



## DEFINING AIR POWER: PART II CONSIDERATIONS FOR A NEW DEFINITION

*Pathfinder 133 (May 2010), Defining Air Power: Part I Evolution of the Term*, outlined the attempts at defining air power by various air forces and air power thinkers. In particular, it noted that air power is a broad term and defining it has been an evolutionary process reflecting the changes in air power theory and application since the early 1900s. As the Air Force transitions through the Defence Capability Plan into a future force capable of generating global strategic effects, there is value in re-examining our own understanding and definition of air power. In order to achieve this, there are few key considerations that must be re-examined.

Definitions are important. In military doctrine, clear and concise definitions of terms enable a common understanding between and within Services and provide common foundations for the planning and conduct of effective joint operations. Doctrinal definitions will always be contextual as they reflect a military organisation's stance at the time—influenced by its culture, political and strategic experiences and history. At the strategic or philosophical level, doctrinal definitions will inevitably be broad as they need to encompass different perspectives. At the procedural or tactical level, doctrinal definitions will be more precise as they need to be more directive.

Defining air power is particularly important as it provides a foundation for further doctrine development. An effective air power definition will provide the spectrum within which an air force's roles, functions and capabilities are situated. As definitions determine function, this directly relates to force structure as 'form follows function'.

Critical to defining air power is understanding what is power. The Macquarie Dictionary provides several

definitions of power including: "an ability to do or act; capability of doing or affecting something; a particular faculty of body or mind; political or national strength; the possession of control or command of others; and lastly, ascendancy or influence." These definitions provide a valuable base from which to understand air power.

Likewise, there is also a need to clearly understand the air environment. *Pathfinder 133* noted how space had been included on several occasions in air power definitions. The concept of aerospace power dates from the 1950s. It gained prominence in the ADF when the 4th edition

of the RAAF Air Power Manual reflected USAF doctrine by embracing the term aerospace. But the notion of aerospace does not sit comfortably with a capable but smaller air force such as the RAAF. While large air forces like the USAF can integrate space power into their mission set, there is limited capacity for a smaller air force such as the RAAF to do so. There are more pragmatic reasons for separating space from air power concepts. While there are some similarities between the air and space environments, there are also distinct differences. Space provides a higher perspective that allows one to see the entire battlespace rather than a part of it. In space, speed and reach are considerably greater than in the air environment. Similarly,

the airspace over a nation's territory is recognised as a sovereign territory, whereas there is no sovereignty in space. The significant differences between the two environments indicate that they should be defined as separate environments. As was highlighted in *Pathfinder 4* (August 2004), the danger in not acknowledging space as a separate environment is that the ADF will not be able to develop meaningful space power doctrine and capabilities. Further, it could potentially impact upon existing air power doctrine by causing a dilution of considerations specific to the air domain.



***The space domain has unique characteristics, such as perspective, that are different to the air domain.***

The contemporary discussion of effects in air power definitions reflects a growing understanding that air power is more than the ability to simply project force. Air power produces effects, which is essentially one's capacity to influence the adversary. Conflict is caused by differences of opinion between two or more entities. One way to resolve such differences is to change the adversary's intent. This invariably requires the creation of effects that are synergistically applied to influence the cognitive domain of the adversary in order to change their opinion. The characteristics of contemporary warfare reflect the complex environment in which irregular and military forces increasingly participate in multi-agency operations sharing a battlespace with non-government organisations. In such an environment, effects must be broader than purely military ones.



*The Australian civil aviation industry has a long history of augmenting the RAAF in projecting national and military air power.*

The ability of air power to create effects and align them to grand strategic objectives is an important element that has been overlooked in recent air power definitions, including the RAAF's current definition. The inherent strategic nature of air power allows it to create strategic effects that can directly have impact on national security. More importantly, understanding air power in national terms captures the broader aspects of a nation's air power capability that include the aviation industry and civilian aviation activities. This broader understanding of air power was evident post-World War II but has been somewhat relegated to the background in recent interpretations. However, several regional nations still recognise the broader definition. For example, the Indian

Air Force identifies air power as 'the ability to assert its will through the medium of the air'. Likewise, the Indonesian Air Force recognises air power as 'the total capability of a nation to utilise airspace as a medium to achieve its national interests.' Such definitions acknowledge the many components of air power while also implying a linkage to a political or national objective. In effect, air power is a component of national power. However, these broad definitions tend to lose some focus when applied in military terms. There is a case for defining military air power as a subcomponent of national air power.

There is no doubt that air power is a broad concept leading some thinkers such as Winston Churchill to suggest that it defies a simple definition. Nonetheless, it is important to have a clear and concise definition of air power—it establishes a baseline for determining and understanding an air force's role and responsibilities. Such a definition should clearly distinguish between air power and space power, noting that air and space are two unique environments. Lastly, there is a need to identify how air power can influence and create effects at the national strategic level. It is in this respect that military air power could be identified as a sub-component of national air power. As the Air Force develops the future force capabilities envisioned in the Defence White Paper 2009, its doctrine must have a clear and concise understanding of air power that will fully reflect and maximise the potential strategic effects such capabilities can create at the national level.

- *There is a need to clearly distinguish between air power and space power.*
- *As the RAAF develops the future force, it must have a concise understanding and interpretation of air power.*
- *Military air power, should be considered as a sub-component of national air power that encompasses industry and civil aviation.*

*'Air power is the total aviation activity—civilian and military, commercial and private, potential as well as existing.'*

General Henry H. ('Hap') Arnold



**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.raaf.gov.au/airpower](http://www.raaf.gov.au/airpower)

