



## THE CENTRALITY OF AIR POWER: STILL A CONTESTED CONCEPT?

*'Although warfare has become more complex as its geographical environments have increased from two (land and the surface of the sea) to five-plus (land, sea surface and sub-surface, air, orbital space, and cyberspace) it retains its essential unity.'*

Colin S. Gray,  
*Air Power for Strategic Effect, p.14.*

Air power provides highly versatile and effective tools that are capable of enforcing national strategy, which in turn ensures the security of the nation. More than a century from the beginning of the 'air age', air power has also matured into being a powerful component within the elements of national power. These are incontestable facts. However, even as the concept of the employment of air power, especially in its lethal mode, has matured and proven itself, there is still a lingering uncertainty at times regarding its efficacy. The narrative of air power, its theories and practices, its demonstrated effectiveness in conflicts of the past few decades, this questioning of air power and its position in the hierarchy of national power continues to make it controversial.

To the people whose knowledge about air power is limited, the nuances of the features that together make up a whole that is termed air power is difficult to fathom. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that of all power projection capabilities resident within a nation, strategic air power is the most dynamic—in its theory as well as employment. Air power's dynamism is at once its unequalled strength as well as the single most important contributor to the controversy that surrounds it. The air power narrative, at the strategic and conceptual levels, is never at a standstill but always changing in its character while the fundamental nature remains a constant. Air power continues to be controversial. There are few factors

such as its definition, its primacy in military intervention campaigns, and its role as the enveloping force in joint campaigns that ensure its centrality in joint campaigns and yet make it a contested element of national power.

Since air power is an instrument of national policy, its contribution cannot be separated from political intentions and objectives. Air power, or for that matter any other element of national power, therefore becomes a part of the political process. In fact the entire history of air power has been overwhelmingly influenced by political intentions and consequences. The process of defining air power itself demonstrates this complexity of its historical development and the inherent controversy that it generates. Further, the success of air power in achieving its objectives has also inhibited the acceptance of a concise and common definition,



*An Army Black hawk helicopter passes HMAS Tarakan.*

making the available definitions contextual and catering to the circumstances of a particular nation.

The many definitions that are available—almost all of them apparently correct within the circumstances of their development—also feed the misperceptions that abound regarding understanding, employing and commanding air power. The continuing debate regarding the military ownership of air power, prevalent in almost all nations that possess a military force of some calibre, is a tribute to the fact that air power is a capability that is critical to the success of military operations. From that foundational

understanding stems the craving to control its assets. Again the situation becomes blurred because of the less than optimum understanding of the different aspects of the generation, application and sustainment of air power. It is one thing to know that air power is vital to military success, but a completely different ability to be able to command it effectively. A definition that attempts to answer all these questions is difficult to craft and therefore the contextual ones will have to suffice. As long as the definition of air power remains open there will always be a contextualised contest regarding its ownership and employment.

In the contemporary global security environment, military intervention in areas of instability is becoming more common and a regular occurrence. This is perhaps the downside of globalisation, because no nation, however stable, can be assured that burgeoning instability in one region will not spill over into its own backyard. The Middle-Eastern wave of migration into Europe in the recent past is a classic example. In any such intervention, air power has become the force of first-choice to be employed. The reasons are equally political as it is based on the strength of air power.

While military interventions in volatile regions of the world have become a necessity, the political leadership of the intervening nations is also sensitive to their own casualties. The method to keep the risk of casualties minimised is to employ air power extensively, while not deploying ground forces at all or keeping ground incursion to the barest minimum. This operational concept is seen to work well in most of the current intervention situations, where the adversary does not possess credible air power capabilities. In other words, the airspace is uncontested and risk of casualties is almost non-existent. The strategic, operational and technical dynamism inherent in air power makes it an effective power in these circumstances.

This switch in roles where the army is only used in the background, especially in the more common place irregular wars, creates a rift between the advocates of air power and those strategists who support the traditional 'boots-on-the-ground' approach. The use of air power as an independent entity becomes the target for deliberate misunderstanding of its capacity to create the necessary effects to ensure success. The centrality of air power to military success has made it a contested capability. Flowing from this is the demand for air power, as defined by the critics, to be placed as an element of the 'military forces', which invariably means the army.

The requirement is for military forces to function as joint forces to achieve national security objectives that are politically defined. There can be no debate regarding the relative value of strategic air power, land power or naval power in this security equation. The fact is that each of these capabilities will be employed situationally and will vary with the context. Extraneous factors like a nation's attrition tolerance and the ethos of its population will always impinge on the employment of military forces. These forces will carry more weight in discussions when the intervention, conflict or war is seen as one of 'choice' rather than 'necessity'.

Air power's value to national security—at all levels from the strategic to the tactical—is completely dependent on what it can do and the effects it can create, not necessarily what it is defined as, whether contextually or in a very broad manner. Air power, being a strategic asset, can be converted to a tactical apparatus of very limited impact by its employment and concepts of operation being developed to achieve narrow objectives. Modern warfare, whether irregular or conventional, demands that it be conducted as a whole. Even so, a lot of jointness is always left to be desired, let alone achieving seamless integration that developed military forces have started to mention. In spite of a great deal of study and development, the geographical boundaries that define capability spectrums of the three main components of the military force—army, navy and air force—continue to draw clear dividing lines. Air power, with its ability to envelope the other two domains, has to assume the role of the integrator. Contesting this concept or challenging the ownership of air power is not the answer to efficient joint operations.

## Key Points

- *A little over a century from the beginning of the 'air age', air power has matured into a powerful component within the elements of national power.*
- *The lack of an acceptable definition of air power, mainly because of its dynamic nature, has created debates and discussions regarding the ownership of air power at various times.*
- *Air power's value to the nation is directly related to what it can do, rather than on its definition.*



## Air Power Development Centre

F3-GF, PO Box 7932, Department of Defence  
CANBERRA BC ACT 2610

Ph: 02 6128 7041 Fax: 02 6128 7053

Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)

Web: [www.airforce.gov.au/airpower](http://www.airforce.gov.au/airpower)

