Over the past two or three decades, precision-guided munitions (PGMs) have become synonymous with the application of lethal air power. So much so, there have been recent articles in reputed magazines reporting their perception that the Russian Air Force possesses only a limited stock of PGMs and therefore raising the question of its ability to carry out effective strikes and be successful in the current operations in the Middle-East. Such analyses create the impression in the minds of the less informed that, firstly PGMs are infallible and secondly, that the application of air power can only be successful with the employment of these undoubtedly sophisticated weapons.

On the other hand, the enviable success of air-launched PGMs when combined with air power’s inherent characteristics of speed, reach and flexibility has unobtrusively moved air power to the position of first-choice option when lethal power projection is required in the pursuit of national security, irrespective of the fundamental strategy being adopted. When PGMs are employed, air power is capable of creating the desired effects with extremely minimised chances of collateral damage even when the target to be prosecuted is time-sensitive and offers only a fleeting window of opportunity. This capability has created an perception of infallibility in the application of air power, which creates its own pitfalls. Therefore, when collateral damage does occur during air strikes, the repercussions in terms of adverse reportage is at times overwhelming.

In order to appreciate the ‘cult-status’ that PGMs have achieved in both military circles and, more importantly, with the media, it is crucial to fully understand the meaning of the words precision and accuracy as well as the connection and differences between the two. Subsequently, it is also necessary to analyse and place on record the impossibility of achieving a completely fool-proof result in the application of a PGM. The expectations of both the political leadership and the general public regarding the application of lethal force from the air must be tempered with facts and a clear understanding of the variables that are in play when air attacks are conducted in war zones.

So, what does precision mean? Precision is the quality or state of being precise; and precise means definite or exact. When translated to air delivered weapons it would mean that the weapon will do exactly what it was intended to do and strike the pre-programmed target that was chosen, nothing more nor less. In itself this is a unique capability and will produce spectacular results when employed successfully. However, the challenges regarding the application of lethal force emerge when the precision capability of air power is combined with the need to find, identify and then attack a target considered to be critical enough to be neutralised. The two—the physical aspect of the capability of the PGM and the more virtual aspect of gathering intelligence regarding the target—when combined optimally have the potential to create the precise effect required. When both are aligned, they almost always do.

The issue of collateral damage has taken centre stage, especially when air strikes are analysed. The demand—both political and military—is to avoid collateral damage at all costs, at times even at the cost of not being able to carry the fight to the adversary. In purely military terms...
this is a retrograde step, since the fundamental objective of any military campaign is to degrade and defeat the adversary with minimal cost to one’s own forces. This is where PGMs come into their own. PGMs have now sufficiently matured to be able to hit the selected target with almost complete assurance. The issue of failure therefore stems from the ‘virtual’ element of the combination, the ability of the joint force to find and identify the ‘correct’ target so that it can then be attacked with precision from the air.

An air attack where the proper and approved target has been correctly identified—and then been neutralised by a PGM with precision—is what can be termed as an accurate strike. There is a connection as well as a subtle difference between being precise and accurate. **Accurate** means, in exact conformity to a standard or rule; free from error. It is clear that only accurate strikes will create the desired precise effect. Further, the inaccuracy of a strike using PGMs would, in most cases, be attributable to the failure of the ‘find and identify’ side of the combination and not that of the PGMs per se. Therefore an accurate strike is a combination of a PGM and correct intelligence. Inaccuracies in air strikes, irrespective of the sophistication of the weapon being employed, will have to be accepted as long as the target identification process contains even the slightest degree of fallibility. However, air power and its practitioners have done an admirable job in the great majority of cases to meet the demands placed on them for accuracy and timeliness of air attacks, and thereby have almost always been able to create the desired precise effects.

The reason for air power having become the first-choice military element to create precise effects is not difficult to discern. The severe criticism levelled at air power when it fails to achieve the desired outcome, however small the percentage of such incidence compared to its greater achievements and even when it has not violated any international norms, is far greater than what it should be in highly volatile operations. Even when the inaccuracy of the attack can be clearly attributed to flawed intelligence that may have emanated from other agencies, air power is set to wear the blame. This could be attributed to the difficulty in understanding the nuances of delivering a PGM in a time-sensitive manner within a war zone and from a fast moving platform where the time available for the human in the loop to make the decision is very limited and amounts to only a few seconds. Secondly, in all cases of mistaken targets being attacked and the obvious collateral damage that is created, there is always the need to assign blame—air power fits the bill fully, being demonstrably spectacular in its strikes and also having vociferous advocates who are not averse to accepting the fallibility of intelligence, while stoutly defending the capabilities of air power.

Air power and its PGMs are the best innovations that have taken place in recent times in the sphere of lethal application of military force. When this capability is combined with the intelligence gathering capacity of a joint military force, the PGMs become accurate weapons of destruction that can create the desired joint effect precisely. Precision by itself without having the ability to identify the target accurately will not always create the desired effects, which will immediately contribute to the pursuance of the objectives of the battle, campaign and/or war. As long as there is misunderstanding between the concept of precision and accuracy, air power whenever it fails—occasions that are few and far between—will always have detractors who will never be able to appreciate its effectiveness as a potent element of national power.

**Key Points**

- The success of air-launched PGMs in combination with air power’s inherent characteristics of speed, reach and flexibility has made air power the first-choice option for lethal power projection
- Intelligence can never be completely infallible
- The accuracy of an air strike is dependent both on the PGMs precision and the availability of verifiable and accurate intelligence