

PATHFINDER

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AIR POWER AND NATIONAL SECURITY

'Strategic air assault is wasted if it is dissipated piecemeal in sporadic attacks between which the enemy has an opportunity to readjust defenses or to recuperate.'

General Henry H. Harnold, 1945.

The character of war has changed in the past few decades to an extent that theorists and practitioners alike are starting to question whether a conventional war, as the world has known in the past, will ever be fought. This is a debate that is unlikely to produce a unanimous verdict. However, what has become clear is that wars are fought today not solely by the military forces of a nation, but by the entire nation in a united effort to ensure its safety and security.

In the evolving concept of hybrid wars, air power, being unique in its ability to respond rapidly to emerging challenges even at great range, will undoubtedly be the first engage an immediate threat. If this engagement can be done early enough, it may even negate the necessity for extended surface combat. A combination of the contemporary adversaries' reluctance to engage in 'pitched' battles and the ubiquitous nature of air power reduces the requirement for the employment of massed armies to the surgical use of Special Forces on focused missions. Even though there are advocates who continue to harbour the notion that only physical occupation of territory achieved by large numbers of soldiers on the ground constitutes military victory in conflict. If the objective of the application of force is to secure one's nation, then this is an archaic proposal. It has been demonstrated in the past half century that the political objectives of a conflict can be achieved with the sagacious application of air power supported by minimalist Special Forces missions.

At the end of World War II in November 1945, General Henry 'Hap' Arnold, then commanding the US Army Air Forces, broadly defined air power as, 'a nation's ability to deliver cargo, people, destructive missiles, and war-making potential through the air to a desired destination

to accomplish a desired purpose'. If this statement is critically analysed, it becomes clear air power is not composed merely of the war-making components of aviation. It encompasses the total aviation activity—operations, industry, research and development—of the nation, both existing and possible future developments.

Military air power is critically dependent upon the national air 'potential', which in turn encompasses myriad factors that could be combined within the term 'air mindedness'. The development of this holistic and complex capability will require judicious coordination and planning to be undertaken at the strategic



*F/A-18A Hornets from
Air Task Group 630 Strike Element*

level of government. In most nations, the air force is the repository of the majority of military air power with limited capabilities resident in the other military services. However, air forces are almost always on the verge of obsolescence, especially in times of relative peace when its size and capability replacement rate will be inadequate to meet the demands of full-fledged war. The connection between national air power and the air force is the bridge that spans this gap. National air power should have the inherent ability to absorb the increase in capacity required of the air force in times of emergency by being the repository of new concepts and technological developments.

National security would be endangered by an air force whose doctrines, concepts and techniques are embedded purely within the existing systems and processes. Current systems are but another step in the progressive evolution of capability. It is a well understood paradigm that any air force that does not keep its doctrines ahead of its existing systems and does not harbour a vision that dwells far into the future, will not be able to provide the necessary level



A Royal Australian Air Force C-17 Globemaster takes off from the Multinational Base Tarin Kowt with its heavy load of cargo.

of national security. The necessity to investigate and fully integrate autonomous systems and artificial intelligence into the overall capability of the air force is inherent in this statement.

In order to ensure that the doctrine and concepts of the air force are aligned to the needs of national security, it is necessary to build them within the precepts of a larger concept of national air power. An air force should be able to demonstrate a number of capabilities within the national security agenda to be considered an element of national power. It should be a deterrent force by maintaining a credible offensive strike force; it should have adequate expeditionary capabilities to be able to operate at short notice in theatres away from home; it should retain sufficient stand-alone capabilities while also being interoperable with allies; it should be able to operate jointly with the other military services, if necessary being the catalyst for joint operations; and it should have the agility to reorientate the axis of operations rapidly.

The employment of air power in the pursuit of national security is no longer a local or regional activity, but a truly global undertaking. The inherent range of air power now necessitates a greater understanding of the potential adversary's centres of gravity and modus operandi. The precision, proportionality and discrimination of the destructive capability of air power in combination with the accuracy of airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) ensures that there are almost no targets that are safe from a determined air attack. Further, although air defences have been attempting to keep pace with the advances in strike capability, the resource-intensive nature of the effort has been a dampener. Air attacks are almost omnipotent.

Irrespective of the character of the conflict and the roles that are delineated to the different military services,

the establishment of adequate control of the air is a prerequisite to any successful operation—air, maritime or on land. Control of the air is the first essential condition for the conduct of any effective offensive or defensive action. This can only be achieved by an air force. Considering the criticality of being able to apply air power efficiently, the planning, development, organisation and training of an air force needs to cover all aspects of air warfare with the ability to continuously develop new and versatile concepts. Accordingly, the air power doctrine of the air force must be kept flexible and free of inhibiting tradition.

An air force is a complex combination of many systems and varied personnel supported by the industrial and scientific resources of a nation. Even though the fundamental nature and principles of war have not changed appreciably, evolving weapon systems and new concepts of operations alter the characteristics of war. It is in understanding and catering for these subtle changes that the application of air power in the pursuit of national security becomes a viable proposition.

Retaining a modern, autonomous and well-trained professional air force in being at all times will not, by itself, be sufficient, but without it there can be no national security.

Key Points

- *Military air power is primarily resident in the air force of the nation and forms part of the broader national air power capability*
- *Air power doctrine needs to be dynamic and flexible*
- *A proficient air force is critically necessary to ensure national security.*



Air Power Development Centre
 F3-GF, PO Box 7932, Department of Defence
 CANBERRA BC ACT 2610
 Ph: 02 6128 7041 Fax: 02 6128 7053
 Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
 Web: www.airforce.gov.au/airpower

