

Airpower Hopes: The West versus the Islamic State, and the Evolution of Warfare

Written by Strobe Driver

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STROBE DRIVER, DEC 21 2014

Strike-fighters over Baghdad

Recently in *The Age*, Professor Hugh White wrote, “Tony Abbott hopes for a good, quick, cheap war in Iraq. But after the first few weeks of bombing everyone now understands that Western air strikes alone will do little to ‘degrade and destroy’ the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (White 2014). Without doubt, Australia’s Prime Minister Abbott is hoping for a short, quick war, culminating in the defeat of Islamic State (IS). The direct use of air assets at such an early stage in this conflict offers an understanding of what the current attitude is with regard to warfare amongst Western politicians. Airpower is, and remains, the great achiever in war; and it is venerated by the ‘West’ [1]. From this standpoint, although airpower has its place in war and warfare, its use alone will not bring about the circumstances for the defeat of enemies. Moreover, this has been proven time and time again in wars since World War Two (WWII). Nevertheless, it is because of the achievements of airpower in WWII that airstrikes have remained such a weapon-of-choice, both as a deterrent and as a direct action, and politicians in powerful Western nation-states turn to it regularly. Strike-fighters over Baghdad are only the most recent use of airpower and, therefore, to know how and why this has happened, one need only delve briefly into WWII.

Airpower as ‘Advantage’

In the twenty-first century – as with the twentieth century – politicians have remained faithful to the notion of airpower as a weapon-of-advantage and, therefore, to its WWII use and application. To be sure, airpower does supply levels of advantage – and for politicians, it has the addendum of a ‘can do’ attitude – and signals an overt representation of preponderance. Prime Minister Abbott’s order for airpower (in this case, Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18 Super-Hornets) to be used against IS advances in Iraq under the umbrella of the “long, strong arm of Australia” (Osborne 2014) is testament to the status airpower has retained. However, its abilities to achieve what was set in place in the days of WWII are, in contemporary times, under continuous challenge. To understand how the phenomenon of airpower came to establish such a formidable reputation, only a brief analysis of WWII is required.

Airpower gained its credibility as a weapon-of-destruction in its use both as a ‘strategic’ [2] weapon that destroyed an enemy’s capabilities, and as a tactical (or immediate use) weapon. Airpower had, as a legacy, an intense period of involvement between World War One (WWI) to the beginning (and through) WWII. Commensurate with this, there was the development of internal munitions (bombs, cannons, and machine guns) and external/under-wing munitions (rockets, cannons and missiles), and these, too, would increase airpower’s advantage and further resource an ever-expanding set of uses. Airpower could target enemies within specific campaigns; be used as an instrument of terror against a population and/or a city; destroy infrastructure and diminish troop and transport movement; and be used against an enemy’s air, land, and sea assets.

Thus, airpower became a multi-faceted weapon. For instance, Nazi Germany used the Luftwaffe to pound its enemies into submission, to destabilise the enemy as part of their *Blitzkrieg* [3] offensives, and a germane example of this is *Operation Bistard Hunt* [4]. For Allied forces, the D-Day landings of 6 June 1944 – *Operation Overlord* – in which Allied air forces dropped a staggering 200,000 tons of bombs on targets in France in order to retard German

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forces abilities, to reinforce the beaches on which the landings were taking place (BBC); and the post-D-Day Saint Lô breakout of 25 July 1944 in France – *Operation Cobra* – which saw Allied ground forces, supported by 2,000 heavy- and medium-bombers and 700 fighter-bomber aircraft, shatter determined German resistance (Chambers 2000). During WWII, airpower was also utilized as a long-distance weapon, and is shown in the coordinated, systemic firebombing of Tokyo (PBS) by the United States (US) 20th Air Force on 19 March 1945 – *Operation Meetinghouse* – which destroyed 16 square miles of the city (Trueman 2014), and the firestorm that was created in Dresden by Allied bombing in February 1945 (Trueman). All are excellent examples of the formidable use of airpower. Moreover, Allied forces would eventually succeed in the ‘punishment phase’ [5] of aerial bombardment on Germany and Japan, and produce unconditional surrender and total defeat. In achieving this, airpower holds a sacrosanct place in highly industrial and technological Western societies.

To be sure, after WWII, others would invariably take up airpower in earnest: Russia, Israel, Syria, Egypt, South Africa, and, in more recent times, China, to name only a few. Airpower would play a major role and become the weapon-of-choice in establishing, defending, and maintaining strategic footholds and, in a post-WWII world, of preponderance in general. However, there is another crucial element which allowed airpower to exponentially excel in gaining control of battlefields, and this was due to the ‘way’ in which wars were fought, and this can now be given a perspective.

The Evolution of Warfare: Airpower’s Decline

Armies had, over time, from as far back as the Roman Empire and especially since the Napoleonic wars (1799-1815), waged wars in a ‘type’ of way: ‘symmetrical warfare.’ This type of warfare, as the name implies, results in uniformed armies congregating on open plains, in which large-scale deployments (eventually) engaged in ‘broad-front’ confrontations, and met in ‘force-on-force’ collisions. Inevitably, the end result would be a ‘set-piece’ [6] battle, or several battles. This type of warfare would become ingrained in the European/Western psyche, and would retain its predominance and be a mainstay of actions in WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. Airpower in WWII, therefore, was constantly deployed against armies – and to some extent navies and air forces, although it was particularly effective against slow-moving ground forces – and, thus, could break the momentum of an enemy. This could be achieved in numerous ways: by deploying it as a roving ‘free-fire’ harassment weapon, as a ‘call-in firepower’ asset that could be utilized by ground- and sea-borne forces, or as a dedicated strike ‘package’ directed at a specific target. Airpower, due in large part to tactics on the ground remaining consistent, had its effectiveness exponentially increase. However, that was ‘then,’ and as ground-borne forces realized they were becoming more and more vulnerable to airpower, they began to change their tactics.

Notwithstanding, airpower with its enormous capabilities – including the development of non-fixed wing aircraft (helicopters) – would prove to be a less-effective weapon as another ‘type’ of warfare began to evolve, meet, and then impede the efficacy of airpower. The First Indo-China War (1946-1954) (Encyclopædia Britannica) offers an example of airpower having reached its zenith and of its decline in achieving WWII results. The French use of airpower in both supply and combat roles would do little to retard the systemic and focussed use of ground-borne guerrilla tactics and selective ground artillery bombardment by North Vietnamese (NV) forces. Airpower would prove ineffective against coordinated, yet decentralised, attacks, mounted by the NV and their continuous encroachments into the French base at Dien Bien Phu. The NV would eventually overwhelm French forces. The Second Indo-China War (the ‘Vietnam War,’ 1954-1975) (Encyclopædia Britannica) would show that a belief in airpower, as a weapon providing overwhelming advantage to the US, was also misguided.

Paradoxically, the iconoclasm would come about in the form of a triad: the NV government would use a combination of its domestic air force, utilise other anti-aircraft assets in the north (Viet), and employ dedicated ground-borne assets against airpower in the south (Nam). The astute use of these largely decentralised yet powerful forces is summed up by Kagan:

Vietnam was nearly as much of a disaster for the airpower services as it was for the [US and South Vietnamese] land forces. A lethal combination of Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), traditional anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), and [North Vietnamese piloted] MiG fighters led to staggering losses in aircraft and crews. Two thousand five hundred

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and sixty-one aircraft and 3,587 helicopters fell to enemy fire, and roughly another 1,200 planes and 1,300 choppers [helicopters] crashed due to non-combat causes... Kill ratios in the skies over Vietnam were a mere 2.4 to 1, dropping at times to an even exchange. They had been 8.1 in World War II, and 10 to 1, sometimes as high as 14 to 1, in Korea. The Vietnam War induced a real sense of failure and crisis in the airpower services (Kagan 2006:25).

Whilst in future wars, the lessons of destroying an enemy's airpower on the ground would be a priority for industrialised, highly technological nations (as was the case in the Six Day War and the Falklands War/Islands Malvinas War), there would be a strategy that would come to the fore and finally develop to the point of undermining airpower's abilities: 'asymmetrical warfare' [7]. This 'type' of war is also referred to as 'unconventional warfare,' and 'non-traditional warfare'. Asymmetrical tactics in the Vietnam War would stymie airpower's productive strike-rate, and frustrate the US and their allies – including Australia. Although the Vietnam War would constitute a defeat for airpower as an overwhelming tactical and strategic weapon, politicians of many nations would, however, remain faithful to the notion of what it *could* produce, rather than its shortcomings and limitations.

Airpower: Limitations and Consequences

Examining the asymmetrical/unconventional war that has developed in recent times in the Middle East also allows for IS to be given a perspective. Insurgencies understand and have known for a long time that facing the military might of a nation-state will bring about certain defeat. North Vietnamese forces were acutely aware of this in the Vietnam War, and remained elusive and fluid for this single reason. This was known by US military personnel and as early as 1962. John Vann, a US adviser, would state that NV forces could be defeated in the south "if they would only stand and fight" (Karnow 1984:260). This is reiterated by Frizzell, in stating the 'enemy rarely stood and fought set-piece battles at which the US would have excelled' (Frizzell 1977:77). North Vietnamese forces would have been decimated with the application of what is known as 'steel-to target' warfare, which consists of a combination-package or singular unit massive delivery of high-explosive munitions via sea-, air-, or ground-borne assets on a designated target (Lind 2005:12). Hence, the reason NV forces remained fluid and decentralized – eventually dictating in the majority of cases where, and when, a battle would take place – also assisted in the continual undermining of airpower's potency.

The key to the above statements is that non-State actors – such as IS – have, over time, moved toward asymmetrical warfare as a matter of survival, and because it allows close contact with the local populace. Whether IS will achieve its aims on the ground is a moot point and need not be debated here, other than to state that their success will depend on an overall regional acceptance of their cause. More to the point, whilst the West has remained conjoined to the traditional use of airpower, insurgents have modified their methods and, in the face of challenging the nation-state to fight in wars of a 'third way/third kind' [8], the need to indulge in 'low-intensity' [9] warfare is increased – a point proven in the current tactics of IS. Airpower has insignificant long-term impact on these types of tactics and strategies, whether waged against a Western or non-Western nation-state – as was proven in the Russian-Afghan War (1979-1989) (Taylor 2014). Another major issue that is generated by and informs repercussions to airpower's capacity is the direct reaction to its use by the non-military populace and other peripheral actors. Airpower's scope, penetration, and destructive powers inevitably draw other actors into a conflict – often as a result of air-to-ground engagements. The evidence suggests that an offshoot of airpower's use is that it actively encourages non-State actors to a greater sense of purpose, enabling the 'cause' of the conflict to expand extramurally to the kinetic boundaries of a war. In this case, raising the ire of other Islamic peoples to the extent of them making the journey to Iraq in order to fight for the IS cause. Airpower often has, as its by-product, prodigious infrastructure destruction and, as alluded to in the above-mentioned, often incurs what is known colloquially as 'collateral damage': the deaths of civilians. The deliberate targeting of infrastructure, however, also has a long history, one that has its roots firmly in WWII – it was then referred to as 'putting the city in the streets' (Beever 2012:503). The purpose of this tactic is the hindering of further enemy activity, ensuring the complete disruption of movement, and of creating a population that becomes progressively non-functional. However, the exceptional disadvantage for State actors – in particular Western nation-states – is that this type of destruction is able to be exploited by groups such as IS, because it neatly befits a definition raised by Kilcullen and is summed up in the statement with regards to battling insurgencies: 'injudicious use of firepower creates blood feuds, homeless people and societal disruption that perpetuates the insurgency' (Kilcullen 2010:30). Herein lies the enormous problem that airpower actively contributes to, and which must inevitably spill out into communities far beyond the war zone(s) of IS. It appears, however, politicians are

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reluctant to admit any detrimental aspects associated with the utilization of airpower, and this is a folly which is now able to be addressed.

Conclusion

Returning to an aforementioned Vietnam War for a final perspective, it is relevant to mention the lessons of airpower's limitations and specific problematics as a tactic and strategy have been known to Western—and other governments—for decades yet airpower remains a consistent part of the arsenal that Western nations immediately deploy as a control mechanism in a conflict. There is no greater example of the negative affect airpower can have than to observe that during the Vietnam War, NV forces referred to American B-52 raids as 'recruitment drives' (Mockatis 1999:132). Based on the evidence, Western leaders' refuse to acknowledge any negative elements in the deployment of strike-fighters, and the intense animosity it engenders within the overall populace. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of airpower's use is that it is still able to generate a belief, as it did in the Vietnam War, that it is a panacea to what is driving a conflict, at least from a Western perspective. An analogy of this is observable in the use of airpower – in this case, referring to the mobility and firepower helicopters offered – generating an unintended 'knock-on' effect in which American commanders were deluded into thinking that they could focus on operations and ignore the political and social issues associated with an unconventional war (Murray & Parker 1995:350). There is evidence that a similar chain of events is generating a comparable outcome, as addressing the ingrained political issues is given scant attention. To be sure, the issues of relevance that come into play as a war progresses are not only military, as war is a multi-faceted event. Airpower, however, in the Vietnam War continually gained status and became part of a grand strategy, and was able to overshadow other vital elements of the war. The above evidence suggests the current Australian government – and other allied Western powers – are investing in an outdated model of what airpower can *actually* achieve, whilst the problems being generated by its use are being expediently disregarded. What is more, the evidence of airpower's shortcomings, which have been widely available to government strategists and politicians for decades, as has an understanding of the evolution of wars and warfare, are being ignored.

Finally, underpinning the aforementioned is also that Western governments, in general, have a poor understanding of how and why conflicts start, escalate, and continue. This is astutely addressed by Holsti in comparing the 'historical norm' of wars, which in contemporary times no longer applies. Wars, up until WWII, consisted of one or more sides declaring their intent – such as Nazi Germany declaring war in Europe, and England responding with their own set of demands. In the post-WWII world, however, Holsti avers, 'a typical war since 1945 has a very different profile [than those that had gone before]. No single crisis precipitates them, and they typically do not start at a particular date. There are no declarations of war, and there are no seasons for campaigning, and few end in peace treaties' (Holsti 1996:20). With this in mind, Western governments should acknowledge that wars and warfare have changed considerably, have the potential of dragging on for decades, and that the use of airpower – whether legitimate or illegitimate – has consequences far beyond the actual zone-of-conflict. Moreover, it has the potential of adding to an ongoing hatred of the West (and its governance practise) which, in turn, may override any negative actions of insurgencies – in this case IS – and may not be able to be contained. Regardless, of the evolution of war and warfare, Western political leaders – including Australia – should not embrace the 'can do' elements airpower offers, and seek longer-term policies which inevitably would not have the volatile backlashes associated with its use.

Notes

[1] Western civilisation and what it represents is a vast and complex subject and fraught with interpretation. A succinct reference to this is only needed here in order to instil an understanding of how it became so expansive in its mechanisms that allowed this to prosper. Stearns uses the Industrial Revolution to make a point about what the West 'comprises.' Stearns avers industrialization 'extended a Western commitment to using technology as a measure of social progress. The impulse to deplore other societies as backward because they lagged behind Western industrialization represented a further step is [sic] what was already a well-established impulse... [and moreover being Western] now depended on claiming unchallenged world supremacy' (Stearns 2003:105-108).

[2] Strategic bombing refers to 'attacks far behind the battlefield to destroy military targets, which can be anything

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from a munitions dump to a weapons factory to a railway station; anything that will enhance and support an enemy's war effort' (Knell 2003: 52).

[3] '1935-40; German, equivalent to *Blitz* lightning + *Krieg* war' (Dictionary.com).

[4] The German military's push into Eastern Europe, and the role airpower played, can be seen in the 1942 *Operation Bustard Hunt*. In May-July of 1942, the Luftwaffe air wings *Fliegerkorps VIII* and *Fliegerführer Süd* reported bombing Sevastapol and ports in the Kerch Straits, 'sinking 68,450 tons of enemy shipping... and two submarines... critically damaged another submarine... and less seriously damaging a large number of ships including 42,000 tonnes of merchant shipping, one heavy cruiser, one light cruiser, four submarines and a tug... *Fliegerführer Süd* also reported that it shot down as many as 204 enemy fighters and bombers and smashed another 30 on the ground... It knocked out no fewer than 64 tanks damaged another 29, put 98 trucks of the road for good, and left a further 36 damaged' (Hayward 1998: 78).

[5] The 'punishment phase' of aerial bombardment is designed to 'inflict enough pain on enemy civilians to overwhelm their territorial interests' (Pape 1996: 59).

[6] A 'set-piece' battle is a method of warfare that is a uniquely Western way of warfare, one in which the enemy is progressively engaged in face-to-face encounters along a defined perimeter which allows for the opponent to be outgunned – usually via artillery or some type of human mass assault of an opponent (Coker 2002: 102-103).

[7] Asymmetrical warfare, in contemporary times, has aspects of allowing a situation to be developed where 'an adversary, is able to take advantage of its strengths and an opponent's weakness.' This stated, a microcosm of this in contemporary times is that of terrorism, which acts '*outside the limits imposed on the use of force*', which is the use of asymmetry in conflict (Barnett 2003: 53). Emphasis in original.

[8] A war of the 'third kind' is a complex event and has a multitude of factors involved, however, IS would befit the following: the 'deadly game [of direct combat and psycho-political interplays] is played in every home, church, government office, school, highway, and village.' Kalevi Holsti. *The State, War, and the State of War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 36-39. Expanding on this description, it is also helpful to note the following: 'in wars of the third kind there are no fronts, no campaigns, no bases, no uniforms, no publicly displayed honors, no points *d'appui* [pressure points], and no respect for the territorial limits of states.' Martin Van Creveld. *The Transformation of War*. New York: Free Press, 1991, 206. Emphasis in original.

[9] According to Thompsen, 'low-intensity' conflict is associated with a 'diverse range of politico-military activities less intense than modern conventional warfare. The types of conflict most frequently associated with the concept are insurgency and counterinsurgency and terrorism and counterterrorism' (Thompsen 1989:2).

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About the author:

Strobe Driver completed a PhD in War Studies in 2010 and since then has been writing on War, Conflict, Terrorism and Asia-Pacific Security. During 2018 he was awarded a year-long Taiwan, ROC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fellowship to write an independent analysis of Taiwan – China relations with a focus on when and whether a conflict would break out. The analysis is entitled 'Asia-Pacific and Cross-Strait Machinations: Challenges for Taiwan in the Nascent Phase of Pax-Sino.' All other writings by Strobe can be found on his blog.