

Where are the air power strategists?

I very much enjoyed reading Gp Capt Ian Shield's thought provoking article 'Where are the Air Power Strategists?' in the Spring Edition of the *Air Power Review*, and note your challenge for letters on this subject. In his article Gp Capt Shields asked what was the 'art' of air power, and where were the air power strategists to compare with Corbett and Mahan, and Jomini and Clausewitz as maritime and land warfare strategists? He neatly categorises the development of air power into three eras: a 'strategic effect' era up until the end of the Second World War, a 'lines on maps' era from 1945 to the 1991 Gulf War, and a 'third age' era, still underway, of agile air power, characterised by space and networked enabled capability. He suggests four reasons why we have yet to capture the art of air power: our age, our military origins, technology, and the uniquely joint nature of air. Gp Capt Shields argues that it is necessary to 'capture the very essence of air power' and 'as air power proponents we risk becoming mired in tactical effect, wedded to today's battle.' He goes on to say 'if the third dimension is not to be regarded as merely an adjunct to the efforts of the other Services, where is air power's unique and compelling voice?'

I suggest Gp Capt Shields very nearly answers his own questions. His 'third age' provides the opportunity to 'capture the very essence of air power' achieving effect at the strategic, operational and tactical levels, and co-ordinated with joint and component command as appropriate. Hence, the era of separate strategists for each

environment has been and gone, though a 'lines on maps' mindset still limits co-ordination.

The direct equivalents of Corbett, Mahan, Clausewitz and Jomini were the air power theorists of Gp Capt Shield's 'strategic effect' era, such as Douhet and Trenchard. They viewed their own environments as separate and dominant in that environment. Clausewitz considered the nature of war and the relationship between politics and war, but as a Prussian student of Napoleon he focused on land warfare and ignored maritime and economic warfare. Mahan on the other hand believed controlling sea-borne commerce was critical to domination in war. Douhet sought victory through coercive, morale bombing enabled by Command of the Air – which would now be judged indiscriminate and therefore illegitimate unless in supreme emergency. Warden is perhaps best viewed as a descendent of this 'strategic effect' era, and not from the 'lines on maps' era as suggested. As Gp Capt Shields's points out, it is air power that has enabled environments to project power in other environments. Clausewitz and Mahan predate this and so we should not look for contemporary comparisons.

The contemporary 'art' of air power is therefore exploiting air power within a joint context. Yet the 'lines on maps' era is not yet over. For example Johnson's *Learning Large Lessons* explores contemporary friction between the US Army and Air Force in joint war-fighting.¹ His analysis of post-Cold War conflicts suggests a shift in the relative war-fighting roles of land and air power, most apparent in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Air power

dominates the strategic and operational levels of war fighting against large, conventional enemy forces, whereas exploitation at the tactical level is the domain of land power. However land commanders demand large areas of operations, pushing out the fire support co-ordination line, in order to mount deep, shaping attacks with their own long-range missile fire and attack helicopters, when air power would be more effective, and indeed these 'lines on maps' make air power less effective. Johnson maintains that the authority to establish fire support coordination measures that affect the theatre campaign plan should be withheld by the joint force commander.

NATO's Joint Air Power Competence Centre (JAPCC) has tried to capture what Gp Capt Shields's describes as the enduring 'essence of air power' in our recent NATO Future Joint Air and Space Power concept.² We describe the enduring nature of air and space power in three levels or categories of activity – Deep Persistent Operations, Control of the Air (and Space), and Joint Enabling activities. All three are critical to any joint operation across the spectrum of conflict, including contemporary operations countering irregular activity.

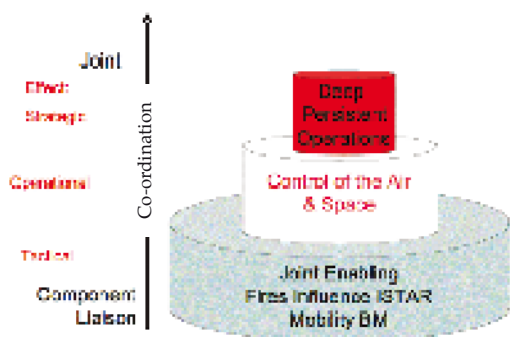


Figure 1 – The nature of air and space power

The relationship between these categories, the degree to which the manoeuvre is co-ordinated between components and the strategic, operational and tactical focus for each category is shown below.

Essentially air power conducts deep persistent operations co-ordinated by the joint force commander. Air is the supported component for delivering control of the air and space, co-ordinated at the operational-level, and supports maritime and land with tactical-level joint enabling activities. Plainly our categories of air power are not dissimilar to the explanation of the core capabilities of air power found in AP3000, but the key is to put them in context of level of warfare and degree of co-ordination required. This in turn allows a model to be constructed to provide the required command, information and intelligence, battlespace management, liaison and co-ordination, and exploit network enabling, and so on.

The term 'air power strategist' is obsolete, for the reasons I have argued, as it is wedded to the 'strategic effect' era. Instead, the focus is on air power within the joint context, such as the JAPCC thoughts outlined above and by the work I know Gp Capt Shields is doing at the DCDC, that 'captures the very essence of air power'. This is not 'wedded to today's battle', but is enduring – not merely an adjunct to the efforts of other Services – and reflects air power's unique contribution.

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Notes

1 David E. Johnson, *Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Roles of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post-Cold War Era* (RAND Corporation, 2007) at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG405.1/> accessed 15 July 2008

2 See <http://www.japcc.de/projects.html>

*Dir Def S (RAF)**Comment*

Group Captain Alexander makes some very interesting points in his response to Group Captain Shields's excellent paper. It is worth reading his comments in conjunction with Air Commodore Colley's article in this edition of *Air Power Review*. Both Group Captain Alexander and Air Commodore Colley highlight the primacy of air power at the strategic and operational levels and particularly in 'Third Generation Warfare',¹ where air is being increasingly used as a substitute for more traditional methods of firepower support.

This was acknowledged at the RUSI conference in June, where the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Richard Dannatt, explained the reorganisation of the British Army into a uniform brigade structure, accepting that the heavier firepower elements – tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and self-propelled artillery – would now be spread more thinly across the brigades on the basis of 'our increased confidence of delivery of effect from the air'.² However, the effective application of air power at the tactical level in largely static, Phase 4-type stabilisation operations in current 'Fourth Generation Warfare' is more problematic, and therefore more contentious.

Clearly, there are strong parallels between the model that NATO's Joint Air Power Competence Centre has developed to explain the utility of air power in a joint context and Air Commodore Colley's proposal to use the 'joint action' model as a framework. *Air Power Review* would welcome alternative views or interventions into this critical debate for the future of the delivery of air power effect.

Notes

1 Thomas Hammes categorises warfare in 4 epochs: 'Third Generation Warfare' is the conventional, mechanised and mobile, all arms warfare developed since 1918, whereas 'Fourth Generation Warfare' is Rupert Smith's 'war amongst the people', the net-worked, irregular and asymmetric warfare experienced on current operations. Hammes, Thomas X., *The Sling and the Stone*, (Zenith Imprint: New York, 2006).

2 Quoted in 'British Army proposes to revamp brigade structure', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Vol. 45, Issue 28, 9 July 2008, p. 4.

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