



THE ON-GOING DEBATE - WHY AN 'AIR FIRST' APPROACH?

Enough has been written, discussed and analysed about the 1991 Gulf War, on how that campaign exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam for the United States armed forces (and by implication for all other Allied forces); on how it was a vindication of bold planning; how the theories of air power—long derided as wishful thinking—came to be validated; and how the entire world now saw the invincibility of Allied (read American) military power.

The reality is that, while all of the above may be true, the most important factor to be recognised is that it fundamentally changed the way in which we approach the conduct of war. In the theory of warfare, it has been an age-old paradigm that land operations, by virtue of capturing the enemy assets, determine the outcome of major wars. By a straightforward logical extension, this can then be further developed to the theory that, since the outcome of land operations are almost completely determined by the Army, the Army will determine the outcome of all major wars. At the conceptual level the 1991 Gulf War challenged this premise. At the operational level it graphically highlighted the primacy of air power in combat operations—who can forget the widely transmitted image of the impact of a precision weapon on a hardened shelter that became the symbol of the 'new' air power? The fall-out was the dismissal of the notion that the air and maritime elements of the defence forces were intended fundamentally to 'support' land forces.

From this turning point in the history of warfare, air power has continued to evolve into a holistic force projection capability, able to create a number of effects that have both strategic and immediate tactical impact. The conduct of recent conflicts is instructive in demonstrating this newfound confidence in air power capabilities. In Operation *Allied Force*, NATO forces brought about the surrender of the Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia purely by air attacks on strategic targets. The Yugoslav army suffered

very little damage and was not the centre of gravity. The NATO ground forces were never employed, since a ground invasion of Kosovo would have been politically untenable. In addition, although it took 78 days of gradual escalation, air power achieved NATO's political objectives.



Bombing of Belgrade 1999

Yet again in Afghanistan, air power supported by Special Forces and other control units removed the Taliban from power in a very short time. It was only in March 2002 that conventional land forces were deployed in actual combat missions, in order to mop up the remnants of the Taliban and also to support the new regime.

Of course, the success or otherwise of air power employment will always be highly contextual. There would have to be clear understanding of the specifics of the situation, which in turn will determine the tactics that could be utilised. The underpinning lesson is that air power was used in a fundamentally different way each time and with great success.

Operation *Falconer* (Iraqi Freedom) was a sort of summing up of the lessons learned from the employment of air power in 1991 and since. In the first instance, some Allied land forces deliberately manoeuvred in such a way as to draw out Iraqi forces into the open so that they could then be destroyed by air power—a great example of the synergy of land and air forces acting in conjunction. Almost like a replay, air power was also used in a similar manner to Afghanistan in the Kurdish area north of Baghdad to destroy Iraqi strongholds with the help of indigenous and Special Forces. The third example was the use of extremely sophisticated technology resident within air power to inflict severe damage (estimated as high as 86 per cent) on Iraqi Republican Guard divisions that were relocating under cover of a sandstorm. The common denominator and success-enabler for all the operations that have been discussed above is the ability to deliver precision-guided munitions at will to complete the cycle of reconnaissance, target identification and assured target destruction within a span of time that does not degrade the tactical or strategic importance of the target.



SAS pass aircraft concealed against air attack on entering Al Asad airbase, Iraq, 2002.

So, what are the reasons for this sudden reliance on air power to achieve aims and goals from the tactical to the political? The capability of air power to find targets, process information and carry out devastating attacks with precision has been steadily growing. The improvement in the quality of the information and its processing, as well as the precision that is achievable,

has been paralleled by the risk-averseness of senior leadership, both political and military. The primary reason for an ‘air-first’ decision is therefore the propensity to avoid risking land forces when the same result could be achieved with precision strikes. As a corollary, even if the political or operational aims are not achieved by air strikes and the involvement of land forces become imperative, precision strikes would have greatly reduced the enemy capacity to resist.

Secondly, the potential difficulties that are faced by multinational coalitions in obtaining unhindered access to staging areas and base facilities make the choice of employing air power, in the opening stages at least, an attractive proposition. This is further reinforced in the current strategic environment when ‘coalitions of the willing’ may not have international approval. The advantages of long-range air power are thus re-emphasised.

With the improved accuracy that air power now has, it may not be necessary for the land forces to engage in direct-fire encounters with enemy armour, especially in open terrain. The old saying that the best weapon against a tank is a tank is no longer valid; the best weapon against a tank now is coordinated air power. The chances of any land force having to engage any armour opposition that has not been severely degraded by air power is very remote.

Air power has outgrown the cliché of having to provide indirect fire support to land forces in manoeuvre warfare. Conceptually, it has now transformed into wielding the sword, rather than being the shield!

This is the key point: the effective employment of air and space power has to do not so much with airplanes and missiles and engineering as with thinking and attitude and imagination.

- General Merrill A. McPeak, USAF, 1993



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