With the long-drawn conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down there is a belief in some quarters that Irregular Warfare (IW), as it has been known for the past few decades, is a thing of the past; that the lessons of these conflicts are no longer relevant. However, this perception does not take into account that 80 per cent of the wars fought after the end of World War II have been irregular in nature; further emphasised by the recent events in North Africa. In fact, it can be surmised that democratic nations will be involved in IW in the future and, like most conflicts, at inconvenient times. This would be the norm rather than the exception.

IW, like any other form of conflict, can only be prosecuted successfully with adequate control of the air, which air power provides. Air power is a critical element in the overall capability of the nation to conduct a successful IW campaign, especially since it provides an ‘asymmetric’ edge over the adversary to erode their power, will and influence. The ultimate aim of all participants in an IW campaign is to win over the population of the contested nation/area, which often means that an intervening force would have to change the status quo. In order to achieve this, air power carries out three core roles: strike, air mobility, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). Winning over the population, or ‘winning the hearts and minds’, is a complex process. In such a situation, the application of kinetic force through air strikes may not be the most effective application of air power for a number of reasons. However, in certain conditions and in the appropriate context, air strikes may be the optimum response; therefore, the ability to do so must always be available to the military force engaged in IW.

Strikes are considered the most measured response from air power, after obtaining control of the air, in a conventional military campaign. However, in the case of IW, strikes could create a negative impact if they are not carefully crafted to ensure that there is minimal collateral damage. The advent of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) with extreme accuracy has somewhat ameliorated the chances of collateral damage in the traditional application of kinetic force from the air. However, the possibility of collateral damage to non-combatants and non-military assets is still high because of the conduct of such conflicts within or in close proximity to purely civilian population and assets. In these circumstances even limited tactical action can have broad strategic implications. Knowing when to use kinetic air power in IW is a complex decision, and its use is prone to creating unwarranted influence on popular perception through the biased manipulation of the general media.

The irregular adversary normally does not possess even the most rudimentary form of air power and consequently decries the slightest of collateral damage issues resulting from the use of air power. This is done because air power is extremely effective in the IW scenario; therefore, the employment of air power must be done in a manner that does not create the condition for the adversary to win a propaganda war relating to collateral damage. This can be achieved with smaller yield PGMs with improved accuracy in their delivery. In certain settings, the concept of carrying out strikes from smaller and slower turbo-prop aircraft has been found to have merit. This

"Aircraft with precision weapons and sensors, such as this Air Force F/A-18F Super Hornet, provide valuable strike and ISR capabilities in irregular warfare."
mode of delivery could further enhance the ability of air power to limit collateral damage in some contexts. In all cases, the fundamental aim is to avoid collateral damage at all costs.

The second role of air power in IW is air mobility that includes special recovery operations. Air mobility operations conducted by both fixed and rotary wing assets are at times even more important than the kinetic application of force through strike missions. In remote and inhospitable regions, air mobility permits the legitimate government to extend the rule of law and thereby stifle insurgencies at the initial stages itself. The rapid response to emerging situations that air mobility permits is a decisive advantage in IW, which is characterised by fluid situations and the ebb and flow of skirmishes over vast areas.

Countries or regions that are plagued by IW generally have poor communications and lack infrastructure, which could hamper the operations of a conventional force. However, this situation can be turned around to suit the conventional military force through the optimised employment of air mobility concepts. Air mobility shrinks the battlefield that irregular forces would typically like to expand and diffuse to their advantage; it permits forces to be applied at the time and place of choice irrespective of choke points in surface deployments; and avoids ground forces being subject to ambushes to a great extent. One of the key considerations in the conduct of IW is to manage the perception of the local population regarding the physical presence of foreign troops in the country. Air mobility permits a numerically smaller force to dominate a large area while also creating a much smaller footprint, thus alleviating the intervening force’s perception issue. Of course, the maximum advantage of air mobility can only be leveraged after control of the air has been unquestionably established.

The third role of air power in IW is that of ISR. While intelligence is a critical requirement in all kinds of wars, IW is perhaps the most intelligence-driven form. Prosecuting a ‘small war’, as IW is at times referred to, cannot be successfully waged unless the force has the ability to fuse dedicated ISR capabilities with intelligence gathered by non-traditional ISR with a high degree of accuracy and as near to real-time as possible. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles that are also armed has changed the conduct of IW through being proactive in combining ISR and strike operations. The success of such combined missions is dependent on the adequacy of the force’s inherent command and control capabilities. The importance of flexible command and control to optimise the employment of air power in IW has been demonstrated repeatedly in the past two decades.

Unlike in earlier wars, no one element of air power, or for that matter of a military force, can function in isolation and hope to achieve the broader strategic objectives. Each dedicated air power role needs to be complemented at the right time, place and context with other roles for success in complex operations such as IW. This is a seminal lesson that comes out of more than a decade of IW operations that must be carried forward for the future understanding of the application of air power. Finally, there is no doubt that IW campaigns will be the norm rather than the exception in the future and that air power provides a distinct advantage in their conduct. However, insurgencies that lead to IW are normally the result of bad governance and therefore, unlike conventional conflicts, the military forces are only one element of national power and part of the solution that must be employed in a concerted whole-of-nation approach to succeed in an IW.

**Key Points**

- Irregular wars, normally the result of bad governance, will continue to erupt in the future with minimal warning.
- Air power, after obtaining control of the air, can create a distinct advantage in the conduct of an IW campaign, through providing strike, air mobility and ISR.
- IW campaigns can only be successfully prosecuted by adopting a whole-of-nation approach in which air power, as an element of military power, is only one element of national power.