Bombardment from the air is legitimate only when directed at a military objective, the destruction or injury of which would constitute a distinct military disadvantage to the belligerent.


The US Air Force carried out three strikes in the vicinity of the city of Kunduz, Afghanistan, on 2 October 2015. The first two were on a warehouse and a mansion in two densely populated residential areas, according to local officials. No-one was killed in these attacks, but the targets were completely destroyed and the windows of nearby houses were shattered. The third attack on a hospital, staffed by Doctors Without Borders, killed 30 medical staff and patients, making it one of the deadliest civilian casualty incidents stemming from coalition air strikes in Afghanistan. It triggered an international outcry and investigations by the Pentagon and NATO.

There is conflicting information being selectively released that is meant to allocate blame for the ‘mistake’ that took place in striking the hospital, including reports that the Taliban were using the hospital as a base for attacking Afghan Government forces. Irrespective of the results of the investigation, the destruction of the hospital is being labelled as a failure that highlights the fallibility of air power, particularly its employment in the strike role. This conclusion is biased and not based on any comprehensive analysis of air power capabilities and does not take into account myriad human inputs into the process of an air strike.

A precision air strike has two elements to it. The first is the decision-making process that permits the conduct of a strike and the second is the actual operational and tactical part, which is predominantly based on the technology of air power.

The decision to carry out a strike is never casually made—it is always a considered one, made after ensuring that safeguards are in place and taking into account all possible repercussions that could emanate from the neutralisation of the selected target. Essentially, the effect that the strike will create—on the battlefield at the tactical level, in the theatre at the operational level, and at the highest levels of government at the strategic level—is carefully calculated and weighed against the probability of collateral damage and possible fallouts before authorising a strike. This process has been arrived at after a great deal of thought and consideration of the effects that may not always be aligned to the desired objectives.

The decision-making process is almost completely reliant on the intelligence that is available. Such intelligence straddles the entire spectrum of conflict from the tactical to the strategic. The fundamental challenge to decision-makers is the fact that intelligence is always fallible and can never be completely fool-proof and one-hundred per cent correct. The reasons for this are many. At the tactical level, the heat and dust of battle could skew intelligence analysis and at the strategic level, the Clausewitzian fog
of war could obscure critical information and create a situation where wrong decisions are made with all good intentions. In almost all cases of incorrect intelligence being made the basis for decisions that subsequently prove to be disastrous, there will be an element of human error. The quality and reliability of intelligence being made available is the foundation for the selection and targeting of the correct centres of gravity.

The technology of air power that provides it with the ability to strike with pinpoint accuracy does not need elaboration since it has been demonstrated repeatedly. Into this combined equation is now introduced the consideration of the effect that is to be created. When air power came of age in World War II, the consideration of the effect of air strikes was very broad and almost always strategic in intent. The tactical application of air power in contributing to the surface conflict was in its infancy and close air support of advancing ground forces was a novel concept. The weapon systems did not have the technological competence to assure absolute precision. In these circumstances air power could not state with any assurance that it would be able to create the effects that were desired. Therefore, the reliance on air power to provide fire support was limited.

The assurance of accurate air strikes through the advent of precision-guided munitions in combination with small diameter bombs that ensure discrimination and proportionality, altered the entire scenario. Air power could now neutralise targets with an efficiency that had not been achieved by any other power projection capability. The result was that planners could now turn to finetuning the effects that were required to be created to win the battle, campaign and war. It became possible to visualise and draw the connecting thread between tactical actions and strategic actions. There was also a downside to the arrival of such a capability. A strike, like the one on the Kunduz hospital, that could be tactically precise has the potential to create strategic repercussions that could have detrimental impact on the overall progress of the campaign. This is particularly visible in irregular wars where local public opinion is a critical element for success.

Contemporary, high-calibre air power is now capable of creating tailored and nuanced effects that can either be fully restricted to the tactical level or ones that have clear cascading effects that will ripple all the way to the strategic level. The selection of the appropriate centre of gravity and the decision-making process, both of which are reliant on intelligence as the primary input, will have to ensure that the cascading effects are not unwanted and/or unanticipated. If there is a failure in this process, it is likely to be that of intelligence since the technological aspects of an air strike has now become almost fully infallible in its accuracy.

The optimum situation is where the intelligence, which has an assurance level that precludes the selection of a wrong target and is as near to real-time as possible, is combined with strike capabilities that have the ability to react rapidly. This combination will permit air power to create carefully tailored precise effects at all levels of war, a capability that is unique to air power.

Key Points

- Contemporary air power has the ability to strike any target with precision, discrimination and proportionality
- Intelligence, gathered from a number of sources, can never be infallible
- With adequate intelligence, air power can create carefully tailored and precise effects in the battlefield as well as at the strategic level of decision-making