



## THE REALITY OF AIR POWER AND IRREGULAR WARFARE - A CHANGE IN PERCEPTION

Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the world has witnessed a significant rise in the participation of Western forces in irregular wars (IW). This increased participation has initiated a debate in military circles about the utility of air power when applied to non-conventional conflict. This debate, fuelled by the lessons learned from Coalition operations against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, has led to significant changes to both Joint and Air Force doctrine within the United States and United Kingdom. Furthermore, these changes reflect a general acceptance that IW will continue to form a major part of contemporary conflict for the foreseeable future, and is widely referred to in the US as the 'long war'. For Australia this debate has yet to occur, and given the Defence White Paper guidance, Defence planners need to consider the role of air power in IW as it is likely to remain the most common form of conflict for the foreseeable future.



*Strategic Reach - A RAAF C-17 departing Knakeroo airfield NT, a demonstration of its austere airfield capability.*

Doctrinal development in both the UK and the US regarding the conduct of IW is based on a realisation that firstly, the commitment will be ongoing and demanding, and secondly, that a reassessment of force structure and resource allocation is required if air forces are to remain strategically relevant and sustainable in the long term. This change in thinking is contrary to the widely held view that IW is exclusively the domain of land forces and that air power can at best play a supporting role.

The central tenet in the argument detracting from the utility of air power in IW, as summarised by Colin Gray in his paper *Understanding Air Power – Bonfire of the Fallacies*, is that IW conflicts are largely 'people wars' where hostile combatants seek refuge in the general population or disperse into remote areas or cross-borders into safe havens. This concealment by the adversary is

considered to create an insurmountable problem for air power in the effective employment of its intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR) capabilities in support of precision strike. Detractors of air power believe that it is only against a conventional opponent in which air power can truly shape the battlespace, through control of the air and precision strike. These critics point to the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon as the most recent example of the failure of air power to deliver strategic effects in an IW conflict.

Further, critics argue that air power's application is often counter-productive and plays into the hands of the insurgents. The use of overwhelming firepower by Western air forces is portrayed by insurgents, and the media, as applying disproportionate force, and a form of collective punishment against a hostage population, affording insurgents no other means of fighting

than from within the general populace. All air strikes, regardless of their merits or success are often portrayed as the killing of innocent civilians. As noted in recent UK doctrine, a similar standard of 'morality' is not applied to the often far more destructive and lethal application of force used by land forces in built-up environments. Studies of the Iraq war indicate that only 11 to 13 per cent of civilian casualties were caused by air strikes, with the majority of deaths the result of land based weapons ranging from small arms through to artillery. However, regardless of the death toll, land warfare is portrayed somehow as both discriminatory and proportional, a 'fair fight', as soldiers and insurgents target each other directly.

So is this the reality of IW? Should air forces be limited to being niche supporting players? Gray argues that in

fact air power is an essential element of any successful IW operation. He proposes that although air power will conduct a predominantly contributory role, its versatility and flexibility are vital to a successful IW campaign. It is air power's unique ability to insert, sustain and extract ground forces rapidly, as well as provide timely ISR, direct and indirect fires, and combat aero-medical evacuation that permits relatively small land force elements to dominate a disproportionately large area.



***Battlespace Management - The RAAF Control and Reporting Centre (CRC) based at Kandahar Airfield in Southern Afghanistan.***

This vital air power role in the conduct of IW is exemplified by the Coalition's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where ground forces work closely with Coalition air assets. Air power has proven essential in sustaining these small task forces in the field, providing mobility, resupply, ISR and precision strike. Moreover, this successful integration of air and ground forces optimises air power's unique precision strike capability, through the finding and fixing of hostile targets by ground force elements working within a complex environment. The role of air power within special operations is now so well-entrenched that the concept of these air operations being 'special' is becoming increasingly open to question.

Doctrinally within the US and UK, IW is no longer considered a 'dumbed down' form of conventional conflict or merely a coordination activity involving discrete elements of air power in support of a land commander. Rather, successful IW operations are hallmarked by the synchronisation of air and land

forces across the battlespace. This changed approach to the conduct of IW is exemplified by recent Coalition doctrinal releases on IW and air-land integration (ALI). However, to date there has been no equivalent doctrinal development within Australia regarding the importance of air power in an IW context. Given the recent releases of the Defence White Paper and updated Coalition doctrine, 2009-10 would appear to be an ideal timeframe for the development of appropriate irregular warfare air power doctrine.

Even though this doctrinal evolution should be cognisant of the experiences of our Coalition partners, the Australian doctrine needs to be fashioned within our own security context, and heavily informed by the Defence White Paper. For the RAAF there is a tremendous opportunity through the acquisition of advanced ISR, C2, mobility and strike systems to significantly enhance the ADF's IW capability. However, in order to fully maximise this potential, it is vital for the Air Force to further develop its doctrine, education and training in partnership with the other Services in order to position itself for the 'long war' whilst also delivering on its very extensive renewal program.

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*'IW is not a lesser-included form of traditional warfare. Rather, IW encompasses a spectrum of warfare where the nature and characteristics are significantly different from traditional war.'*

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