



LONG-RANGE STRIKE A FOUNDATION OF POWER PROJECTION

When a single platform can blur the notions of roles and air power categories and incorporate new technologies that regain and re-establish aerial pre-eminence, then something important has occurred.

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In the rapidly evolving global security environment, it is becoming increasingly clear that nations will need power projection capabilities to ensure their national security and protect national interests. Purely being able to defend the geographical borders of the nation as the end-state in achieving national security and sovereignty is now insufficient in the broader understanding of what comprises national security. So what is power projection? Broadly, power projection is the ability of a nation to influence another through the projection of all its elements of national power individually or in an appropriate combination. However, in common usage it refers to the deployment and/or employment of military power to ensure and enhance national security.

In strategic military terms, power projection is the ability to deploy and sustain military forces far away from home bases. In a more focused manner, it is the ability to employ lethal and non-lethal military capabilities in order to neutralise the adversary's centres of gravity at long distances, in accordance with national security objectives and imperatives. From an air power perspective, there are two major aspects to military power projection and both have political overtones to them.

First, military power projection is not merely the realm of air power. Military capabilities of all domains contribute to the overall capability to project power. In the contemporary security environment however, the timeliness of the projection of power gets superimposed on the ability to do so. When power projection is required at short notice and in a time-critical manner, air power by virtue of its inherent characteristics of speed, reach and flexibility will be at the vanguard in the initial phases. In this situation air power has the onerous responsibility of being the prime mover and

enabler in meeting contingent national power projection requirements. Whether it is air, land, or maritime power projection that is required, when time is of the essence it will be air power that first gathers and deploys the assets essential to project the necessary quantum of power needed to achieve the effects required. Success of such power projection will be underpinned by the political influence that a nation can bring to bear on another nation to host foreign military forces, on occasion for long periods of time.

The second aspect is more within the gamut of the employment of air power and directly attributable to it. It requires the application of lethal and non-lethal air power capabilities to create the required effects in a time-critical manner, most often from great distances. It is in this arena that the long-range strike capability of air power becomes a crucial constituent of military power projection capabilities. The ability to mount long-range strikes, which are part of the spread of a balanced and modern air power capability, provides a greater number

of options to the government in times of crisis. Even though more power projection options are available, the employment of air power in this role would be directly dependent on the strength of the political will of the nation to do so. As in all other aspects of power projection, political will and influence have an overarching bearing on the employment of air power.

A corollary to air power's capability to rapidly mount long-range strikes is the asymmetric approach to control of the air that contemporary adversaries with limited air power capabilities have adopted. Instead of control of the air they adopt an approach that is more constrained in time and space, which can be termed 'air denial'. While control of the air is primarily built on the offensive application of



An FA-18 from 2 Operational Conversion Unit is refuelling from a United States Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker during a mission on Exercise Talisman Saber 09



Australian F-35A (rear) flying out of Luke Air Force Base, USA

air power, air denial is inherently defensive in nature. A force with inadequate air power capabilities can rely on this concept to degrade to a certain degree the offensive air power capabilities of a more powerful adversary. This is achieved by building hardened shelters that will minimise damage of aerial attacks and deploying air defence systems that consist of radars and surface-to-air missiles. The versatility of these air defence systems is based on their mobile nature; especially the missile systems.

Under these conditions, the environment for air operations would become contested. A contested airspace is one in which one's own operations would be questioned or opposed by the adversary's air power. In cases where the concept of air denial is employed, the contested airspace would be made sufficiently lethal through the deployment of sophisticated air defence systems. Such an environment is not conducive to the assured survival of airborne strike platforms. In such an atmosphere, long-range strike capabilities that can avoid entering the lethal envelope of a contested airspace, or do so without being detected, would be a tremendous advantage and a coveted capability.

Another factor that has to be considered regarding operations in a contested airspace is the proliferation of electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. In the recent past, there has been an enormous increase in EW capabilities while the costs to acquire or create and integrate them into a capable system have reduced remarkably. In fact EW has now become commercially available and, perhaps more importantly, very affordable. This situation complicates air operations, particularly those conducted in contested airspaces.

The solution to these challenges is to develop long-range strike capabilities at the highest end of the spectrum of air power capabilities. The cost considerations of developing such capabilities point towards adopting a process that creates an airborne platform which can not only carry out long-range stand-off attacks, but can also have other capabilities embedded within it. In this respect, integrating

command and control and EW capabilities into the same platform would boost its multi-role capabilities—integrating sensors and increasing the processing power creates a platform that has a broader role than just being a dedicated strike platform. Resource constraints make this approach the most cost-effective way forward in creating future air power systems. It is envisaged that such a system, while primarily being an offensive power projection capability, could also double as a minimal capacity Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) platform and also as an EW system.

When such a platform is eventually built and made operational, it would revolutionise the manner in which power projection is achieved. It will also become the asymmetry that more powerful military forces will be able to bring to bear on the contemporary spread of irregular adversaries with limited defensive and no offensive air power capabilities. By fielding such a system the challenge of operating in contested airspaces where the adversary is focusing on the concept of air denial can be negated. Such a platform will not only have long-range, stand-off precision capability with increased payload, but will also be flexible, survivable and versatile. Power projection through the employment of air power capabilities would have opened another chapter.

Key Points

- *Air power is a critical element and at the vanguard of a nation's power projection capabilities*
- *Groups with relatively limited air power capabilities are building air defence systems that facilitate the concept of air denial, which in turn creates contested airspaces for operations*
- *Airborne multi-role platforms with long-range, stand-off, precision capability and increased payload, which are also flexible, survivable and versatile will enable air power to counter the challenges of operating in a contested airspace.*



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