



THE COMBINATION OF PRECISION, SPEED AND REACH: A UNIQUE AIR POWER CAPABILITY

One of the most important lessons of strategic bombing [long-range precision air strike] which still has to be learned fully is that target priority systems are meaningless unless target intelligence is hard and up-to-date.

Asher Lee, *Air Power*, 1955, p. 19

The ability to neutralise an adversary's centres of gravity has always been a coveted military capability. To a large extent, power projection is centred on possessing the demonstrated ability to damage, destroy, or neutralise a selected target. Possession of such a capability also underpins the strategies of deterrence and coercion. Around 250 B.C. Sun Tzu, the renowned Chinese warrior philosopher stated that 'to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill', meaning the ultimate objective of any military strategy is to bend others to one's will without coming to conflict. Deterrence and, if that fails, coercion is at the foundation on which such a strategy is built.

All military forces rely on deterrence in varying degrees to achieve a desired end-state in terms of national security. However, small and medium sized forces have to be especially careful to tailor their capabilities such that their deterrent stance is clearly and demonstrably visible and achievable. All elements of national power have to be analysed and optimised to achieve the same effect.

Air power is unique in its ability to pursue a deterrent strategy and also in its capacity to transition rapidly to more escalatory strategies of coercion and punishment, if and when required. In fact, air power can achieve this transition within the same mission if so required, since a 'show of force' mission is equally capable of initiating punitive action without even having to change the mission profile. A strike of this nature could deliver a much greater strategic effect than the mere neutralisation of a target. Although this ability to transition is prized, air power can be a much more powerful apparatus when used to selectively project the power and intent of a nation farther, more rapidly and with precision than any other capability. In addition, this can be achieved without the intrusiveness and risk to own forces that accompanies the employment of surface forces to accomplish the same end-state.

The geo-strategic environment is in a continual state of flux across the globe. The military forces of a nation must therefore strategically monitor the changes that



F/A-18F Super Hornet carrying out an air-to-surface attack.

are taking place and evolve accordingly, primarily for two reasons. First, to ensure the continued security and sovereignty of the nation; and second, to ensure the long-term ability of the force to preserve national strategic interests beyond state borders. Failure in the first will invariably lead to failure of the second, and subsequent irrelevance. While deterrence is the preferred option to secure a nation and its interests, in some circumstances, physical intervention and the adoption of a strategy of punishment could become essential. Such actions could be necessitated to enforce peace on warring factions or in the pursuit of the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect'. However, the international socio-political environment today does not favour protracted interventions. If actions have to be initiated, the political imperative will be to keep the intervention 'sharp and short' if possible. This is where the efficient application of air power comes in to its own.

Air power has some unique characteristics. It can penetrate deep into hostile territory without leaving any permanent foot-print; it can carry out long-term uninterrupted intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) of a delineated area almost

unobtrusively; and perhaps most importantly it can strike rapidly with precision, discrimination and proportionality.

It is the combination of these unique features of air power that makes it the most coveted military capability in the contemporary security scenario. The ability to rapidly strike, and be precise in neutralising the selected target, is a powerful deterrent. However, there is a caveat: the effectiveness of a precision strike capability as a deterrent will be directly proportional to the demonstrated 'will' to use it if required, while also noting the risk of escalation that accompanies precision air strikes. This is a decision that sits at a level above the military command of air power and therefore should not be viewed as an inherent air power weakness.

Long-range precision air strike, bolstered by accurate ISR, is a most potent capability since it can support the implementation of most military strategies. It can also in some circumstances substitute for other forms of power projection. This capability assumes greater importance in a situation where there is scarcity of resources to ensure that military forces have 'full-spectrum' capability available. Whilst air power's precision strike capability is an expensive capability to acquire and maintain, the unique benefits it provides make it a cost-effective option for contributing to military and national security strategies.

When combined optimally with comprehensive ISR and sophisticated command and control arrangements, air power's precision strike capability can effectively sanitise a deceptively large geographical area—over land, sea or in the littoral environment. Further, this can be achieved rapidly and with minimal overt interventional presence.

The concept of long-range air strikes on centres of gravity is not a new innovation. It was articulated before World War II and practised during that War. What has changed is the sophistication that contemporary air power brings in the employment of this concept. Gone are the days of the 'thousand-bomber' raids, where the destruction of selected objectives was achieved through saturation or carpet bombing, since precision was an unattainable quality at that time. Even with such tactics, there are doubts still being expressed regarding the efficacy of the strategic bombing campaign during World War II—conducted with such enormous losses on both sides. The same objectives can today be realised by a sole aircraft delivering a single precision-guided munition that is also calculated to achieve only the desired, proportional effect. In most recent campaigns precision air strikes have preceded any other military manoeuvre.

The assured proportionality and discrimination that air strikes can deliver, made possible through progressive technological advances, makes the combination of speed,

reach and precision a unique capability vested in air power. The effects that the application of this formidable capability can create make air power a critical and indispensable part of military power projection.



An Australian-operated Heron conducts final checks prior to take off from Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan.

Key Points

- *Effective air power is a powerful deterrent capability*
- *The inherent flexibility of air power can transition from a show of force mission to punitive strike rapidly and almost seamlessly*
- *The combination of speed, reach and precision and the effects that this combination can produce is unique to air power*



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