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AIR POWER AND COLLATERAL DAMAGE: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

‘…we use military force in order to achieve a military objective and minimise civilian casualties. If we are deciding not to hit a legitimate target because there may be a civilian casualty, now we have turned that on its head.’

Rep. Martha McSally,
Retired USAF Colonel and A-10 Squadron Commander

Air forces of western nations have been involved in carrying out airstrikes in the Middle East for more than a decade. Starting from the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, air power has been used in myriad ways by the intervening forces, predominantly in the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and strike roles. Air forces have also utilised the inherent mobility of air power to position and support ground forces and, more recently, to provide humanitarian assistance to people who have been isolated by insurgent action. The operating air environment has so far been benign with the adversaries possessing only rudimentary air defence capabilities, thereby negating the need to mount a dedicated air superiority campaign.

The use of uninhabited aerial vehicles that carry out the dual roles of ISR and opportunistic aerial strikes have enhanced the effectiveness of air power. This is particularly so for focused attacks on enemy leadership, who are only vulnerable for targeting at fleeting opportunities. While the success of such strikes is undeniable, their impact on the overall insurgency is a matter of intense debate in both academic and operational circles. Another aspect that has been contentious is the question of collateral damage—particularly civilian casualties—that is unavoidable in the application of lethal force when prosecuting a legitimate target.

There are two intangible factors that must be considered in any discussion of collateral damage caused by air strikes. First, there has to be an acceptance that even with the most stringent rules of engagement (ROE), ‘zero’ collateral damage can never be assured. Second, in modern warfare the application of lethal force from the air is the most effective way to minimise collateral damage. In popular belief, air strikes are considered to be more prone to excessive destruction, perhaps because of the widespread destruction that accompanied the bomber offensive in Europe during World War II in which entire cities were obliterated.

Air power has travelled a long way since then. Modern air power is capable of neutralising even a very small target with precision, discrimination and proportionality. With timely and accurate intelligence, air power can and does carry out strikes with almost no collateral damage. This is a prime reason why air power has become Government’s weapon of choice, when punitive action is being contemplated. Technological advances have made air power the most effective mode for the delivery of measured lethal force.

The question of collateral damage however does not end with the assertion that it has been minimised to ‘acceptable’ levels. A minimum level of unintended collateral damage may be tolerable in state-on-state conflicts in which the antagonists tend to operate within a broad spread of the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). This could also be because of the relative ease with which combatants and non-combatants can be differentiated in a conventional conflict. Since the conclusion of the 2003 Gulf War, there has not been a
single conventional conflict that has been fought—all wars have been irregular in their modus operandi.

There are two unique features of irregular wars that constrain the uninhibited use of air power. First, the fighting force of the irregular force is difficult to identify from the normal civilian population. Further, the insurgent combatants tend to use this diffusion to their advantage by functioning within the populated areas and being embedded within the general population. Second, while the insurgents do not adhere to any norms regarding LOAC, they are the first ones to complain when regular military forces make genuine mistakes in the application of force. They are also very adept at using social media to highlight any such shortcomings. The question of collateral damage, particularly ‘civilian’ casualties, falls within this broad ambit.

The political repercussions of unintended civilian casualties, notwithstanding the impossibility of distinguishing irregular combatants and civilians, have become a challenge for air forces to overcome. Recently the US and other coalition air forces have stated that they are aiming for ‘zero’ civilian casualties in carrying out air strikes against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Since it is impossible to be absolutely certain regarding the identity of a targeted individual, the coalition air forces have started to refrain from proceeding with the mission if there are chances of even one civilian casualty.

What this constraint means to the prosecution of an effective air campaign is that sudden developments on the ground can often force the cancellation of a strike, which could have been of enormous importance to achieving overall objectives. In the case of the current operations in Iraq and Syria against IS, this further degrades the effectiveness of the air campaign since the coalition is already constrained by not having their own troops on the ground which in turn means that there is no support in terms of ‘spotters’ on the ground to identify targets. The emphasis on ‘zero’ casualties has made the air campaign less effectual, with some estimates stating that as much as 75 per cent of combat missions are returning without dropping any weapons.

Avoiding civilian casualties is a desirable, noble and humanitarian concept. However, by not neutralising a legitimate target for fear of civilian casualties in a war zone, especially in the current context of the war against IS, they may be able to continue to commit extreme atrocities. The world at large must be made aware that ‘zero’-collateral damage and -casualty campaigns are unachievable in practice and also that this level of accountability is not required under the LOAC. Laws governing the application of lethal force by the military require that all ‘reasonable’ measure be taken to avoid collateral damage and civilian casualties. However, Coalition air planners are cognisant of the fact that civilian casualties are antithesis to the need to win over the local population in counter-insurgency operations. Accordingly, a very delicate balance is maintained between attempts to neutralise high-value targets and the need to minimise collateral damage and ensure, if possible, zero civilian casualties.

How an air campaign is conducted against an insurgent force that is mixing with the civilian population that it has infiltrated, will have direct and profound influence on the way in which the coalition nations are viewed by the civilian inhabitants of the region. The success of air power in combating irregular forces operating completely outside the norms and laws that govern conventional warfare, will depend on its ability to deliver precise, discriminatory and proportional air attacks while ensuring limited collateral damage and minimal civilian casualties.

Key Points

- The use of uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) to carry out opportunistic, precise air strikes has increased the effectiveness of air power.
- Unintended collateral damage and civilian casualties in the lethal application of military power have become politically unacceptable.
- Air forces are altering their concepts and tactics to ensure that air strikes do not create civilian casualties, moving closer to a ‘zero’-casualty modus operandi.