FORCE PACKAGING FOR POWER PROJECTION

‘No longer must a nation wait for a tertiary system to assess effects before taking appropriate follow-on action. The integrated capability greatly compresses the time required for successful closing of the “observe, orient, decide, and act” loop.’

David A. Deptula,
In John Olsen (ed), Global Air Power, p 414.

Some truisms: The military forces of a nation are primarily meant to defend the sovereignty of the state, ensure national security and protect national interests. In the current international system, military forces are the agents that a sovereign government can legally direct to employ lethal force outside the state in the pursuit of legitimate ends. However, since the end of the Cold War, the role of the military forces has evolved from a focused employment to protect the geographic boundaries of the nation or the projection of national power toward a broader sweep of activities aimed at projecting power in order to protect national interests, wherever they may appear to have been compromised.

Until the advent of digital high speed communications, power projection had been associated with military forces. However, in recent times other elements of national power, such as economic, diplomatic and informational power, are also being employed as instruments for power projection, based on the use of digital media. While these, mostly soft power elements, can be used as tools of coercion, they cannot be used to fully enforce the will of one nation on another. Military forces continue to be the element of national power that can be legitimately used to enforce the will of the nation, if necessary through the application of lethal force. At the high end of national security strategies, a nation’s force projection capabilities are primarily resident in its military forces.

The cycle of strategies that ensure national security starts at the benign level of influence and shaping, then progresses to deterrence and then moves to coercion and goes on to punishment and destruction. In this cycle, non-military force projection capabilities can only play an effective role in the strategy of influence and shape and a much more diminished role in coercion. On the other hand the military forces will play a critical role in force projection within the entire cycle of strategies.

The effectiveness of force projection is dependent on three major factors—time available, balance of capabilities in the force and ability to sustain the projection of force. In this discussion extraneous factors such as the political and national will to employ the force package and the resource availability to build the force to the required standards are being considered as available as necessary.

There are two further aspects regarding relative time in terms of force projection. First is the time available for a nation to respond to an emerging challenge and second, the rapidity with which a force package can be assembled and deployed. In the contemporary security scenario it is inevitable that time available to respond will be short and therefore the military force will have to rely on rapid deployment. In turn this would mean that military forces would have to be kept at some level of readiness to respond.

Ascertaining the balance of capabilities to project force at the appropriate level to ensure that the emerging challenge is contained is a complex process. The elements of capabilities that can be incorporated within a force projection package will depend on the overall structure of the military force. Similarly the ability of the force to sustain the package for the
necessary duration will also be a critical factor in ascertaining the viability of the package.

The factor of relative time available will superimpose itself on the development of the capability spread of the package and could very often act as a constraint. This statement has to be understood with few caveats. Air power will be at the vanguard in situations that require rapid kinetic responses. However, there is a complex interplay of hard and soft power, kinetic and non-kinetic response, as well as a balanced combination of military and non-military national power that go towards creating a viable power projection package. The combination of the need for a rapid response and the balance of capabilities necessary to ensure the practicality of projecting power will point towards the employment of air power within an integrated package of military power as the initial response to force projection requirements.

From a purely air power perspective, this situation warrants an examination of the capability spread required within an air power package that can, along with other elements of national power, project power in an effective manner. While every such package would have limitations in terms of time and projection capabilities, the first requirement would be to have all elements of air power embedded in it. This would mean having the ability to create control of the air where and when required, the capability to carry out accurate, proportionate and discriminative strikes to create the necessary effects, airlift of sufficient quantity to sustain the package in an expeditionary mode and sufficient intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to ensure adequacy of information. These capabilities would also have to be supplemented by self-sufficiency in electronic warfare (EW), command and control infrastructure and air-to-air refuelling capabilities.

The most important factor that will determine the effectiveness of an air power package is its relativity as part of an integrated national solution to an emerging security challenge. Once it has been ensured that the air power package is essentially integrated into the broader power projection capability of the military and the nation, the other factors peculiar to air power can be distinguished and examined.

Two factors would determine the effectiveness of such an air power package—its range and sustaining power. The range in this case need not be the geographical distance that the package can travel, but the reach that it has in terms of targeting capability. In turn, the targeting capability would be a function of the ISR element within the package. Considering the weapon envelope and EW capacity, the targeting reach will or should always be more than the force package range. The ability to target at a distance from the physical position of the air power package is a prized competence and could be the critical element in strike operations.

The sustaining power of an air power package is directly proportional to the availability of air mobility assets as well as the critical mass of other capability delivery systems. From an air force perspective being able to create an air power projection package is a complex enterprise. First, the air force in question needs to have the full suite of capabilities that make it a balanced force. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it needs to have developed a versatile command and control structure that permits the functioning of an air power package as an independent entity, with sufficiently robust remote governance oversight. Third, the force should have developed and exercised concepts of operations that fit into the broader joint campaign, even while the independent air power package is operating. The requirement would be to function autonomously, but within the larger joint campaign and its objectives.

In the current environment there are only few air forces that can fulfil the above requirements of having the complete suite of capabilities; being able to effectively put together a force projection package; and being able to deploy the package to the necessary theatre and for the duration required. Versatile command and control and ISR capabilities that greatly increase the horizon of the force projection package are premium capabilities that are not easy to obtain and even more difficult to maintain as part of a much larger package. In this context, the RAAF has demonstrated its ability to provide such an air power package and operate it in an expeditionary mode, as required. Amongst the middle powers of the world, this is a unique achievement and is a reflection of the professionalism of the members of the Air Force.

Key Points

- The role of the military forces has evolved from employment to protect the geographic boundaries of the nation to a broad sweep of activities aimed at projecting power to protect national interests.
- The effectiveness of force projection is dependent on three major factors—time available, balance of capabilities in the force and ability to sustain the projection.
- The RAAF has demonstrated its ability to provide an air power package that can project power in an expeditionary mode for the duration required.