

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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## FACETS OF AIR POWER: EMPLOYMENT IN URBAN CONFLICTS

The character and conduct of conflict have changed significantly over the past few decades. This has been primarily the result of an evolutionary change in the understanding of the concept of national security that in turn has altered the perception of current threats and challenges. Today, the occurrence of conventional conflicts—state-on-state, military fighting military using conventional weapons to achieve national objectives—is increasingly rare. Instead, armed conflicts that pit state forces against irregular adversaries pursuing a plethora of objectives—most of them not linked to the notion of national security, using asymmetric operational tactics and not bound by the Laws of Armed Conflict—are now common place. The RAAF understands such conflicts as *irregular warfare*. This shift has also resulted in most of the contemporary conflicts being initiated and conducted in urban areas where the terrain is more advantageous to small groups of irregular forces than to modern conventional military forces.

The urban operating environment poses a number of challenges to conventional military forces such as the difficulty in distinguishing combatants and civilians and avoiding collateral damage. Inherent air power characteristics and capabilities can be selectively optimised and employed to mitigate many of these issues.

First, urban conflict normally occurs as a result of intervention requiring the deployment of external forces, the legitimacy of which will always be questioned at the global and ideological level. Prolonged presence of foreign troops in disputed areas usually leads to resentment from the local population who view them as occupying forces. The reach and penetration capabilities of air power can overcome these challenges by operating from bases that are not in contested territory. While troops on the ground may almost always be required, the numbers and duration can be minimised by using air

power. Further, the use of air power will diminish the probability of mission creep since it leaves only a small and transient footprint. In the contemporary international politico-security scenario, air power provides a more acceptable solution to this vexed problem.

Second, adversaries operating in small and diffused groups require a much larger number of troops on the ground to contain them. Effective employment of airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities makes the task of monitoring the activities of these dispersed groups comparatively easier. In fact the high endurance of airborne ISR assets and their relatively unobtrusive nature along with their ability



*Release of AGM-154C Joint Standoff Weapon from a Super Hornet*

to rapidly identify and fix both stationary and moving targets are key ingredients to success in urban operations. Airborne ISR is also critical to coordinating surface operations that may otherwise become disjointed because of the complex terrain encountered in urban conflicts.

Third, the necessity to minimise collateral damage sometimes negates the use of a surface force's organic firepower in the urban environment. Modern air power has unique strike capabilities that can be leveraged to meet the stringent demands of the accurate placement of weapons in urban areas. All modern conflicts demand precision, proportionality and discrimination in the application of force. This is particularly important in urban conflict where the risk of collateral damage and unintended consequences increases. Air power can carry out such precision strikes by combining its inherently broad perspective with its ability to carry out ISR using airborne platforms that have reach and persistence. A combination of long duration ISR and time-sensitive targeting is a lethal mix that can negate many of the asymmetric advantages that an irregular adversary might gain through movement and concealment in urban areas. Essentially, air power provides a 'bird's eye view' where

it is possible to see, understand and strike precisely and rapidly from the air. The integration of air power's kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities permits immense flexibility in conflict and provides for very rapid transition from benign to lethal operations.



*Heron taking off from Kandahar Airfield in support of Operation SLIPPER in Afghanistan*

Fourth, the ability to carry out long-range but swift strikes makes air power an important strategic deterrent. A combination of advanced technology, innovative operating concepts and closely coordinated ISR activities gives air strike a unique ability to achieve very high levels of strategic influence with relatively minimal effort. In urban conflict this could be leveraged to achieve the desired end-state even before ground forces are deployed. This takes on added importance considering that the urban battlespace poses a number of problems for surface operations.

In conflicts in urban environments, air power can take on another unique role—air control. Air control is the ability to control surface operations through the employment of air power. Air power can effectively cordon off a delineated operating area to deny irregular adversaries

external support, both in resources and personnel through anti-infiltration and curfew enforcement activities. Since urban conflicts are mostly irregular in nature, non-kinetic options, such as information operations and show of force, take on added importance.

The evolutionary process of understanding the threat, both strategic and operational, and refining and adapting concepts and technology to counter it underpins operational success in urban areas. Air power can achieve a blend of persistence, precision and minimal presence at a rapid rate making it a decisive capability in low-intensity, irregular and urban conflicts in a contextual manner. Effective integration within the joint force enables air power to relieve the ground forces of some of the warfighting requirements. Close-in employment of air power in urban areas has the potential to challenge the traditional notion of the primacy of ground combat. However, this should not be viewed as air power assuming the prime role in urban conflicts. A truly joint force will be able to seamlessly integrate the unique advantages of all of its elements to ensure that the force as a whole is successful. The innovative employment of air power is the key to achieve this.

- *The urban operating environment poses unique challenges to conventional military forces.*
- *Air power can mitigate a number of issues that may otherwise become insurmountable.*
- *In a seamless approach to conflict in urban areas, air power is a key element in the integration of all force elements.*

*In an age when our society is extremely sensitive to casualties, and in a period when our entire defence establishment has to come up with innovative ways to do more with less forces while minimising the extent of collateral damage, the need to embrace new uses for air power is becoming more acute.*

Major General Dan Haloutz  
Chief Israeli Defence Forces, 2006



**Air Power Development Centre**  
TCC3, Department of Defence  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041

Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)

Web: <http://airpower.airforce.gov.au>

The views expressed in this Pathfinder are not necessarily those of the RAAF

