



## AIR POWER AND COLLATERAL DAMAGE: THE STRATEGIC EFFECT

Unintentional civilian deaths resulting from military action have always caused friction between civilians and the military. During 2009, the continued public remonstrations over civilian deaths in Afghanistan from air strikes forced NATO planners to change their tactics. More importantly, they highlighted the degree to which air power can cause major unintended negative effects that undermine the capacity of a Western nation's will to wage war. Modern Western military forces have recognised the need to avoid or minimise collateral damage—a term generally used to denote inadvertent injury or death to non-combatants or damage to civilian infrastructure. Australia has developed doctrine and methodologies to ensure warfighters appropriately estimate possible collateral damage prior to prosecuting a target.

By its very nature, war is horrific and dangerous. During the 20th century, it is estimated that 180 million people died in war. The indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas during World War II prompted much emotional outcry, causing air power to be often viewed as the major perpetrator of civilian deaths in war. However, statistics show that of the 40 million civilian deaths incurred during World War II, less than 5 per cent were caused by air attack, indicating that the negative reputation of air power is not fully deserved.

The air power experience in recent Iraq and Afghanistan operations has been similar. In 2009, the *New England Journal of Medicine* assessed that air attacks accounted for only 5 per cent of total Iraqi civilian casualties between 2003 and 2008, with small arms fire accounting for 20 per cent and execution (by insurgents) for 33 per cent of deaths. Meanwhile, the

Centre for Strategic and International Studies assessed that, since January 2007, insurgents have caused 80 per cent of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Instances of air strikes causing inadvertent civilian casualties have been where air strikes were called in by ground forces to provide support to troops in contact in a time critical manner. Sometimes the tactical benefits of employing air power in such cases do not justify the potential risks of a negative strategic effect resulting from collateral damage. Yet, paradoxically, it is the application of air power that is increasingly being questioned in the public eye and not the actual decision to call in air strikes.



*An Australian soldier treats an Afghan civilian indiscriminately injured in a Taliban roadside IED attack*

This can be largely explained by the changing characteristics of 21st century warfare, Western societies' aversion to it and the adversaries' appreciation of this change. Firstly, warfare is increasingly characterised by combating ideologically-motivated irregular forces that depend on asymmetry, terrorism, guerilla tactics, insurgencies and criminal activities that threaten a nation state's national interests but not national survival. While irregular warfare has always existed, its primacy has been established in the void of a post-bipolar global community.

Secondly, while the adversary has embraced such tactics as integral to fighting a war of survival, Western society has largely detached itself from

the concept of fighting such wars unless they are pushed to the extreme, such as the United States of America immediately after the September 11 attacks. It is in this climate that the adversary has found considerable success in exploiting the West's aversion, mainly because of lack of popular support, to irregular warfare. Irregular warfare

is complex, dangerous, lengthy and difficult to wage for a military force largely equipped and trained to wage traditional inter-state warfare.

Western military forces have recognised the need to avoid or minimise collateral damage. This has driven the development of sensors and weapons that can discriminate the smallest targets and minimise blast effects in their immediate area. Likewise, Western forces adhere to the Laws of Armed Conflict and the principles of proportionality, necessity and discrimination. Rigorous methodologies have been developed to ensure such principles are integrated into targeting the adversary. However, there needs to be better understanding that such processes are not fail-proof and will only ensure that warfighters are required to estimate as best they can from the information available at the time that a specific mission is legal, necessary and proportional. This places significant demands on one's own intelligence process—a factor that is compounded by the nature of irregular warfare where intelligence assessment is particularly difficult. While technology provides incredible capacity to identify, track and monitor weapon systems, the irregular adversary concealed within a foreign population remains the most difficult target to identify. Precision targeting requires accurate intelligence.

But the Afghanistan and Iraq experience highlights the need for air forces to better understand collateral damage and the negative strategic effect that it can inadvertently create within Western populations and at the political level. However, it must also be kept in mind that air power is a key Western asymmetric advantage that the adversary seeks to neutralise. It is therefore necessary to have a broad appreciation of the employment of air power. There are few factors that make this easier. First, the limitations and dependencies of precision guided munitions must be understood while stressing their accuracy. Second, the need for accurate intelligence, which can be impacted by the fog of war but is integral to the success of a precision strike must be appropriately considered. Third, there is a need to educate an air force's partners and the media regarding the capabilities and limitations of air power, as well as the processes that have been instituted to mitigate collateral damage. Fourth, there is a requirement for personnel with professional mastery of air power to employ it and minimise collateral damage in all conflicts. This will reduce the potential for negative strategic effect and adverse media exposure.

Surface forces must not only be trained to appreciate the broader effects that air strikes create but also be educated to understand the limitations of close air support when troops are in contact with the enemy, in terms of clear target identification, proximity of non-combatants to the engagement, and the effect of aerially delivered weapons. This would go a long way in reducing civilian casualties from air attacks in irregular warfare.

Air power has gained an ill-deserved reputation for causing collateral damage. Statistically, air power has incurred significantly less collateral damage both historically and in recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan than that created by adversaries or ground forces. Despite this fact, there is a need for air power practitioners to appreciate the potential strategic effects that air power can inadvertently cause when manipulated by a politically adept adversary. This does not mean that air power is a liability; indeed, it actually reflects the true strategic potential of air power. However, it does mean that air forces need to educate commanders, governments, media and populations on such aspects, particularly in cases where an adversary deliberately plans for war among the people necessitating a time critical response.

- *Air power has gained an ill-deserved reputation for causing collateral damage in comparison to that of other operations.*
- *Western air forces, including the RAAF, have developed significant mechanisms to minimise the potential for collateral damage.*
- *Western air forces need to better educate commanders, governments, the media and the population on the capabilities and limitations of air power.*

*'Tanks and armor are not a big deal. The planes are the killers. I can handle everything but the jet fighters.'*

Unknown Insurgent Fighter in Afghanistan



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