



IRREGULAR WARFARE AND AIR POWER

War is war and warfare is warfare

Colin Gray

Colin Gray's observation that war is simply war is a masterpiece of eloquence and simplicity that has been somewhat forgotten in recent years. Since the end of the cold war there has been a steady stream of attempts to define new forms of war in response to trying to explain the apparent rise of various non-traditional forms of warfare, globalisation, ethnic and religious issues, terrorism and transnational threats. The reality is, however, that nothing has dramatically changed the enduring principles of war and conflict—they have simply evolved—particularly in the realm of unconventional warfare. For air power, the core functions of *counter air, precision attack, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR)*, and *air mobility* remain enduring for the conduct of both unconventional and conventional warfare.



RAAF C-130 and C-17 aircraft provide the critical air bridge sustaining deployed ADF forces conducting operations against an unconventional adversary in Afghanistan

Since the 1980s there has been rise and demise of various supposedly new extrapolations of warfare. In traditional warfare, the Soviets first discussed *Military Technical Revolution* and *Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)* in the 1980s. This concept quickly gained momentum after the 1991 Gulf War where writers highlighted the combined use of precision weapons, advanced ISR techniques and integrated command, control and communications (C3) systems as the realisation of the emerging RMA.

However, it has been in the realm of non-traditional warfare that the maximum discussion and fervour for new forms of warfare have emerged. The post Cold War era saw the emergence of what was referred to as *4th Generation Warfare (4GW)*. Whereas *3rd Generation*

Warfare was highlighted by modern manoeuvre warfare between states, 4GW reflected a post Cold War era dominated by non-linear operations between state and non-state actors. The plethora of intra-state conflicts during the 1990s gave rise to the terms *low-intensity conflict* and *limited warfare*. In the last decade, terms such as *asymmetric warfare* have emerged to describe the rise of transnational threats such as terrorism. More recently, terms such as *irregular warfare* or *complex irregular warfare* have surfaced.

In recent years, the term *hybrid wars* has emerged and gained considerable support in the US as an alternative to describe the new convergence of warfare between state and non-state forces where there is a blurring of the modes of conflict. Confronted by superior conventional forces, adversaries of western nations are increasingly using a combination of irregular and conventional tactics to conduct more

successful hybrid warfare. Irregular tactics can include insurgency, terrorism, criminal activity and cyberwar. Hybrid war advocates cite Hezbollah operations in Lebanon and Taliban operations in Afghanistan as prime examples of this new type of warfare.

While this attempt to define an emerging form of warfare is thought provoking and admirable, it is not entirely innovative or constructive. The continual attempts to reinterpret the evolving nature of war in another definitive form are unhelpful. They tend to place the theory of war in an ever changing 'new panacea' cycle similar to the business world where every 5-10 years there is a 'new' management initiative that supposedly reflects profound changes in business processes and promises vast rewards for those who adopt. Such continual change is unrealistic for modern defence forces.



The introduction of the JDAM into the RAAF provides enhanced precision and discrimination—factors that are critical against an unconventional adversary

Likewise, while the characteristics of unconventional warfare differ somewhat in their application and importance to conventional warfare, the fundamental nature of war remains the same. As Clausewitz observed, ‘all wars are things of the same nature’. War remains violent; it remains a clash of wills. There is probably greater value in collectively referring to the various recent interpretations of war as simply irregular warfare. For example, the Australian Land Warfare Studies Centre (LWSC) has proposed the term *complex irregular warfare*.

Recognising that it is not the nature of war but the conduct of war that changes, there may be greater value in reviewing doctrine and more importantly, tactics (i.e. the conduct of war) than the enduring theory of war. The Australian Army has recognised this key difference in embracing *Adaptive Campaigning* as its *Future Land Operating Concept*.

There are major roles for air power in irregular warfare. *Counter air* missions were immediately flown after the devastating 11 September 2001 attacks and have since become a standard requirement in national security operations such as OP ACOLYTE (2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne), OP DELUGE (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Fourm 2007) and OP TESTAMENT (World Youth Day in Sydney 2008). *Air Mobility* has also become a critical air power role in current operations, providing Special Forces the ability to quickly respond to or prosecute the adversary and as the vital enabler providing the reach to sustain globally deployed ground forces.

Airborne *ISR* has proved to be particularly valuable in providing time critical and persistent capability to find, fix, track and monitor the adversary. The huge demand placed on airborne *ISR* in current operations, constant desire to enhance *ISR* capability to detect Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and operatives, and transition of traditional maritime patrol aircraft to more capable *ISR* platforms conducting operations over land reflects the importance of this air power role. Further, the ability of air power to prosecute an adversary with precision, speed and discrimination has become the preferred attack mechanism alongside direct Special Forces action on the ground. Importantly, all these roles are critical in integrated combined operations.

The RAAF is either directly conducting or supporting these operations in the Middle East and in Australia’s immediate neighbourhood. They are being conducted in an operational environment against an adversary conducting irregular warfare. The USAF recently promulgated doctrine on *Irregular Warfare* in order to articulate the air power contribution to such operations. Air Forces of calibre will seize the opportunity to identify and learn lessons from current operations. For the RAAF, this provides an important opportunity to review and update its doctrine at all levels to encompass the concepts of operations for irregular warfare.

- *Counter Air remains vital in irregular warfare—it is just employed differently*
- *Airborne ISR is critical to find, fix, track and monitor a concealed, mobile adversary operating in small groups*
- *Air power and special forces have become the preferred precision attack mechanism in irregular warfare*
- *Air Mobility is a key enabler to supporting and conducting joint operations*

Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war; not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.

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