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**The Relevance of Airpower  
for the Defence of Small States  
Like Singapore**

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# THE RELEVANCE OF AIRPOWER FOR THE DEFENCE OF SMALL STATES LIKE SINGAPORE

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author states that despite the increasing focus on irregular conflicts, today's threat environment is really a hybrid of conventional and irregular warfare. In his opinion, small states need to retain the ability to deter and prevail in conventional conflict as their geostrategic realities provide them with little margin for error. Against the use of irregular warfare, they need to look beyond airpower's traditional role as a primarily offensive tool to unlock other applications that can more aptly contribute to the objective of achieving legitimacy and influence over the relevant population. The author feels that one must understand that airpower has its limitations and cannot be the sole solution to all problems. Today's conflicts are increasingly protracted and won by those who can control the narrative. The author concludes that airpower will be unsustainable and counter-productive for small states in today's environment, if it is not complemented by other levers such as strategic communication.

*Keywords: Airpower; Modern; Defence; Relevance; Security*

## INTRODUCTION

While the 'father of modern air force' Billy Mitchell defines airpower as 'the ability to do something in the air', strategy theorist Colin Gray nuances it to focus on the strategic value of the air domain rather than its capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Early airpower theorists like Giulio Douhet believe that this strategic value is the ability to dictate the victory of battles and wars.<sup>2</sup> In fact, John Warden once asserted that 'since the German attack on Poland in 1939, no country has won a war in the face of enemy air superiority... Conversely, no state has lost a war while it maintained air superiority.'<sup>3</sup> While the validity of this statement is debatable, history has shown how airpower can contribute to decisive outcomes in conventional conflicts. The Six-Day War in 1967, for instance, demonstrated how Israel used airpower to achieve a swift and decisive victory over its numerically superior Arab nations.

Some scholars argue that as the world becomes more economically interdependent, the likelihood of conventional conflict reduces.<sup>4</sup> The existence of more strategic and powerful tools of war, such as nuclear weapons, further makes it inconceivable that states will risk mutual destruction to go to war. Simultaneously,

there is a rise in the use of indirect and asymmetric approaches by both state and non-state actors to influence the populace. These include kinetic activities such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States (US), and non-kinetic means like the cyber-attacks on Israeli water infrastructure in 2020.<sup>5</sup> Given the tight association of airpower to conventional battles and wars, one may question the relevance of airpower in today's context.

This essay argues that airpower continues to play a key role in the defence of small states like Singapore, even as the nature of conflict shifts towards irregular warfare. First, the need to deter and prevail in conventional conflicts remains and airpower is a key enabler. This is especially true for small states which cannot afford to gamble against the possibility of a full scale war due to its geostrategic realities. Second, airpower can also contribute to the objective of irregular warfare if we can look beyond the classical concept of airpower focused on targeting. Notwithstanding, airpower has its limitations and needs to be complemented by other instruments such as strategic communication in order to be relevant in today's conflicts, which is increasingly won by controlling the narratives.

**The recent Russia-Ukraine conflict is a sobering reminder of how economic interdependency is insufficient to deter determined aggressors from employing conventional means to achieve their goals.**

### **THE NEED TO DETER AND PREVAIL IN CONVENTIONAL CONFLICTS**

Even as irregular conflicts become more prevalent, the need to deter and prevail in conventional conflicts remains, especially for small states. The recent Russia-Ukraine conflict is a sobering reminder of how economic interdependency is insufficient to deter determined aggressors from employing conventional means to achieve their goals. Even after Russian banks were removed from the international financial system and sanctions imposed on Russian exports and individuals, Russia was undeterred in its quest to invade Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately for Ukraine, its vast territory presented multiple fronts for the Russians and bought time for the international community to send in supply

of weapons, fuel and other aid to bolster its resistance.<sup>7</sup> Small states do not have the same luxury in a conventional conflict.

Small states are typically confronted by three geo-strategic realities. First, most small states are intrinsically irrelevant to the international system. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted this reality in his address to the Forum of Small States in 2019: 'Unlike larger and more powerful countries, we do not set the agenda or decide the mega trends. If Singapore disappears tomorrow, the world will continue probably just fine.'<sup>8</sup> To this end, small states will not only need to make themselves relevant through extrinsic means, but also accept the possibility that the international community may not come to their aid in times of crisis. Second, most small states lack physical strategic depth. A strategy involving forward defence, pre-emptive strike and strategic mobility is key to keep the battlefield away from their soil, which can otherwise have devastating effects on the populace.<sup>9</sup> Third, small states lack natural resources and hence are highly reliant on imports. A prolonged conflict coupled with the blockage of lines of communication will threaten small states' survival. Facing these geo-strategic realities, small states have a much narrower margin of error compared to big countries in a conventional conflict. They therefore cannot afford to bet against the possibility of one taking place even if the prevailing odds are low.



*A Messerschmitt Bf-109 escorting a Junkers Ju-77 of the Luftwaffe in 1941.*

## ASYMMETRIC OFFSETS ENABLED BY AIRPOWER

To this end, small states must continue to build the capabilities to deter, and if necessary, prevail in conventional conflicts. Airpower, with its inherent reach, perspective and speed, provides the ability for small states to asymmetrically offset their disadvantages against larger adversaries. First, the reach of airpower enables small states to penetrate behind enemy lines to strike strategic targets. This idea of strategic strike, first theorised by Giulio Douhet, aims to hit the enemy's vital centres to break their will to fight and oblige backdown.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shock and awe effect played a significant part in the Japanese leadership's calculus, even if the decisive factor for the Japanese's surrender remains debatable.<sup>11</sup> The ability to deny the sanctuary of depth also serves as a strong deterrent, forcing potential aggressors to weigh the costs of reprisal against the benefits of any provocative actions. This explains why small states like Singapore and Israel continue to invest heavily in strategic strike capabilities, such as the stealth F-35 fighter jets, despite the hefty price tags.

Second, airpower operates in the third dimension and provides an unique perspective of the battlefield, unconstrained by barriers or borders. This broader field of view cannot be otherwise obtained from sensors in the surface domains.<sup>12</sup> The U-2 spy plane, for instance, provided early indications of Soviet efforts to build nuclear missile silos in Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. This prevented the US from being fundamentally surprised and provided sufficient time for them to formulate the corresponding response plans.<sup>13</sup> Small states can similarly leverage air intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations to obtain early warning indicators of an impending attack, and launch pre-emptive strikes to prevent conflicts from unfolding in their own backyards.

Third, airpower provides the ability to achieve swift and decisive victories in the land and maritime battles against numerically superior enemies. Philip Meilinger asserts that the speed of airpower enables one to dominate the fourth dimension—time—and compress the surface combat operations to place enormous physical and psychological strains on the enemy.<sup>14</sup> These elements of speed and surprise can substitute for mass, enabling the David to overwhelm

the Goliath. The Luftwaffe for instance was fundamental to Germany's Blitzkrieg strategy, which led to the rapid fall of France in 1940 despite the latter's numerical advantage.<sup>15</sup> More recently, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict showed how small and relatively inexpensive aerial drones could be used to strike tanks, artillery and troops, achieving not just military superiority but also the effect of demoralising the enemy.<sup>16</sup>

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However, airpower's ability to provide small states with the asymmetric edge also creates a paradox. Unable to compete directly, the adversaries will seek other forms of asymmetry to achieve their desired outcomes. One may argue that Iran's inability to compete with Israel's conventional airpower has motivated them to fund and equip proxy forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which employ guerrilla tactics as the panacea to the capability overmatch. This begs the question of whether airpower remains relevant in addressing today's nature of conflict, which is increasingly a hybrid of conventional and irregular warfare.

## CHALLENGES OF CLASSICAL AIRPOWER THEORY IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

According to the US Department of Defence, irregular warfare is 'a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.'<sup>17</sup> While it favours indirect and asymmetric approaches, it may also employ the full range of military or conventional capabilities.<sup>18</sup> The key difference between conventional and irregular warfare lies in their objectives. Conventional warfare focuses on the adversary's armed forces with the aim of coercing the adversary's government to back down. It assumes that the population are non-belligerents and will accept any decision the government makes. In contrast, success in irregular warfare hinges on winning the hearts and the minds of the population of interest, and



not on the control of enemy's forces or territory.<sup>19</sup> This requires a shift from the traditional heavy-handed approach, to one that adopts the right amount of pressure on the right entity at the right time, or what Canyon describes as 'Goldilocks Power.'<sup>20</sup>

This idea of influence is not new. Douhet asserts that airpower should be used to strike the urban areas, to make life so intolerable that surrendering to the will of the enemy will be the least unacceptable option for the populace.<sup>21</sup> John Slessor, on the other hand, advocates the interdiction of a country's supply chain as the most optimal way to influence an outcome.<sup>22</sup> John Warden's 'Five Ring' model acknowledges the importance of these different targets, but highlights that the leadership should be the priority as they make the decisions regarding the fate of a country.<sup>23</sup> Despite the differences, they all have similar notion of 'centres of gravity' and believe that airpower's value proposition lies in its ability to strike these targets to influence the outcome of the conflict.

This classical concept of strategic strikes works for small states against larger countries, as there are unambiguous targets to be attacked. Against even smaller states or non-state actors, the small states become the Goliath. The weaker actors will adopt

asymmetric strategies to have a chance for success.<sup>24</sup> Insurgents, for instance, will blend into civilian population to pose targeting issues for airpower. This is the case in the Afghanistan War, where the Taliban forces made a point of fighting in built-up areas and close to the civilians. This forced the American forces into a dilemma—exercise 'courageous restraint' or risk civilian casualties that would erode local support.<sup>25</sup> Irregular actors also do not have defined 'centres of gravity' to be targeted as they often operate in small groups with no central command centre or infrastructure. Without clear targets, the classical concept of airpower centred on strategic strikes loses its ability to influence.

## ROLES OF AIRPOWER IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

To unlock airpower's potential to influence beyond conventional conflicts, one must look past the classical application of airpower for targeting or as a primarily offensive tool. Operationally, air platforms can support with aerial imagery and electronic reconnaissance to provide superior intelligence. This enables a high degree of situational awareness which can be used strategically to disrupt the adversary's



An F-16 Fighting Falcon assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Fighter Squadron from Hill Air Force Base, Utah, takes off at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2015.

efforts to shape the narrative in their favour. In the lead up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, aerial images showed continuous build-up of Russian forces and helped to refute Russia's claim that they had withdrawn their troops from the Ukrainian borders following the completion of their military exercises. This shored up international support to confront Russia's war intentions and bought time for Ukraine to prepare against the impending invasion.<sup>26</sup>

Airpower, in the form of air mobility, can also contribute directly to the objective of winning the people's hearts and minds. The use of air mobility to deliver humanitarian assistance during disasters or crises earns tremendous amount of goodwill with the recipients and aids in the states' efforts to build legitimacy. The Berlin Airlift from 1948 to 1949 was a clear demonstration of this capability. The US and the United Kingdom (UK) took to the skies to supply food, fuel and other essentials required by the West Berliners, after the Soviets had blockaded all land and water accesses into their city.<sup>27</sup> This massive effort, which lasted over 10 months, prevented the West Berliners from caving in to the Soviets, and provided the Western Bloc with one of the greatest victories of the Cold War without a single shot fired.

Airpower can also be used to conduct psychological warfare against the adversary. Since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, propaganda materials have been air-dropped from aircraft or distributed via balloons to influence both combatants and non-combatants. For instance, the Special Leafleting Squadron and the Balloon Unit were set up by the Allied forces to distribute subversive propaganda across Europe during World War II.<sup>28</sup> More recently, food like Choco Pie cakes and flash drives containing recordings of South Korean shows were sent to North Korea via balloons, to convince the locals that their economy was not doing as well as the North Korean leadership had claimed.<sup>29</sup> North Korea's warnings to South Korea to stop the balloon launches or risk retaliation reflected the influence such airborne propaganda had on the population.

## LIMITATIONS OF AIRPOWER IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

Notwithstanding, airpower has its limitations and these are magnified by the very nature and objective of irregular warfare. First, airpower with its high cost and inability to hold ground is ill-suited for irregular warfare, which is inherently protracted to test the resolve of the



South Korean activists releasing balloons to the North.

adversary. Airpower is traditionally designed to deliver a swift and decisive outcome. Failure to do so places significant financial strain on anyone, particularly for small states which have limited resources. For example, the airlift operation to overcome the 10 months of Berlin Blockade came at a huge cost of over US\$224 million, or close to US\$3 billion in today's value.<sup>30</sup> Airpower's inability to hold ground also provides a disadvantage against an adversary who can be persistently on the ground to dominate the mind space of the people and shape the narrative. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, after 19 years of violent struggle with the US, shows how insurgents can outlast a superpower that relies heavily on its superior airpower.

Second, airpower has a bad reputation for being a blunt tool and hence can be counterproductive in the bid to gain legitimacy and influence. This bad reputation is attributed to the large number of civilian casualties associated with past applications of airpower, such as in the Vietnam War. Even as strategic strikes become more precise and the applications of airpower extend beyond targeting, adversaries can easily leverage this entrenched negative image to develop a credible disinformation campaign. In 2006, factions opposing the Iraqi government claimed that over 30 civilians were killed by American airpower. The report gained wide circulation in the local and international media and contributed to the negative sentiments towards the American forces, even though the alleged bombing never took place.<sup>31</sup>

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## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the increasing focus on irregular conflicts, today's threat environment is really a hybrid of conventional and irregular warfare. Small states need to retain the ability to deter and prevail in conventional conflict as their geostrategic realities provide them with little margin for error. Against the use of irregular warfare, they need to look beyond airpower's traditional role as a primarily offensive tool to unlock other applications that can more aptly contribute to the objective of achieving legitimacy and influence over the relevant population. Notwithstanding, one must understand that airpower has its limitations and cannot be the sole solution to all problems. Today's conflicts are increasingly protracted and won by those who can control the narrative. Airpower will be unsustainable and counterproductive for small states in today's environment, if it is not complemented by other levers such as strategic communication.

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