

Viewpoints

Airpower and Afghanistan

By Air Commodore Dave Best

Air Cdre David Best spent 2011 working as ISAF's Director of Air Operations and Plans within the ISAF Joint Command, Kabul. Responsible for day to day running of coalition air operations throughout Afghanistan, he also made sure that when major land operations were being planned, air experts were fully involved so that the full range of coalition air capability available was understood and used effectively. Looking to the future, he was responsible for air aspects of transition planning – as well as thinking about what air support might be required after security responsibility has been fully handed to the Afghan Security Forces at the end of 2014.

Introduction

This piece is the result of 12 months in Afghanistan during 2011, a year which was the most challenging and fulfilling of my 29 years service in the Royal Air Force. Airpower (in its widest sense) is a crucial component of NATO's comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, providing mobility, running the strategic airheads, designing and running Afghan airspace and operating powerful intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities as well as delivering kinetic and non-kinetic air effects in support of military operations across a vast geographic area.

Senior leaders in theatre recognise airpower as a key asymmetric advantage, and one which allows ISAF forces to punch well above their weight. As a senior US Army general put it to me: *'the thing that allows our troops to fight insurgents of 4 – 5 times their own numbers is airpower. I'm not prepared to take more risk on that'*. The particular strength of fast air, which is used in close coordination with armed UAVs and attack helicopters, is its ability to cover large distances, often across major mountain ranges, very quickly and then deliver a range of

precise effects to suit the situation on the ground. This makes it an extremely efficient way of providing support not only to pre-planned operations, but also to troops who run into unexpectedly heavy opposition. In fact, on many occasions, the mere presence of a fast jet is enough to defuse a developing situation, and this ability to take the pressure off friendly troops without firing a gun or dropping a bomb can be very useful, especially when the situation is confused and ground commanders need a way of de-escalating a developing situation. The fact that the aircraft can also provide troops with a real-time surveillance picture is also very important in allowing commanders to assess options and determine the best way to deal with events.

By operating a central tasking system for all fast jets in theatre, regardless of their nationality, ISAF is able to make very efficient use of a relatively small number of aircraft. It is also able to direct the nearest aircraft to respond to a developing situation; the aim is to have an aircraft overhead troops who are in contact with the enemy anywhere in Afghanistan within a matter of minutes – 24 hrs a day, every day. This also includes the ability to provide air support to Afghan forces if the need should arise – a very important development and one which will help to ensure that as they continue to develop their own capabilities and increasingly operate on their own in difficult areas, Afghan forces receive the support that they need.

As the capability offered by unmanned aircraft increases and the surveillance capability of fast jets gets ever better, I see a blurring of roles between what we currently label as Close Air Support and ISR. In terms of tasking, I didn't care whether the pilot was in the aircraft or whether he was in a control cabin several thousand miles away. My job was to make sure that we provided the right effect in the right place at the right time. That sometimes meant using a Reaper for close air support and sometimes it meant getting a fast jet with a video downlink capability overhead a particular location as fast as possible. Whilst unmanned aircraft are able to stay aloft for many hours on end, they carry limited weapons, cannot cover distance quickly and are significantly more weather limited than manned aircraft; they therefore perfectly complement the fast jets, which carry a wide range of weapon effects but which even with air to air refuelling (another critical air component role), are limited to shorter sortie lengths. We therefore worked hard to make sure that our tasking methods were able to quickly harness the strengths of all of the aircraft available. This policy also extended to more 'exotic' surveillance capabilities, such as the UK's ASTOR system. Proper use of this type of scarce but powerful asset relies not only on its allocation to high priority tasks across the country, but also on making sure that a number of different surveillance assets are coordinated, so that a wide area can be monitored and specific 'tips' given to more tactical platforms in order that they can be focussed on the correct areas. The coordination of the bewildering number of ISR aircraft in theatre, ranging from large strategic types based out of country all the way down to small UAVs operated by land units, presented quite a problem. However, recent experiences of close cooperation between specialised platforms proved very successful in building accurate intelligence pictures of insurgent networks, thereby allowing ground units to plan operations against high value targets very precisely.

Another area in which air makes a crucial contribution to the campaign is that of mobility. In such a vast country with some of the highest mountain ranges in the world and where the ever-present IED threat makes road travel problematic, ISAF relies on air mobility to a very large extent. All 49 nations in the coalition bring their troops and a significant proportion of their logistic needs into theatre by air and there is little alternative to air travel when movement over significant distances is needed in theatre. Helicopters have, of course, proved to be an absolutely critical capability, not only for the conduct of operations, but also for routine movement of troops, the provision of 'golden hour' medical care and the re-supply of remote forward bases. Despite the high number of helicopters in country, this is a capability which is always in short supply. Consequently, ISAF rotary wing planners are currently looking at ways to improve the efficiency of rotary wing operations, including a country-wide analysis of the best way to employ contracted helicopter lift. Air delivery of supplies to remote bases from fixed wing aircraft is one very effective way to take some pressure off the helicopter assets, and this along with the development of low-cost parachutes, is why recent years have seen a huge increase in the number of air drop missions carried out – especially by the USAF. Also, as ISAF increasingly supports the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) as it moves through the transition of security from ISAF to Afghan forces, it is very important that Afghan ministers are seen, heard and understood by ordinary people throughout Afghanistan and this requires a significant air transport effort. Whilst the Afghan Air Force is able to support some of these needs, ISAF recognises the importance of assisting the government by flying its politicians around the country.

Turning to airspace, Afghanistan represents a complicated mix of ISAF military activity, Afghan Air Force activity, a bewildering range of contractors flying in support of the coalition and an increasing number of international and Afghan commercial airlines servicing both internal and international routes. Some of these operators have access to classified operational airspace plans and restrictions and some do not. With responsibility for airspace control falling to the air component, this makes the challenge of ensuring safe and efficient routing of aircraft a complex business, especially when it often becomes necessary to rapidly clear airspace in order to allow the delivery of weapons, either from aircraft or from artillery. The presence of a 24/7 AWACS capability is helping in this regard, as have airspace changes introduced following a major airspace study conducted in 2011. However, it is likely to be a long time before Afghanistan will be able to take responsibility for controlling its own airspace; this will remain a coalition responsibility for the foreseeable future, and certainly well beyond the 2014 date set for security transition in the land environment. However, improvements in Afghan airspace control are important because charges for international overflight of the country by airliners are a major source of revenue for the Afghan government, amounting to around \$60m in 2011.

And then, of course, there are the airfields. Afghanistan has 7 'Tier 1' airfields all of which are currently being run by military authorities: Kabul International and Kandahar are NATO run, Bagram is US run, Bastion is UK run, Herat is Italian run, Mazar-e Sharif is German run and Shindand (the Afghan Air Force Training Centre) is Afghan run with US assistance. These airfields

are not only fundamental to all ISAF operations in theatre, but are also a vital ingredient for enabling Afghanistan's future economic growth. Whilst the intention is to transition those airports with a clear commercial future to Afghan control, this is some way off at present and GIRoA will continue to need western assistance beyond 2014 if the aviation industry is to stand on its own feet. In the meantime it is highly likely that airfield operations will remain the responsibility of NATO and national western authorities as Afghan civil aviation legislation regulation and are developed and whilst the challenges of training Afghans to assume roles in airfield operations are tackled.

Future challenges for ISAF in the air environment are significant. Development of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) is progressing well, but is a major, long term undertaking. In fact, the AAF is not planned to reach maturity until at least 2016, 2 years after transition has occurred on the ground. Even then, the capability provided by the AAF will be largely one of mobility, with a limited light attack capability. It is clear therefore, given the smaller size of the AAF compared to ISAF's air presence, that the Afghan army will need to fight in a significantly different way to ISAF forces, making greater use of ground mobility and having less reliance on helicopters. Similarly, there will need to be a greater reliance on artillery than on airborne firepower, and since Afghan forces will have limited access to technological sources of intelligence, they will need to make more use of human sources of intelligence. In short, ISAF currently harnesses technology (much of it airborne) to provide an asymmetric advantage over Afghanistan's enemies, but Afghan Security forces will not have that benefit; they will fight much more symmetrically. However, given their understanding of local communities, customs and personalities, this plays to their natural strengths. It does, however, present a particular problem for ISAF as we move through transition. The challenge is to provide ISAF partner and mentor forces with the technological support which they need, whilst at the same time making sure that we train the Afghans to fight as they will fight, not as we fight.

So, whilst airpower will continue to be at the heart of ISAF operations, the next few years present some significant challenges. Firstly, ISAF forces must continue to be supported across all airpower roles whilst the land component draws down; the speed and mobility of air make it a real force multiplier and coalition forces will continue to expect rapid response – especially, perhaps in the areas of close air support and medical evacuation. However, at the same time, ISAF must ensure that it does not train Afghan Security Forces to rely on capabilities which may not be available to them after 2014. There will then be a gap to be bridged between the handover of security responsibility to GIRoA on the ground and the planned maturity date of the Afghan Air Force in 2016. And finally, Afghanistan will continue to rely on external support for a number of air capabilities for the foreseeable future if it is to expand its economy; airspace and airfield management being just 2 obvious but important examples.

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