an air power perspective, transitioning a low-end capable force to meet high-end needs—definitely a cost-effective option—would be impossible for a number of reasons, given the speed at which these changes have to be made.

First, air power capabilities are extremely resource intensive to acquire and operate efficiently, both in terms of assets and personnel training requirements. Further, the lead-time required to operationally field these sophisticated systems completely precludes their acquisition at the beginning of a conflict. As far as air power is concerned, the resident capabilities of a force at the beginning are all that it will have throughout the conflict.

Second, air power is a technology-intensive warfighting capability that requires comprehensive training regimes to ensure its optimum employment. This can only be achieved in peacetime conditions. Therefore, even if the necessary equipment and assets are made available the force will not be able to employ them effectively—i.e.
ramping up from a lower-end to a higher-end capability spectrum will not be possible in the short term. The nature of contemporary conflict places a premium on adaptability and flexibility, which will be almost nonexistent in this case.

Third, air power is required to ensure adequate control of the air for the success of all operations. This requires the capacity to operate high-technology weapon systems in a complex and intense environment in a joint manner. This capability cannot be developed overnight but is the product of long-term planning and strategic vision, both in capability development, asset procurement and joint training. The fact that western coalitions have not had to fight for air superiority in the past forty or so years does not in any way dilute this critical requirement.

Fourth, the preponderant power projection capability of the developed world is the reason for the current adversaries resorting to asymmetry in the first place, in an effort to neutralise it. Technology-enabled capabilities, while difficult to obtain, themselves become effective asymmetric advantages when employed against forces operating at the lower end of both technology and capability spectrums. The employment of air power capabilities to carry out time-sensitive targeting and surveillance that can be long-term or responsive to rapidly emerging needs are prime examples.

Fifth, from an air power perspective the hardest capabilities to regenerate—both in terms of time needed and adequacy of competency—are the high-end ones. Therefore, it would be prudent for an air force to maintain these capabilities and not trade them in at any time. The core competencies of an air force are built on these.

It is always easier to scale down both technology and capability, rather than to try to ramp up resident capabilities in a time-critical manner. The argument for military forces to be tailored purely to combat terrorism and insurgency would have detrimental long-term consequences for the overall capacity of the force to ensure national security. Military forces across the world are operating under increased financial and other resource constraints. Under these conditions it becomes all the more important to ensure that the force is correctly balanced to be able to provide the capabilities required at the time and place needed.

Air power at the cutting edge is resource intensive. However, it cannot be obtained at will and in a limited timeframe, making strategic long-term planning an imperative to ensure adequacy of air power capabilities. At least for air power, force structuring and capability development at the lower end of the spectrum is not a viable option. Air power’s inherent characteristics of flexibility and adaptability will have to be heavily accented to ensure that adequate quantum of quality air power is available when the nation requires it the most. High-end air power—conceptual, technological, and operational—provided by well trained professional masters, capable of adapting to lower end conflict as required, is the only way forward.

• Probability of state-on-state clashes cannot be discounted
• Military forces have to be balanced to adapt to evolving conflict situations
• Air power will have to be structured at the high-end of capability

“So long as there remains a substantial period, often up to ten years, between the inception of a new weapon system and its deployment, even the very latest weapons are out of date in terms of what technology could deliver.”

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