

PATHFINDER

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THE DEMANDS ON AIR POWER AND ITS DOCTRINE

'The old fable of the bundle of faggots compared with individual sticks is abundantly clear. [Air power's] strength lies in unity.'

Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder
Air Power in War, 1948.

There can be no doubt that the strategic security outlook today is far more complex and uncertain than it was even a decade ago. The emergence of non-state entities with sufficient military power to contest control of the battlespace against the strongest of conventional forces and the upheavals to the international political landscape that this development has introduced show no signs of stabilising. On the other hand, the world has become increasingly interdependent where regional changes and challenges routinely trigger global effects.

While the need to wage a conventional war will continue to remain, the relative importance of irregular warfare—conducted to contain and prevent the escalation of activities by non-state, terrorist and insurgent groups—is set to continue to grow. In this confused and complex future, there is an appreciable trend to move warfighting towards irregular wars, which has its own unique characteristics and particular methods of conduct. What role then does air power play in this scenario?

Before, analysing the role that air power plays and the evolving nature of air warfare, it is necessary to state clearly that now, and into the future, all forms of military action will be joint in their planning and conduct. While this tenet is universally accepted, the challenge in putting the concept into practice is in understanding 'who supports whom' and the contextual manner in which the 'supporting' and 'supported' elements change. In joint operations, the days when air power was treated as a support arm for surface forces have long since passed.



In fact, air power has always provided capabilities that complement, and at times substitute for, those of the surface forces. Far more than even a few decades back, modern military air power and its employment has been a multi-Service capability. Air power is no longer resident solely in air forces. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that the US Navy air arm is ranked fifth, in terms of its size

among the air forces of the world. Further, 'air forces' also comprise all elements that directly affect flying operations such as surface-to-air defences. In this case, the command and control of such assets may rest with the air force or where necessary the army/navy.

Future military campaigns will be joint in nature with the land, maritime and air forces contributing. However, the individual contributions will not always be equal—different strategic and operational situations will demand different lead elements identified from within the three domain-centric Services. This delineation of 'supported' and 'supporting' is vital for the success of any joint campaign. Historically, the lead element was determined by the geography of the theatre of operations. The advent of air power as a military capability changed this concept irrevocably. Now the lead element is determined by focusing on the effects that have to be created, the force structure of the joint force and the spread of the theatre, both geographic and virtual.

The ability of air power to be an 'envelope force' that is not constrained by terrain or geography, has made it a front-runner in being the first instrument of choice for governments, not only for the projection of lethal power

at short notice but also in instances of war-prevention and peace enforcement. This assertion is made with the support of two key factors. Firstly, air power's inherent characteristics—reach, speed, responsiveness, flexibility—makes it ideally suited to overcome the challenge of geography that is felt by surface forces. Further, enabled by technology, air power can exploit the third dimension to concentrate force, in a way never possible before, which supports strategies aimed at diffusing rapidly evolving strategic and operational situations in the battlespace. Secondly, the political aversion to casualties, of both friend and foe, makes air power the ideal capability to be deployed to contain emerging situations. Although more resource-intensive, the risk of casualties is minimised because of the precision, discrimination and proportionality that the application of air power inherently brings to the fight.

The military campaigns and the conduct of air warfare within them in the past four or five decades have clearly indicated an unmistakable trend. These campaigns have demonstrated that air forces—meaning the air power assets and the capabilities of the military force irrespective of the Service that owns them—are quick and relatively easy to insert and extract, involve only limited political commitment and, as a result, offer fewer liabilities in attempting to resolve a crisis. These reasons indicate that air power will unavoidably be required to play an increasing part in all future conflicts.

The demands on air power, in the years ahead, are likely to increase at a rate not witnessed earlier. The challenge facing professional airmen can be distilled into a single element: to ensure that the doctrine that guides the employment of air power is rigorous and permits the full exploitation of air power's considerable capabilities. In ensuring the veracity of its doctrine, air forces must take into account three key factors: strategy, organisation and technology.

The expanding capabilities of air power have obviously also increased the strategic options that it brings to planners and decision-makers. One of the key options relates to information warfare, primarily aimed at reducing the adversary's ability to make timely and well-informed decisions, while ensuring that one's own information flow, its speed, quality and quantity are preserved. Essentially this supports the concept of striking at the adversary's ability to wage war. The application of air power is now passing through a phase where the validity of the strategy of 'parallel operations' is giving way to one of 'integrated

asymmetric operations', which seems to be more suited to the irregular wars that Western military forces are engaged in at present. The evolution in air warfare is visible.

Air power remains a limited resource. At the core of the application of air power sits the principle of unity of command that in turn leads to the recently adopted tenet of centralised command, decentralised execution and distributed co-ordination. To provide the air force with the ability to exploit this concept, it needs to have the right organisation. Unity of command can only be ensured by an organisation that is live and capable of extreme flexibility since air power itself is evolving in diverse—and at times unpredictable—ways very rapidly.

Technology is the mainstay of cutting edge air power and its interaction with doctrine is much more pronounced in air power than in the case of either land or sea forces. In the case of air power, doctrine defines how forces can best be developed and employed while technology determines the extent to which the aspirations can be realised. However, today rapid technological developments provide a range of options that normally surpass the doctrinal demands.

Since its inception air power has continued to meet the demands placed on it through developing employment strategies that optimise available capabilities; creating and continually fine-tuning an organisation that is uniquely tailored to the changing demands of a force that is in the forefront of national power projection; and adapting technological innovations to improve its operational efficacy. The foundation to meeting these basic demands placed on air power is a doctrine that retains the flexibility to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances and strategic considerations in the application of air power through evolving concepts of operations.

Key Points

- *Air power has always provided capabilities that complement, and at times substitute for, those of the surface forces.*
- *The ability of air power to be an 'envelope force' that is not constrained by terrain or geography, has made it the first instrument of choice for governments.*
- *The foundation to meeting the demands placed on air power is a doctrine that retains the flexibility to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances and strategic considerations in the application of air power.*



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

