LONG-RANGE STRIKE CAPABILITY

Strike can therefore be used to deter or coerce the adversary, degrade, neutralise or destroy an adversary’s war-making capabilities, or disrupt or deny courses of action.


Essential national security and protecting national interests have always been at the heart of a nation’s security strategies. It is therefore only natural that the security strategies and the national power elements and their capabilities that ensure national security evolve and alter with the changing interpretations and perceptions of what constitutes national security. Irrespective of the nuances in understanding national security, the need to have long range strike capabilities embedded in the military capabilities have remained a constant factor.

As the application of lethal force through the protracted employment of military forces is becoming increasingly difficult to pursue as an option, nations have started to emphasise deterrence as a critical strategy to ensure national security. True and effective deterrence can only be achieved with the demonstrated ability to strike at the centres of gravity of the adversary. In a direct manner, deterrence is built around long-range strike capabilities.

Historically, long-range strike capabilities were built into air forces through operational strategic bombers although they were only available to the larger air forces of the world. However, the concept of ‘strategic’ bombing was an accepted role for air forces. Some even argue, incorrectly, that the United States Air Force (USAF) won its independence in the post-World War II era riding on the back of this concept. The development of the Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) by the erstwhile Soviet Union and the USA gave further impetus for the need to possess a long-range strike capability. As long as the Cold War continued to divide the world into two opposing political groups, long-range strike capabilities remained a powerful factor in the formulation of operational concepts and strategic debate.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent eruption of myriad ‘bush fire conflicts’ in different parts of the world, the perceived need for long-range strikes diminished. A decade of benign neglect of this concept then followed, mainly springing from a somewhat faulty appreciation of the evolution of the character of conflicts and wars, and the acceptability of the application of military power through the employment of multi-layered military forces. All this changed with the attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 and the reaction of the USA. The deployment of NATO forces into Afghanistan and the subsequent US-led invasion of Iraq brought irregular wars into focus. While the characteristics of such wars are different to conventional conflicts, the changes were more cyclical than linear. Irregular wars have spanned history and therefore this was more a renewal of focus than the adaption to a new mode of conflict. They also brought about an element of emphasis, and perhaps more importantly, international debate, on the political correctness of military intervention by surface forces in another sovereign country without a formal declaration of war.

While the debate of the politics of intervention is outside the scope of this paper, the changes in the characteristics of war impacted the concept of operations of traditional military forces. The forms of irregular warfare that the opponents adopted forced the military forces to adapt their own concepts and tactics. It also brought about a situation wherein a clear military victory was not achievable for the intervening nations.
Combined with the casualty figures, public opinion started to waver and the democratic governments were hard pressed to justify the need to retain troops on the ground. At the same time it was also necessary to ensure that the irregular adversaries were aware of the ability of the regular military forces to strike them at will. The answer was once again to be found in long-range strike capabilities.

Long-range strike capabilities are now not resident in strategic bombers, but in a number of airborne platforms. The fundamental requirement is to be able to carry out time-sensitive targeting within the area of interest of a nation. Dependent on the primary area of interest, and the differences in the understanding of national security, the definition of long range itself would vary from state to state. Long-range strikes could involve extended flights across continents, or attacks by cruise missiles or ICBMs. On the other hand, long-range strike could also be conducted by uninhabited combat aerial vehicles operating locally but controlled from a home base, like the ones being conducted in the tribal belt along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Although the debate regarding the efficacy of manned aircraft strikes and the cost-effectiveness of missiles have been on-going, it is not an issue that can be put to rest since it involves a large number of variables that have to be calculated in a contextual manner as each circumstance is unique.

The fundamental outcome brought about by the changes in the characteristics of war and the increasingly global debate that erupts when a military intervention takes place is that governments are reluctant to commit military forces on the ground. The result is that air strikes, when necessary and in extremis, are now being viewed as a first-choice option by most democratic governments albeit that strategic bombers are not within the resource capability of most nations to acquire, maintain and operate. It is also significant that since the B-2, the USAF has continued to investigate designs for the next generation bomber without committing to a specific timeframe. Consequently the operational life of the venerable B-52 Stratofortress has been extended by another 20 years or more. Meanwhile, both Russia and China are pursuing the design plans for strategic bombers to be built in the near future. This difference in approach could well be explained by the USA having a global strike capability resident in their carrier groups, which both China and Russia currently lack.

Conceptually, long range strikes afford a nation two distinct advantages—one, that a demonstrated capability acts as a powerful deterrent factor, and two, through its application, a nation can avoid most of the political hue and cry that is bound to accompany direct intervention through the necessary long-term deployment of ground forces. Air forces around the world now consider long-range strike as one of the fundamental capabilities that they must possess in order to provide the government with a range of options in the national security equation. The ability to strike anywhere within the geographical area of interest of the nation—with precision, proportionality, and discrimination—has become a prized competence for all air forces of calibre. This is the hallmark of a balanced air force.

**Key Points**

- National security is an evolving concept and consequently security strategies have also been dynamic
- Long range strike capabilities have been an important and constant capability in the national security equation
- The ability to rapidly strike anywhere in the pursuit of national interest is a powerful deterrent and a coveted capability