

## US Air Power in Afghanistan: Balancing Kinetic Effects and Pitfalls

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There is not too encouraging news from the United States (US) war effort in Afghanistan. The problem that is obvious is the rising civilian death toll from air strikes. It is not something easy to fix, like tweaking strategy or inventing a new target sensor. The growing anger over the civilian casualties caused by US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) air strikes in Afghanistan poses major challenges for the US and its allies in the fight. It also involves a series of some real human tragedies. It raises issues far beyond after use of air strikes which affect overall pattern of operations. This is a legacy of combat experience that US have carried into the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Disregard for civilian lives in Afghanistan has worrying overtones as it was in Iraq.

Air Force officials say air strikes have been employed in Afghanistan in a new way.<sup>1</sup> During the opening phase of operations in Afghanistan, small teams of special operations forces slipped into Afghanistan and linked up with Northern Alliance forces to help oust Taliban regime and kill or capture Al Qaeda personnel. Among commandos were airmen who specialised in guiding air strikes. The problem of civilian casualties and collateral damage remains.

Issues shaping the future of the war are:

First, casualty estimates now available from the US and NATO/ISAF show that air strikes cause significant civilian deaths.

Second, casualty estimates do not come close to the measures of human suffering and psychological impact.

Third, all of these data are systematically manipulated and exaggerated, extending negative impact of air strikes.

Fourth, the final effects of lasting security after the air strikes phase of operations are not assured. It suggests that one of the key lessons of counterinsurgency operations of having 'boots on the ground' does apply. Air strikes and all forms of kinetic activity create resentment.

Fifth, the level of Afghan resentment and lack of confidence in NATO/ISAF have sufficient negative trends and the coming years will be critical in the effort to move beyond tactical victories with the impact of air strikes.

**Commanders have worried that air strikes can wound or kill innocent bystanders, setting back efforts to win support from locals. General David McKiernan, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, stated that Taliban seeks to create backlash against coalition efforts by using civilians as 'shields' and then give negative publicity**

Finally, there are two other related lessons regarding counterinsurgency and the use force – whether the air strikes or other forms of kinetic activity be able to take the initiative to meet both tactical needs and consider needs of the population. This requires the kind of intelligence and joint operations for integration between air and ground action.

### Civilian Casualties

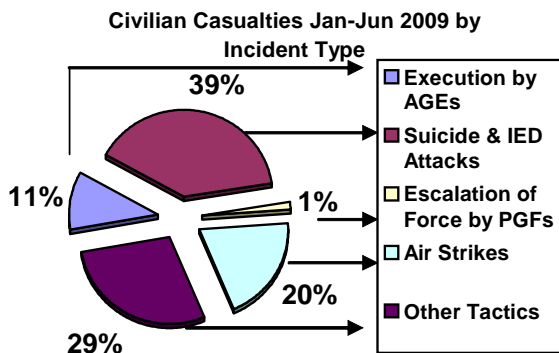
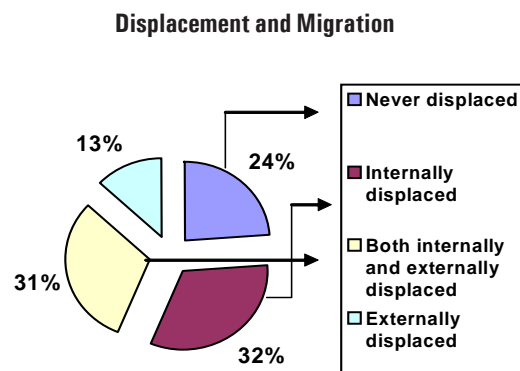
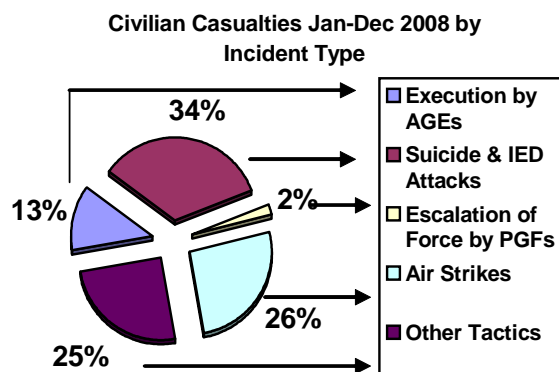
The armed conflict has intensified throughout Afghanistan with corresponding rise in civilian casualties and air strikes remain responsible for a very significant percentage of civilian deaths. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 552 civilian casualties in 2008. This constitutes 64% of the 828 non-combatant deaths and 26% of all civilians killed as a result of air strikes. Following the issuance of new tactical directive by Commander of ISAF on air strikes, there was reduction in civilian casualties. However, use of air strikes in civilian areas continues to claim a large percentage of civilian deaths. Between January and June 2009, UNAMA recorded 200 civilian deaths arising from air strikes. This represents approximately 20% of

the total number of 1013 non-combatants killed. These percentages are slightly lower than the figures recorded for the entire year of 2008. However, particular worry are events like on November 3, 2008 in Wach Bakhto village in Shawali Kot district, Kandahar province, which resulted in a toll of 37 civilians dead and 31 injured in an air-strike which information suggests may have erroneously targeted a wedding celebration.

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“hearts and minds”. There could be an argument in stating that ground operations also cause casualties but air strikes have a psychological impact in almost the same way air power is suppose to have a psychological effect on the insurgents. The young have never known Afghanistan to be at peace.<sup>2</sup> Like the physical scars, the mental scars also run deep. Two in three Afghans are believed to suffer from

depression.<sup>3</sup> In addition to fatalities as a direct result of repeated air strikes, civilians have suffered from loss of livelihood, displacement, destruction of property, as well as disruption of access to education, healthcare and essential services. This has resulted in reduction of humanitarian space.<sup>4</sup>



Source: See Ashley Jackson, “The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978-2009” a report by Oxfam International, Washington, 2009.

President Karzai has made it clear in a number of public statements that air strikes, which cause civilian casualties, undermine the objectives of the Government and public support for the international military forces.<sup>5</sup> There is a clear link between fear and anxiety, and associated insecurity. The example – air strikes: some individuals feel that the current air strikes brings up ‘bad memories’ of the pervasive and indiscriminate

bombardments by the Soviet forces during the Communist period.<sup>6</sup>

**Air strikes, media and response**

Commanders have worried that air strikes can wound or kill innocent bystanders, setting back efforts

Source: Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2008 and Mid Year Bulletin, 2009 prepared by UNAMA, Human Rights Unit, p.15 and p.9 respectively.

**Non Kinetic Effects**

The effects of air strikes causing civilian casualties leave a scar on the

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to win support from locals. General David McKiernan, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, stated that Taliban seeks to create backlash against coalition efforts by using civilians as 'shields' and then give negative publicity. This has led to the Air Force tightening its rules for strikes. General Stanley A. McChrystal, who replaced General David D. McKiernan in Afghanistan, also moved quickly to limit air strikes. Barack Obama's national security adviser, General James Jones ruled out ending air and drone strikes in Afghanistan on the grounds that "we can't fight with one hand tied behind our back".<sup>7</sup> But when the US military employs Apache helicopters, Predator drones armed with Hellfire missiles and F-16s in populated villages against those armed mainly with AK-47s and RPGs, it becomes disproportionate response – this is how the media perceives and the world view responds.

### **Air Strikes: Tactical Shift and Lasting Security**

Military commanders in Afghanistan reduced reliance on air strikes in 2008. This reflects the limitations of air power against a resilient insurgency. From 2004 to 2007, the overall tonnage of munitions dropped from planes rose from 163 tons to 1,956 tons, a 1,100% increase. However, the total tonnage dropped in 2008 fell to 1,314 tons, a 33% decrease. The limits of air power have also shown why more ground troops are needed to provide security.<sup>8</sup> While the fighting in Afghanistan intensified the number of bombs released decreased. Till September 2009 1,211 bombs were dropped according to Air Forces Central Command, almost 50% of previous figures. Also, air force responded to 1,752 calls from troops under fire which is 420 calls more than that of year 2008 for the same period.<sup>9</sup> Between 2006 and 2008, the number of bombs unleashed by US fighter jets against insurgents in Afghanistan doubled, from 2,644 in 2006 to 5,051 in 2008. But in the first six months of 2009, 2,011 munitions were dropped, a 24 percent decrease from the same period a year ago.<sup>10</sup> The reasons though obvious translate into the staying power of air force in counterinsurgency operations. Air power delivers, but it is ground troops which are seen to do the dirty job including making amends for collateral damage. The presence and visibility of air power in humanitarian cause during counterinsurgency gets limited. It is not without reason that President Barack Obama approved induction of 21,000 additional troops in addition to the 38,000 already present.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Air Strikes in Counterinsurgency - Strategic and Tactical**

General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, stated that tactical actions should not undermine strategic goals.<sup>12</sup> Military commanders with extensive experience in conventional and special operations have since been sent to look at the air strikes issue more broadly so that tactical actions do not undermine strategic objectives. Means have been defining goals, tactics driving strategy, and short-term necessities taking precedence over long-term priorities. Afghanistan is currently at a tipping point where international backers are openly challenging the US. The introduction of an Iraq-style surge of troops and limiting air strikes, will not significantly change the situation. Distances are large and troops positioned in far away places.<sup>13</sup> Air power will have to be used to respond to situations. The balance between kinetic and non-kinetic effects of air power have to be weighed very carefully as misjudgment in application of this power can have catastrophic outcome - may result into losing the strategic and final victory.

### **Kinetic and Non-kinetic: The Power Within**

Kinetic airpower is an important element of combined arms employment and also has a role in counterinsurgency operations. The need to provide close fire support to troops in contact with insurgents cannot be denied. Danger to own troops and that of civilians in close proximity also cannot be neglected.

If kinetic air power effects are to be applied then the insurgent is to be separated from the population. Whether this is achieved first by applying land power, followed by kinetic air power, and then continue with land operations, will be a question of operational imperative. Any air action that hurts the troops' relationship with the favourable minority will have negative effects on the strategic objective.

Collateral damage during air strike in Afghanistan has also occurred on close air support (CAS) missions during troops in contact situations rather than on preplanned interdiction missions.<sup>14</sup> This gives enough reasons to look into the non-kinetic benefits of air power. A number of non-lethal air power innovations prove far more prevalent than lethal fires, however, they will have to be represented with ingenuity and drive of the military establishment backed by the government. On a countrywide scale, fighter aircraft conducted infrastructure-security missions,

simultaneously fulfilling the strategic priority of protecting lifelines—oil and electrical systems—from insurgent attacks and the Combined Force Air Component Commander’s (CFACC) direction not to waste fuel, time, or effort in airborne-alert orbits. On a smaller scale, fighter crews conduct non-traditional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

In applying the non-kinetic applications there would be a need to ensure that some of air power’s traditional limitations are mitigated. The valuable air assets are scarce and need to be apportioned in the right way at the right level. Does that fit into a complex operating environment? One valuable answer available is getting enablers in the hands of tactical forces on the ground. Does this work against the model of centralised command and control? Will it match the pace that is needed to achieve in order to be affective? There would, however, definitely be a requirement to consider the balance between kinetic and non-kinetic activity and effect.

**Lessons and Pointers**

- Air power is vital and has to start from a strong position in the main effort of fighting the changing nature and methods of modern insurgencies. As an example, the Royal Air Force’s Air Transport fleet has 18 different aircraft types and each one of them is either currently deployed or has done so in the last 12 months.<sup>15</sup> Without these efforts air power and other combat capabilities would fall in very short order. The level of effort shouldered by state forces—especially air force—provides a conspicuous indicator and if the government cannot operate its own air force, it probably cannot blunt the psychological assault launched by insurgents.

- Discriminate use of force is critical. It underscores the importance and challenges of empirical data to evaluate the relative impact of other capabilities of air power, especially the non-kinetic, for conflict mitigation. The US restricted air strikes from piloted aircraft, but drones strikes have occurred in rapid succession. January 2010 saw 6 remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) strikes while in December 2009, 14 so-called RPA strikes took place.<sup>16</sup> Reasons could be many but fact of the matter revolves around increased lethality against significant collateral damage. Long term validation of cumulative damage caused by air strikes requires deliberation.

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- There is always relative air and ground contributions to intelligence. The ground forces have to be extremely careful with the intelligence being provided to them and in turn being validated.

27 civilians were killed and 14 wounded on February 21, 2010 in the central Daikondi province.<sup>17</sup> The air assets picked up movement of three vehicles and ground forces confirmed they were insurgents, and ordered air strike to go through.

- Integrating complementary capabilities of both air and land power in countering evolving forms of irregular warfare has operational hurdles. In the interdiction role, kinetic air power can be applied against targets that are preplanned. Collateral damage estimate and benefit of applying air power on a high value target based on intelligence will support strategic objectives. Baitullah Mehsud, former Pakistani Taliban leader was killed on August 5, 2009 when a drone fired two Hellfire missiles at a remote farmhouse bordering the Afghan border.<sup>18</sup>

- The options available for applying air power without application of air strikes would not prove counter productive, though they may not yield the desired results on all occasions. Individual air power capabilities, such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), mobility and lift have an obvious and enduring utility in support of all joint operations.

- Air power should contribute significantly to constructive effects through information operations, airlift, casualty evacuation, and other forms of humanitarian assistance. As long as insurgents do not make the mistake of massing forces to confront ground forces, lethal air attacks will probably yield no results but on the contrary bolster the insurgents’ cause. The forces should, however, retain capability to balance the kinetic and non-kinetic effects of applying air power. Pentagon data indicated that the percentage of sorties sent out that resulted in air strikes has also declined, albeit modestly, to 5.6 percent from 6 percent. According to military’s own air-power summaries, it has been analysed that when the planes or helicopters

arrive, they simply perform shows of force, or drop flares rather than munitions; it is only a matter of time before the Taliban see flares and flyovers for what they are: empty threats.<sup>19</sup> Non-kinetic options may be more attractive and relevant in counterinsurgency but will have to

rely on the *big stick* for their credibility.

- Air and space platforms must be tailored to match unconventional and small scale of the counterinsurgency effort. This does not mean the platforms must be “low-tech,” They have to perform missions required in counterinsurgency rather than adapting ‘large war’ capabilities to the small war environment. Changing tactics, techniques, and procedures will take time as it is not easy for crews trained to put maximum firepower on target.

There is no one solution which can produce decisive results and provide a net reduction in casualties and human suffering, and a lasting victory. However, one can indicate a different perspective and additional steps to ensure that air power is used in ways that limit casualties but yet able to foster peace.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Christian Lowe, “Cleared Hot: How the Corps wants to re-invent close air support”, at <http://www.airforcetimes.com/legacy/new/0-AIRPAPER-1042520.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Jackson, “The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978-2009” a Report by Oxfam International, Washington, 2009, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.15.

<sup>4</sup> *idbi.* p.18.

<sup>5</sup> 2009 Report and “US to Review Afghan Air Strike” at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8042642.stm>

<sup>6</sup> Ashley Jackson, n.2. p.21.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Foxley, “Air Strikes in Afghanistan: Unacceptable to say ‘unacceptable’...?”, posted in [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

<sup>8</sup> Tom Vanden Brook, “Fewer air strikes in Afghanistan mirror tactical shift” at [www.usatoday.com/news/military](http://www.usatoday.com/news/military)

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Rolfsen, “Number of bombs dropped in Afghanistan declines” posted in [www.airforcetimes.com/news/2009airforce\\_strike\\_decrease](http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2009airforce_strike_decrease)

<sup>10</sup> David Wood, “Afghan Air War: More Fireights Fewer Airstrikes” at [www.politicsdaily.com/2009/08/23/afghan-air-war-more-fireights-fewer-airstrike](http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/08/23/afghan-air-war-more-fireights-fewer-airstrike)

<sup>11</sup> Ann Scott Tyson, “Support Troops Swelling US Force in Afghanistan”, posted on October 13, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/12/AR2009101203142.html>

<sup>12</sup> “US to Review Afghan Air Strike” at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/42642.stm>

<sup>13</sup> Landmass of Afghanistan encompasses 647,500 square kilometers which makes it one and a half times larger than Iraq.

<sup>14</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), p.52.

<sup>15</sup> Air Vice Marshal Stephen J. Hillier CBE, DFC, MA, RAF, during seminar on “Air Space and Cyberspace Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, at 38<sup>th</sup> IFPA-Fletcher Conference on National Security Strategy and Policy, January 21, 2010, at [www.ifpafletcherconference.com/2010/transcripts/session5](http://www.ifpafletcherconference.com/2010/transcripts/session5)

<sup>16</sup> Spencer Ackerman “Under McChrystal, Drone Strikes Quietly Rise as Civilian Casualties Drop”, *The Washington Independent*, posted on January 14, 2010, at <http://washingtonindependent.com/73915/under-mcchrystal-drone-strikes-in-afghanistan-quietly-rise-as-civilian-casualties-drop>

<sup>17</sup> “McChrystal apologises as air strike kills dozens in Afghanistan” posted on February 24, 2010, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/02/22/afghanistan.civilian.strike/>

<sup>18</sup> Declan Walsh, “Air strike kills Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud” posted on August 7, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/aug/07/baitullah-mehsud-dead-taliban-pakistan>

<sup>19</sup> Lara M. Dadkhah, “Empty Skies over Afghanistan”, posted on February 10, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/18/opinion/18dadkhah.html>



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