



THE REALITY OF AIR POWER AND IRREGULAR WARFARE: STRIKING A BALANCE

In an era where the global security environment is predicted to be dominated by irregular warfare the RAAF needs to consider the challenges and implications of operating within this demanding environment. Irregular warfare, such as the one in Afghanistan, will continue to demand a significant air power contribution, and in order to be successful in the long term, Australian airmen should seek the doctrinal lessons from such contemporary conflicts and consider how to apply the relevant lessons to Australian air power.

The 2009 Defence White Paper's national security strategy is primarily based on the ability of the ADF to control Australia's air and sea approaches against credible adversaries. Underpinning this strategy is the proposal to acquire a range of new high-end maritime and air power assets, including the Air Warfare Destroyers, Submarines and Joint Strike Fighters (F-35). The White Paper also recognises the prominence of irregular warfare, in the form of intra-state conflicts, which it forecasts will dominate warfare for the foreseeable future. Such a dynamic security environment creates a diverse and potentially competing range of strategic pressures for Air Force capability planners and doctrine developers. It demands the resources to sustain high-end warfighting capabilities to be balanced against those of conducting irregular warfare.

In considering RAAF capability and doctrine development, it is worth reviewing the parallel developments in the USAF and RAF. General John Shaud, Director of Air Force Research Institute, 'In Service to the Nation – Air Force Research Institute Strategic Concept for 2018-2023', argues for a review of force structure and doctrine for the USAF if it is to achieve its planned renewal program in conjunction with its waging of the 'long war'. Shaud proposes the concept of 'right tech', and argues that in irregular warfare there is benefit in reducing the use of resource intensive high-end platforms such as F-15/F-16,

and developing new capabilities whose technologies are less expensive and better match the task. Shaud proposes that within an air superiority guaranteed environment, it would be significantly more efficient to operate a dedicated, simple aircraft designed for irregular warfare, capable of operating from austere in-theatre airfields and employing precision weapons and ISR pods.

The appropriate allocation of resources and weight of effort between preparing for conventional high-end state-

on-state conflict and low-end irregular warfare is a major dilemma for coalition air forces. Within constrained resource environments there is a pressing need to strike the correct, and potentially painful, balance. Recently, Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense, argued for altering the *status quo*, 'it is important to remember that every dollar spent to over-insure against a remote or diminishing risk ... is a dollar not available

to take care of our people, reset the force, win the wars we are in and improve capabilities in areas where we are underinvested and potentially vulnerable'. For the first time a US Secretary of Defense has proposed a ten per cent funding allocation for capabilities in irregular warfare.

For the RAAF, the force structure challenge falls within the White Paper capability development program, with the need to consider a host of competing enabling technologies, such as networks, sensors and weapons. It is in bringing into being the next generation of air power capabilities that the concept of 'right tech' may prove both appropriate and useful. For example, the potential for weapon systems more suited to irregular warfare, based on low-yield kinetic or non-kinetic technologies should be considered. The selected weapon systems must be 'right tech' for RAAF, in that they should provide viable, cost effective and appropriate options.

Beyond the debate on force structure, the single most challenging issue for the RAAF will be its ability to



Precision - A RAAF Hornet trialling Joint Direct Attack Munitions Extended Range (JDAMER)

balance the demand to integrate new capabilities into the force-in-being, whilst also achieving its on-going operational commitments, both in the workforce and resource allocation. This combination of security priorities and an extensive force structure renewal program is not unique to the RAAF and mirrors those of our allies and partners. Furthermore, any aspiration for an expanded role for air power in irregular warfare will require difficult choices regarding resource allocation priorities, given the constrained fiscal and workforce environment. For smaller air forces such as the RAAF, these choices are particularly difficult as the ability to generate the critical mass required to sustain viable all-round capabilities becomes a significant limiting factor. As a consequence, any acquisition of new capabilities usually comes at the detriment of existing ones, and as the saying goes 'there is no such thing as a free lunch', as trade-offs and compromises will be needed.



Tactical Mobility - A RAAF C-130 Hercules lands on a dirt strip at a Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Afghanistan.

In parallel with the requirement to develop appropriate air force capabilities for the conduct of irregular warfare, there has been a commensurate doctrinal revision within the US and UK militaries centred on improving air-land integration (ALI). This revision of ALI doctrine is the result of analysing the enduring lessons from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and is aimed at making effective integration a key force multiplier for conventional forces in both operating domains. Emphasis is being laid on surface and air forces training and exercising as joint force elements prior to engaging in irregular warfare conflicts. Additionally, the US/UK doctrinal changes highlight the requirement for greater integration of the command and control processes and an invigoration of senior air force and army commander educational programs regarding the use of air power in land-centric operations.

In Australia, improvement to ALI is primarily the responsibility of the recently established Air Land Integration Office (ALIO). The ALIO is charged with synchronising the development of structures, equipment and training in order to maximise the ADF's ALI capability, specifically relating to the employment of offensive air support. The ALIO is focused on contributing to, and the strategic alignment of air-land operational concepts. The office aims to establish an environment where there is sustained improvement in ALI within the ADF, as well as alignment with coalition interoperability standards.

Overall, the initiatives to improve air power doctrine, force structure and ALI are all positive responses by our allied and partner air forces towards the preparation and conduct of irregular warfare. The challenges for the successful application of air power in irregular warfare are many and complex, and as with the majority of strategic challenges, can only be addressed by achieving an appropriate balance between capabilities and national security requirements. For the RAAF, despite the significant challenges, this is both a dynamic and exciting era of high operational tempo and force renewal. Thus, to maximise the potential of our people and new air power capabilities there needs to be a commensurate renewal of doctrine, air power education and leading edge thinking to prepare for the next century of war in the air.

- *Doctrinal lessons from contemporary conflicts should be analysed for their relevance to RAAF.*
- *The concept of selecting tailored capabilities whose technologies match the task, 'right tech' is appropriate for irregular warfare.*
- *Air-land integration is a key force multiplier for conventional forces in both operating domains.*

'It is no longer a matter of the soldier making his plan for battle on the ground and then turning to see how the air can help him. Land and air operations must be deliberately planned to get the best out of each other.'

J.C. Slessor, *Air Power and Armies*, 1936



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