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## AIRPOWER IN IRREGULAR WAR: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT THAT REQUIRES CAREFUL EMPLOYMENT FOR ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE

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**JCSP 40**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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## **AIRPOWER IN IRREGULAR WAR: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT THAT REQUIRES CAREFUL EMPLOYMENT FOR ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE**

### **Introduction**

Nation states typically build airpower capability in line with their stated strategic objectives of national security. The resources and funding to build these national assets and capabilities are considerably large and must be carefully expended to maximize achieving security of the state and national objectives.<sup>1</sup> This results in Air Force, airpower and capability structures that are primarily designed to fight in conventional or regular warfare. However, history has taught us that this is not the only place in which national objectives are militarily contested. Rather, regular warfare is the historical exception and it is the realm of irregular warfare (IW) where most military action occurs. Even cognizant of that fact, the need to provide security against the possibility of nation on nation warfare largely drives airpower to be configured to deal with the perceived greater threat of regular war. Conducting IW with airpower therefore requires adaptation of these airpower assets and capabilities for useful results.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this adaptation that much of the debate about the role of airpower in IW is centered. Airpower is poorly understood in terms of its capability and what it can achieve in IW outside of producing kinetic effects. The typical military mindset is that airpower exists solely to enable and support offensive military ground operations. This is a mistake of a high order. It misses the importance and criticality of using airpower as part of a broader government strategy to combat the root causes and issues that fuel IW.

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<sup>1</sup> Australia, Royal Australian Air Force, Australian Air Publication AAP 1000-D. *The Airpower Manual 6<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Canberra, ACT: Airpower Development Centre 2013. 16-21

<sup>2</sup> David Glasson. "Big War Airpower for Small War Operations." *The Royal Canadian Air Force Journal*, Vol 3. No 1 (Winter 2014). 17-18

This paper will discuss how airpower is a critical enabler and participant of military and Whole of Government Operations necessary to successfully prosecute an IW campaign. The paper will specifically focus on how misuse or neglect of airpower can undermine governments' ability to achieve not only tactical but also operational and strategic end state goals in prosecuting IW.

### **Defining Irregular War**

It would be most useful at this stage to define what is commonly understood as the meaning of the phrase 'irregular war.' Sir Lawrence Freedman proposes a workable concept in his paper 'Regular and Irregular War' that covers contemporary conflicts.<sup>3</sup> He states the delineation between regular and IW lies in the fact that regular warfare is decided through battle and governmental responses, where as IW encompasses regular forces directing efforts against civilian structures to undermine enemy states or fighters who seek to emerge from and withdraw into civil society to compensate for regular force weakness. The purpose of which is to wear down the patience and will of the enemy, undermining their authority and providing a perceived legitimate political alternative.<sup>4</sup> Various Defence department glossaries, including the US and Australia are more prescriptive in their definition, defining IW as:

A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favours indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence and will.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Lawrence Freedman. "Regular and Irregular War." *Strategic Datalink*, no. 1 (August 2008)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Australia, Royal Australian Air Force, Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2. *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. Canberra, ACT: Airpower Development Centre 2011. 7-6 and United States Air Force, Air Force Doctrine Document 2-3 *Irregular Warfare*. August 2007. 2

There are two important factors about the nature of IW that need to be understood to maximize the chances of success. Firstly, IW is primarily political in nature, seeking to win over and influence the civilian populations in the area to accept an alternative ruling ideology. Although violence is being enacted, a military response is only one small part of the tools and efforts needed to fight the political battle. Secondly, the war will very likely be protracted and no quick military solution or short cuts are available to affect the root cause. The military operations occur to provide a secure environment in which political, social and humanitarian programs may be delivered.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Airpower Brings to the Table**

What airpower provides in IW can be summarized in one word: asymmetry. This asymmetric advantage over the adversary facilitates and enables freedom of movement for friendly forces, swift and timely presence or intervention in contested populated areas, overwhelming force and firepower in violent confrontations, and it lays the foundations for establishing a presence of lasting security for the population.<sup>7</sup> Airpower is presented in four core roles which will vary by degrees of scale and importance throughout a campaign. These core roles are control of the air, air mobility, strike and information, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR).

**Control of the Air.** This is the ability to be free to conduct operations in the air and on the surface below without interference from adversary airpower.<sup>8</sup> Adversary airpower here is not limited to aircraft; it must also encompass air defence capabilities. Control of the air is sufficient to provide freedom of movement for where you want to

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 3-

<sup>7</sup> John D Jogerst. "Preparing for Irregular Warfare The Future Ain't What It Used to Be." *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol. 23 Issue 4, (Winter 2009). 72

<sup>8</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 7-3

operate in time and space. Control does not demand that the adversary cannot operate in or impact the air environment and in almost all cases air supremacy is totally unnecessary.

**Air Mobility.** Air mobility is directly concerned with movement of people and resources both inter and intra theatre. Not only is air mobility about airlift, it also includes air refuelling in the movement of airborne assets.<sup>9</sup> Conceptually, air mobility is often constrained in military thinking to bringing military equipment and personnel to where they need to be for the fight. This is a misjudgment and misuse of the capability in IW. Air mobility extends beyond the tactical and operational military boundaries to which ground operators seek to constrain it. The political of nature IW dictates that air mobility is a strategic capability crucial to whole of government solution and must be used as such.

**Strike.** Strike is an attack with the intention of destroying, damaging or seizing an objective.<sup>10</sup> This is certainly a well-used component of airpower in providing kinetic effects. Arguably these kinetic effects are what is solely thought of as airpower delivery and too much focus is spent here at the expense of desirable non-kinetic effects.

**Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).** ISR is an absolutely paramount capability that enables and directs efforts at the tactical, operational and strategic levels of the war. ISR synchronizes and integrates the planning and operation of sensors, assets and processing, and the exploitation of dissemination systems in direct support of current and future operations.<sup>11</sup>

### **Using Airpower in Irregular War**

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-1

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-6

It is important to remember the fundamental dynamics and abilities of airpower when planning and utilizing it in IW. Whilst it may be wonderful to have a wide range of unique and unparalleled weapons and capabilities to use in the theatre it is not necessarily advantageous for operational or strategic goals to employ them. Airpower brings an asymmetry to war and the crucial aspect of its use for success is ensuring that the advantages of this asymmetry are maximized and the disadvantages minimized.

The nature of the IW is that it is political and protracted. Key military objectives are to provide a secure environment from the violence, whereby political and whole of government operations can effectively operate and support affected peoples in establishing and maintaining a normal existence.<sup>12</sup> Airpower plays a role in both the military operation to secure and maintain this environment, and the political aspects of meeting human needs, ongoing localized policing and security, and physical connectivity between populations and the ruling government(s).<sup>13</sup>

There are three basic areas in which airpower is misused or neglected in IW campaigns. These omissions and misuses are to the detriment of the contributing nations and the host nation(s) in achieving more timely, effective and successful lasting outcomes for the population. The first problem is the focus and balance of structure in which airpower is employed. There exists the need to move away from being only kinetic effects minded throughout the campaign. Secondly, airpower generation, use and sustainment are expensive and resource intensive; as such, they must be carefully and frugally employed. Lastly, there is the lack of genuine succession planning for airpower use following the withdrawal of contributing nations.

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<sup>12</sup> Jogerst. "Preparing for Irregular Warfare." 71

<sup>13</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 4-4

## Force Focus and Balance

There is always a difficult balancing act to the nature and structure of any military task force when planning and executing operations. Overwhelmingly, and correctly so, there is concern from governments of contributing nations about the safety and welfare of their troops and people. If it is not necessary to actually commit troops on the ground, then non-commitment is often viewed as a better outcome. However, there is a danger in pursuing military operations through arms length airpower and neglecting the real need for boots on the ground. These tactics drew favour and influence with the US following airpower success stories in the Gulf War '91 and the early operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban.<sup>14</sup> Sections of the US Air Force are largely to blame for pushing and promoting the successes of strike airpower and ISR, characterizing it as the attractive option for reducing possibility of coalition casualties.<sup>15</sup>

This approach is problematic as it neglects several fundamental tenets of IW; it fails to capitalize on the advantages and does not address the disadvantages of airpower asymmetry. This was demonstrated in Afghanistan during Operation Anaconda where Al Qaeda quickly adapted and negated the airpower asymmetry.<sup>16</sup> IW is political and it requires a secure environment in which the government battles for the population to establish and maintain legitimacy and relevance. Offensive strike and great ISR cannot alone win and establish this on anything other than a semi permanent basis. The defeat of the adversary occurs on the ground. Strike and ISR need to be recognized and used for

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<sup>14</sup> James S. Corum. "Airpower and Small Wars: Current Operations." *Baltic Security and Defence Review*, Vol. 12 Issue 1, 2010., 130-131

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-134

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 131



their roles in this matter; they help establish and maintain the security environment in conjunction with ground forces.

What is truly essential in exploiting airpower asymmetry is air mobility. Without question, in order to effectively provide air mobility it is necessary to have also established control of the air.<sup>17</sup> Understanding that these elements of airpower have interdependent roles leads to the knowledge that air operations need to be planned and executed in a phased manner to ensure that each role can act effectively and enable all other military and civilian elements. This means that a strike capability may be greatly needed in early phases to establish air control and smash adversary strategic objectives. However, IW must progress to the requirements for a widespread and timely presence on the ground. It is air mobility that provides this. The nature and composition of coalition ground forces and host nation ground forces may change and vary depending on the nature and security level of the area in which they operate. What does not change is that these forces need to be physically located when and where there is action. Air mobility provides the means to essentially eliminate barriers of borders, terrain and time that ground bound forces would otherwise face.<sup>18</sup> Air mobility is an absolute essential in any COIN aspects within IW and is sine qua non for any special forces operations throughout the campaign.<sup>19</sup>

The importance and emphasis on air mobility does not cease at initial military contact and clearing operations. In fact air mobility extends well past this tactical usage and firmly into the strategic use for follow up and sustaining operations in direct

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 4-7

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-15 – 4-16

<sup>19</sup> Robert Wilkie. "Hybrid Warfare: Something Old, Not Something New." *Air and Space Power Journal* XXIII, no. 4 (Winter 2009)

government support. This is effective use of air mobility and is centered on assisting the government in maintaining a real time and real value capability of legitimate presence and support for the people.<sup>20</sup> It is genuinely feasible and should be planned, that the same airpower assets can, within a small period of time, be involved in offensive insertion, humanitarian air lift and medical support or evacuation of both troops and civilians. These effects are only available through air mobility and only the government can deliver them. Neglecting this core role greatly reduces the contributing and host nations governments' ability to legitimately provide for the security, social and physical needs of the population – as opposed to the adversary.

In balance with the use of kinetic operations and air mobility is the need and use of ISR. ISR enables an unequalled capability for the user in understanding and having knowledge of the battle space in both physical disposition and in time.<sup>21</sup> ISR provides enhanced command and control functions and is the principle driver of knowledge for a commander within the targeting process of find, fix, track, target, engage and assess (F2T2EA).<sup>22</sup> The ISR assets that are tasked and used are wide and varied in primary and multi role capabilities as well as in costs to run and sustain. The cost and resources required to run space based ISR is vastly different from that of man portable short range drone systems. It is important that the right assets are used for the right purposes and the force composition be constantly reviewed over time. In combination, air mobility and ISR have historically shown their worth as being the most valuable contributing airpower factors in IW and COIN operations (for example, as in the case of the Malayan

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<sup>20</sup> Allen G. Peck. "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare." *Military Technology*, Vol. 32 Issue 3, 2008. 21

<sup>21</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*, 2-11

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-15

emergency from 1948-1960)<sup>23</sup> and must be considered to be so, for now and the foreseeable future.

### **Efficient and Cost Effective Use**

Hand in glove with correct force balancing is the manner in which airpower is used. Airpower is expensive to generate and sustain and it is largely the preserve of wealthy nations to have extensive capabilities.<sup>24</sup> When planning and conducting IW, careful consideration should be given regarding which assets to use, for how long, and for what purposes. Typically, large air forces of contributing nations have been structured to conduct regular war but are adapted to fight the IW to which they have been committed.<sup>25</sup> This means they may not be the most efficient and cost effective means of delivering the best possible airpower outcome, but they are what is available. This is an important point as it leads to two inevitable outcomes. Either more cost effective and tailored airpower platforms are introduced to the war or the adapted platforms must be used in a manner whereby they do not become a limiting factor to the resource sustainment of operations.

The notion of using the air assets in a sustainable and efficient manner is the foundation piece in the way in which an air component commander (ACC) conducts business. Absolutely core is the concept of having centralized control and decentralized execution of airpower. The employment of assets by centralized command allows efficient and effective allocation against competing requirements from theatre wide military and governmental requirements, whilst serving towards the broader requirements.<sup>26</sup> Without centralized control, there is a real risk of air assets and

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-24

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-1

<sup>25</sup> Glasson. "Big War Airpower for Small War Operations." 17-18

<sup>26</sup> Peck. "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare." 17

capabilities being penny packed to local commands, whereby they only serve in limited capacity and tactical scope. This is a gross misuse of such important assets and capabilities. Particularly important are the coordination and use of ISR assets and air mobility platforms. The greater fight is a strategic political one, which is not served by assets being misappropriated for localized tactical purposes.

Perhaps one of the most abused aspects of airpower in IW lies in its overuse at enormous expense and effort for a desired affect. The figures of use of air to air refuellers, tons of fuel burnt, tons of bombs dropped, number of jet fighter/bomber and ISR sorties and airlift missions flown during the Iraq and Afghanistan IW phases is staggering! In his article ‘Airpower’s Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare’ Maj.Gen Peck provides numbers of over half a million combat and combat support missions flown in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.<sup>27</sup> Although Peck uses this as an illustration of the degree of Air Force involvement, it also highlights the enormous resource and budgetary drain of airpower usage. The US Air Force expenditure on operations in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 through 2007 has been in excess of \$60 billion.<sup>28</sup> It brings into question the sustainability of this airpower effort for the duration.

This abuse of airpower lies not in the use of bombers and fighters, but in the effects achieved for the high cost, or more simply the lack of bang for the buck. These platforms and their capabilities are being underutilized in these roles for little asymmetric advantage; yet, they are consuming resources at exorbitantly high rates.<sup>29</sup> This is being addressed to a degree by the use of newer technology such as unmanned ISR and strike platforms and weapons (drones and missiles) and improved sensor technologies

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>28</sup> Jogerst. “Preparing for Irregular Warfare.” 77

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

networking with ISR air and space based platforms. This enhanced technology is to be used alongside more suitable and sustainable cost effective tailored manned platforms such as the modified Tucanos being used for COIN operations and King Air based ISR platforms.<sup>30</sup>

### **Building Host Nation Airpower Capability**

In the end game, contributing nations will be going home and leaving the host nation to sustain and maintain its own security environment and whole of government operations. It is a false premise to consider that it is necessary to maintain extensive airpower resources, assets and capabilities in order for contributing nations to secure and maintain a stable environment; yet, none of this will be available when these nations leave. The host nation(s) are then left with two options: either they continue to receive airpower support from outside contributors or they must now operate without any of the advantages of airpower. There must be a third option, whereby the host nation develops and maintains airpower capabilities that it can employ to its asymmetric advantage.

This is recognized in US and Australian airpower doctrine, which contains discussions of indigenous airpower capabilities as essential for a nation's internal defence; in particular, air mobility and ISR are crucial.<sup>31</sup> Both nations have followed this up with action and have delivered dedicated training and resources to produce indigenous airpower capabilities. The US has worked extensively in El Salvador<sup>32</sup> Iraq<sup>33</sup> and

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<sup>30</sup> Peck. "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare." 23 and Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 2-22

<sup>31</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*, 5-1 and USAF, Doctrine Document 2-3 *Irregular Warfare*. 27-28

<sup>32</sup> USAF, Doctrine Document 2-3 *Irregular Warfare*. 28

<sup>33</sup> Peck. "Airpower's Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare." 22

Colombia<sup>34</sup> to produce ISR and air mobility capabilities. Australia has worked with Iraqis to provide partnered and indigenous airspace management.<sup>35</sup> Cost effective, resource efficient multi role platform capabilities and their effects are paramount to establishing long term capability within the host nation, in order to position them for success in IW. In particular, air mobility and ISR platforms accompanied with trained personnel are a priority.

The purpose of undertaking this task is to hand over responsibility to the host nation. In the words of T.E. Lawrence, “Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.”<sup>36</sup> Of all the neglected aspects of airpower employment in IW, this is the most glaring – simply because it is the most difficult. To build airpower capability is a long, difficult and enduring process, but so too is IW.

## **Conclusion**

Large nation states historically structure their airpower capabilities round the greatest security threat, or regular warfare. To be successfully and effectively employed in IW operations, these capabilities must be adapted in a manner that maximizes strengths and minimize weaknesses. With focus on IW being largely a ground operation, true benefits and usage of airpower are often misunderstood and misused. Airpower, whether in regular or IW brings four core components to the fight: air control, air mobility, strike and ISR. Too often the focus at both the political and tactical level becomes all about

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<sup>34</sup> Sarah Kinoshian. “Pentagon partners with Colombia to build Latin America’s air defense tactics.” Last accessed 24 May 2015. <http://www.securityassistance.org/blog/pentagon-partners-colombia-build-latin-america’s-air-defense-tactics>

<sup>35</sup> Australian Air Publication AAP 1001.2 *The Air Force Approach to Irregular Warfare*. 5-3

<sup>36</sup> T.E. Lawrence, ‘Twenty-seven Articles’, *Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917, article 15 as last accessed on 24 May 2015 via <http://www.telstudies.org/reference/quotes.shtml>

offensive kinetic effects and misses the crucial enablers and tactical/strategic synergies that airpower can deliver in IW.

IW is a protracted political fight where military operations are the means to combat adversary violence, to win a secure level of existence for the people. To achieve success, the focus and balance of airpower employment must be structured in a way that is sustainable, maintains the asymmetric advantages and takes greater consideration of the fight outside of the military security objectives. This involves improved planning and use of non-kinetic airpower to achieve results for military and whole of government operations. Specifically, there exists need for greater emphasis on air mobility and ISR and their management through centralized command and decentralized execution.

Underutilized tasking of expensive adapted airpower assets does not serve a long-term IW well. These assets must be used on a needs-for-effect basis to ensure value is extracted for input and that they do not become a resource liability. It is wise to continually look for opportunities to introduce more cost effective, tailored platforms to do tasks well and maintain asymmetric advantages of airpower. In a similar construct, it is counterproductive to not consider and contribute to the development of host nation airpower and capabilities. Particularly crucial to ongoing internal security is indigenous air mobility and ISR capabilities. The aim of contributing nations in IW is to provide support in military and strategic operations to win a secure environment in which the government(s) conduct the long-term battle for legitimacy and relevance. The ultimate aim is for host nations to win this long-term war themselves, allowing contributing nations to go home.

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