Viewpoints

The Renaissance of Air Power

By Flight Lieutenant Sandy McKenzie

Introduction

Martin Van Creveld's characteristically provocative assault on air power, published earlier this year in the RUSI Journal,[1] is consistent with his intellectual iconoclasm in the field of military affairs.[2] His argument, namely that the utility derived from air power is diminishing, comes at a significant time. Financial constraint, and ongoing reflection on a decade of costly 'small wars'[3], would appear to lend weight to the assertion that modern air forces have become little more than expensive and baroque arsenals. This analysis offers potentially comforting, but ultimately misleading, recommendations to policy makers keen to untie themselves from expensive future equipment programs. However, the argument is also ideologically pre-determined and reliant on the use of a selective data set. Arguing that air power spiralled into terminal decline in the era of nuclear weapons Van Creveld fails to credit feats of deterrence achieved by air power during conventional conflict[4] and underplays the role of air power in enabling counterinsurgency operations in the past 60 years. For example, as James Corum argues, 'while there is no air power solution to counter-insurgency, there is certainly a large role for air power. Air power can bring firepower, transport, reconnaissance and constant presence to the fight; and these are all things that the counter-insurgency force needs'.[5] The subsequent analysis will support this, and will further argue that air power is enjoying a renaissance in contemporary fields of conflict and is likely to offer wide employability in future expeditionary endeavours.

Contemporary Conflict

Like many naysayers, Van Creveld's pessimistic interpretation of military intervention in Libya appears to have been somewhat premature;[6] indeed, serious commentators are already talking

about Libyan operations as a 'blueprint for the future'.[7] The absence of a requirement for costly and perhaps counterproductive western military occupation; the genuine desire for (limited) external support from an established local resistance; regional endorsement and broader legal legitimacy via the UN; and pragmatic European military co-operation within the NATO alliance have provided a steady foundation for qualitative and 'game changing' western military support.[8] The establishment of a transitional government has not been achieved by air power alone; but importantly air power has provided the critical enabler to local ground forces. Vitally, this has been provided at range by a combination of land-based and maritime air assets that have *inter alia*; supplied Libyan rebels and civilians; evacuated foreign nationals; denied military equipment to the Gaddafi regime; and provided critical intelligence to rebel forces. As recent RUSI analysis suggests, 'the Libya campaign has been a salutary reminder of how a broad spectrum of military capabilities are usually required to address any modern conflict. In this one, air power, and the assumption of air superiority, has re-emerged as a critical factor'.[9] Of course, this model of intervention is not unique; indeed there are important parallels to be drawn when comparing recent events in Libya with other conflicts.

The initial intervention in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 is perhaps the most representative comparison. The combination of air power, clandestine intelligence and special-forces delivered impressive results in routing the Taleban and providing political space in what remained a deeply divided country.[10] Subsequent political engagement has failed to generate the necessary consensus, and western hubris has arguably complicated the prospect of a 'solution' in Afghanistan,[11] but that is not the fault of air power *per se*. Indeed having been the most suitable means to bridge Afghanistan's numerous and challenging dimensions of strategy during the overthrow of the Taleban,[12] air power has remained a vital tool in the subsequent pursuit of counter terrorism and counter insurgency objectives. Tactical outposts are often dependant on helicopter resupply, partnered units rely on air-delivered precision guided munitions and intelligence collection increasingly relies on a range of sophisticated systems attached to persistent platforms loitering in the Afghan sky. Indeed as the strategist Colin Gray attests, air power is quite literally essential in counter insurgency warfare.[13] Clearly there are occasions when civilian casualties, caused by air delivered munitions, undermine ISAF's population-centric approach; but the means of delivery is often irrelevant, the effect of aggressive house searches or collateral damage caused by ground forces is equally as damaging. Ultimately, whilst 'unintended wars of choice',[14] such as the ambitious ongoing counter insurgency efforts in Afghanistan, may be of questionable strategic logic, they would be exponentially more difficult, and costly, without the critical contribution of air power.

The likelihood that such 'wars of choice' will become as unaffordable as they are unpopular illuminates the likely future utility of air power assets operating discretely and at range. Devoid of a nationally embraced political compromise, air power will likely be the key force multiplier that will define NATO's enduring partnership with Afghanistan, along with Special Forces and military trainers. This commitment, representing a much smaller footprint than current force levels, will offer two primary functions. First, it will satisfy the political lobby

in Kabul that have consistently demanded the enduring means to qualitatively overmatch insurgent capability.[15]

In tandem with Special Forces and legacy indigenous forces, air power will provide this. Second, and linked to the ongoing campaign against Al Qaeda-linked extremists operating in the largely ungoverned spaces of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, air power (in tandem with clandestine human intelligence and national signals intelligence) will remain the means of choice for gathering intelligence on and taking action against those that continue to threaten global security.[16] Far from being marginal to the ongoing and future mission in central Asia, it is almost impossible to conceive of any future engagement in the region that doesn't utilise the capabilities offered by air assets. Indeed, turning to the Middle-East, should Iran continue to pursue a uranium enrichment project contrary to the will of the International Community, air power will be a central pillar of contingencies generated by military planners responsible for delivering interdiction or deterrence based responses. This should hardly surprise members of the RAF who have contributed to coalition air operations in the Middle East for over 20 years.

Lessons from History

Given the self-evident utility of air power in contemporary conflict, it is worth considering its role in post-Cold War conflicts other than the headline grabbing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such a consideration exposes both the wide employability of air power and reminds us of some of the axiomatic limitations that are as true now as they were at the dawn of manned flight. The air campaign in Kosovo neatly fulfils both criteria. The 78 day air campaign aimed to coercively change the behaviour of Milosevic's government. However, critically, it was the explicit threat of committing ground forces, as well as an implicit understanding that Russia would not intervene on their behalf, that wielded most leverage on an embattled Serbian leadership.[17] However, critiques of air power's supposed failure to deliver strategic effect through coercive bombing are guilty of tactical thinking.[18] Ultimately, air power helped as a contributing means to a joint campaign that achieved the desired strategic effect; regardless of the 'pyrrhic' nature of NATO's eventual victory.[19] Devoid of the wider political and military context, air power could achieve little more than isolated tactical effect. The same can be said for the contribution of air power in the initial stages of intervention in the Bosnian conflict. This serves to remind us that air power is essentially a dimension of strategy in its own right; one that cannot achieve strategic effect in isolation, but one that must be resourced when considering the military means necessary to achieving policy ends.

Indeed air power has been a pivotal ingredient in force packages designed to achieve a myriad of effects over the past 20 years. Whilst the first Gulf War is often viewed as the 'last hurrah' of inter state industrial conflict,[20] the efficacy of air power in routing Saddam's military capability ensured air superiority for ground forces. Such relative freedom of action has arguably been taken for granted by ground forces in the 2 decades that have passed. Other militaries, operating in more 'conventional' environments, have been more cognisant of the requirement.

For example, Russia's adventure in Georgia in 2008 was supported by considerable air power assets.[21] Indeed, also in 2008, the unique combination of qualities offered by air power resulted in its selection as the strategic lever of choice by the Israeli military against a clandestine nuclear facility in Syria.[22] Less evident but nonetheless relevant examples also abound. British intervention in Sierra Leone relied heavily on the manoeuvrability offered by air power whilst humanitarian assistance in Central Asia and South America has depended heavily on recourse to air mobility. In short, air power continues to be in high demand across its four fundamental roles; control of the air, air mobility, intelligence and situational awareness and attack.[23]

Renaissance of Air Power

As outlined above, the 'New World Disorder' that unfolded in the aftermath of the Cold War has provided numerous examples in which the utility of air power is evident across the spectrum of conflict. However, it is in the future that air power is likely to prosper most as postmodern governments shy away from expensive, inconclusive and arguably counter-productive counter insurgency campaigns. Air power will never succeed in delivering policy ends in isolation, but given the necessary preconditions, as illuminated in Libya, and hard headed objectives, it will offer politicians the opportunity to seize 'relative advantage' in crises that are too important to ignore, but too costly to fully resource. Change will be necessary in order that a true renaissance can flourish. Indeed 'algorithmic warfare' and data exploitation will become far more challenging than, for example, operating remotely piloted vehicles in high threat environments. Nonetheless, air power will remain the primary means of operating at range, in support of indigenous forces, interdicting a belligerent's military capability, or containing rogue states.

As events in Libya have proven, the renaissance may just be beginning. Recent analysis has concluded that, in Libya, 'foreign air power comprised the rebels' asymmetric advantage, without which their uprising would almost certainly have been quelled by Gaddafi's forces. For proponents of air power, the outcome illustrated its judicious application, showing the way for foreign intervention in future local conflicts in spite of the general fatigue with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.'[24] Indeed, the current Chief of the Air Staff appears to have been particularly prescient when arguing in early 2010 that:

> 'Unfortunately, it's only too easy for a foreign contingent to be portrayed as an alien and occupying force; it's much better for the majority of 'boots on the ground' to be indigenous, supported and assisted by appropriate and highly trained specialists and Special Operations Forces with access to the higher-tech capabilities – including air and space power – that are difficult for local security forces to acquire and operate.'[25]

Ultimately, air power will never remove the requirement for complimentary land and maritime components; however to suggest it is in decline fails to grasp the new dawn of strategic calculation that confronts us. Alexander de Seversky famously argued that 'air power speaks a strategic language'.[26] He could have had no idea how correct he would be.

Notes

[1] Van Creveld, Martin, 'The Rise and Fall of Airpower' RUSI J 156:3, Jun/Jul 11, pp 48-54.
[2] See McKenzie, Alexander, 'New Wars Fought Amongst the People: Transformed by Old Realities', Defence Studies 11:4, 2011, forthcoming.
[3] Chalmers, Malcolm, 'Keeping our Powder Dry? UK Defence Policy Beyond Afghanistan', RUSIJ 156:1, Feb/Mar 11, pp 20-28.
[4] For example, the limited resistance offered by the Iraqi Air Force in 1991 and 2003 was largely the result of coercive deterrence.
[5] Corum, James, 'Air Power and Counter-Insurgency: Back to the Basics' in Hayward ed, 'Air power, insurgency and the War on Terror', RAFCAPS, 2009, pp 205-220.
[6] Van Creveld, Martin, 'Lets Drop the Big One Now', Infinity Journal online, 21 Jun 11. Available at: **http://www.infinityjournal.com/article/25/Lets_Drop_the_Big_One_Now?message=Welcome%20back.%20You%20have%20successfully%20logged%20in**.
[7] Ashdown, Paddy, 'Ray-Bans and pick-ups: this is the future', The Times, 26 Aug 11.
[8] Zakaria, Fareed, 'How the Lessons of Iraq Paid Off in Libya', Time Magazine, 25 Aug 11.
[9] Accidental Heroes. Britain, France and the Libya Operation. An interim RUSI campaign report, Sep 11.
[10] The most readable account of this remains: Schroen, Gary, 'First In', Presido Press, New York, 2005.
[11] For a fascinating insight into this see: Morgan Edwards, Lucy, 'The Afghan Solution', Palgrave, London, 2011.
[12] On Dimensions of Strategy see: Gray, Colin, 'Modern Strategy', OUP, Oxford, 1999, pp 16-47.
[13] Gray, Colin, 'Understanding Air Power Bonfire of the Fallacies', Strategic Studies Quarterly, winter 2008, p 79.
[14] Milevski, Lucas, 'A Collective Failure of Grand Strategy', RUSI J, 156:1, Feb/Mar 2011 pp 30-33.
[15] A familiar lament from security ministers such as Bismullah Khan is the Afghan Army's lack of airpower.
[16] Inkster, Nigel, 'The Death of Osama Bin Laden', Survival, 53:10, pp 5-10. Inkster concludes with the sage recommendation that, 'the focus should be on how the capabilities and skills which delivered the successful operation against Osama bin Laden, which needs to be seen not as a lucky one-off but rather as an outstanding example of what good intelligence can achieve given time and adequate resources, can be maintained and deployed on a generic basis against a range of potential threats and risks.'
[17] Jackson, Michael, 'Soldier', Transworld, London, 2007, p 247.
[18] For a concise consideration of both arguments see Byman, Daniel and Waxman, Matthew, 'Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate', International Security, 24:4, 2000, pp 5-38.
[19] Wyllie, James, 'The Kosovo Intervention and European Security: NATO's Pyrrhic Victory', in V. Koutrakou (ed), 'Contemporary issues and debates in EU policy The European Union and international relations', Manchester : Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004, pp 23-37.
[20] Smith, Rupert, 'The Utility of Force', Allen Lane, London, 2005.
[21] Vendil Pallin, Carolina and Westerlund, Fredrik, 'Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences', Small Wars and Insurgencies, 20:2, p 406.

[22] 'Israel strike 'targeted Syrian nuclear reactor'', The Telegraph, 14 Oct 07.
[23] AP3000 4th ed.
[24] IISS Strategic Comments 17:34, 'Early Military Lessons from Libya', Sep 2011.
[25] Dalton, Stephen, 'Dominant Air Power in the Information Age', IISS Address 15 Feb 11. Available at: **http://www.iiss.org/recent-key-addresses/air-chief-marshal-sir-stephen-dalton/**
[27] De Seversky, Alexander, 'Victory Through Airpower', Simon and Schuster, New York, 1942.