AIR POWER AND IRREGULAR WARS: 
A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK

'It is ironic that the air power story in Afghanistan, both for the brief 2001 campaign and as a pervasive enabler of the mission creeping since then, has been as first-rate as ultimately it was futile.'


In many ways, air power is viewed as one of the fundamental, and at times critical, elements of Western military power. Its presence is tangibly visible even when not being employed to apply lethal force and its technology-enabled capabilities seem untouchable in its sophistication. Air power is also seen as a strategic advantage of the mature military forces and therefore an irregular adversary always attempts to neutralise this source of capability advantage. This quest has led to the adoption of asymmetric means by irregular forces globally. It is ironic that perhaps the best illustration of the employment of asymmetric means was through a novel employment of air power against arguably the world leader in air power, when the World Trade Center twin towers were destroyed in September 2001.

It was in the 1990s that air power emerged as the supported rather than the supporting element in the application of military force in the pursuit of national objectives. However, this perceived predominance was short-lived since the war on terror in the 2000s reduced the relative importance and significance of air power, at least outwardly. With the advent of the US-led Global War on Terror (a term that has since fallen into disuse) the prevalent belief was that the global security environment had been transformed. Further, it was felt that this transformation made air power, which had by now been fine-tuned into a precision instrument, less effective against emerging threats.
factor in the effectiveness of air power—from benign to the lethal application of force.

In the European theatre of operations in the 1990s the application of air power in the pursuit of national and coalition objectives was a resounding success. Air power was applied in its most sophisticated technical form and achieved spectacular tactical results that contributed directly to strategic victory. However, in the 2000s, air power applied against irregular adversaries in almost perfect technical-tactical co-ordination at its precise and proportional best, did not deliver the sought after strategic victory even after two decades. Why did air power not deliver a strategically decisive end-state despite having achieved near-perfection in creating the desired effects?

There are many contributory factors, at all levels of war, to this diminishing return from high-end air power in irregular conflicts. Even so, the primary reason is the very perfection that has been achieved by air power in the technical-tactical sphere. The near perfection of the application of air power has motivated and forced the irregular adversary to find ways to neutralise the tremendous advantage that air power provides to conventional military forces. Air supremacy invites recourse to asymmetry—that is what happened in the early 2000s, a classic case of the superiority edge being whittled away until it becomes non-existent.

Another factor that contributes to the dilution of air power application, and one that is normally not discussed by air power enthusiasts, is that however important air power may be to winning the battle, campaign or war in an irregular conflict, it is only one part of the broader struggle for creating lasting influence among the people. Perhaps only a catastrophic nuclear war can create a truly conclusive end-state through the application of air power. Hopefully this will remain an unlikely event.

Ever since the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the strategic narrative regarding air power and its application has been marred by the tactical errors that have been committed. There are numerous examples of missions that should not have been undertaken and therefore have led to highly publicised failures. Analysis shows that the fault lies not in the application of air power but in the misconstrued theories that underpin its application, which are developed without sufficient appreciation of the contextual nature of conflicts and wars. A theory that suits a conventional war will not lend itself to being adapted to irregular wars.

Air power, of all the elements of military and/or national power, is most prone to being directly influenced by the context of its application. The context therefore becomes a critical factor in the success or failure of air power. As an element of national power, air power’s technical-tactical excellence and its ability to apply precise, proportionate and discriminatory force has reached unparalleled levels in the annals of war and conflict, in the past decade. Similarly, the inherent spread of its capabilities and the broad spectrum of its employment—from delivering humanitarian aid to the lethal application of force—have no equivalent to compare. However, air power is not the panacea to all the mistakes in the application of force, which tend to detract from the ultimate aim of winning the battle, campaign and ultimately the war.

A retrospective look at the employment of air power in irregular wars indicate that the need is for a broader spread in its application that leverages its inherent flexibility couched in its precision and proportionality. Employed contextually, air power can create the exact effect necessary to turn the tide of an irregular conflict; even one that seems to be heading towards a complex and protracted situation.

Key Points

- In the 1990s air power emerged as the supported rather than the supporting element in the application of military force in the pursuit of national objectives.
- When appropriately employed, stand-off air power capabilities are able to dominate both air-land and air-sea engagements.
- Air power is highly prone to being directly influenced by the context of its application.