

Airpower and security challenges in the 21st century



Angelos Giakoumis
Μέλος ΑΛΛΗΛΟΝ
Lt Colonel
Hellenic Air Force
[Angelos Giakoumis | LinkedIn](#)

Περίληψη

Following the 9/11 attacks, security challenges like terrorism and insurgency openly challenged the global world order. Radical groups, rebels, and secessionist movements came to destabilize entire regions. In this short article, I discuss the strategic implications of airpower in countering security challenges in the 21st century. I first define airpower using a combination of academic and military sources. To support the argument, I point out three recent armed conflicts that highlight airpower's strategic effects. The article concludes with a brief review of the first year of the air war over Ukraine.

Airpower is a vast subject in the fields of international relations and security studies. It comprises all different uses of aviation, in the pursuit of a nation's security interests. The 1991 Gulf War proved that airpower could be the decisive element of an entire campaign. Airpower offered Western leaders the long-awaited short war with minimum casualties and "a victory on the cheap". The September 2001 terrorist attacks marked the beginning of a new era of security threats. Non-state actors like terrorists and insurgents openly challenged the global world order. Radical groups, rebels, and secessionist movements, destabilized entire regions. Failed or failing states with weak and corrupt political institutions, like Libya, Afghanistan, Mali, and Iraq, provided safe havens where these groups could train, regroup, and prepare for the next attack. The new security landscape raised academic and political debates about whether airpower can produce strategic effects against those threats, or merely alter the tactics of countering them. Before discussing airpower and security challenges in the 21st century, it is essential to establish a common language by agreeing on a definition of air power.

There are multiple definitions of airpower, from various airpower theoreticians. Dave Maclsaac argues that air power is the extension of traditional surface warfare into the skies and that theorists had limited influence in the field, because of the dependence of air power on technology and practitioners (1). Collin S. Gray considers Maclsaac's argument incorrect and misleading. William "Billy" Mitchell offered a simple but right definition, stating that airpower is "the ability to do something in the air". Gray improved Mitchell's statement by adding to his wording: "Air power may be defined as the ability to do something [strategically useful] in the

air” (2). The academic debate about the definition of airpower seems endless for two reasons. First, the essential meaning of airpower remains blurry for many scholars, political leaders, and even professional military officers. Second, airpower –significantly junior for many years to the branches that provide land and sea power - has long been treated as “a supplement” to the other forms of military power. Most theoreticians agree however that airpower remains a valuable tool for statesmen/women and generals.

Fortunately, things look less blurry in the military. The US emerged as the ultimate airpower nation after the end of the Second World War. Airpower became the sharpest of America’s swords. According to the ‘Air Force Doctrine publication (AFDP) 1’, airpower is “the ability to project military power through control and exploitation in, from, and through the air” (3). The British approached airpower from a different angle. The UK ‘Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30’ refers to airpower as “The ability to use air capabilities in and from the air, to influence the behaviour of actors and the course of events” (4). I believe that the British strategic mindset came up with an excellent definition for two reasons. First, this definition captures the essence of the Clausewitzian dictum that “war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means”(5). Additionally, it represents a theoretical perspective, widely validated by numerous armed conflicts over the last thirty years. I will highlight three examples.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a small group of US Special Forces, working with indigenous Afghan rebels and supported by US-led airpower conducting precision airstrikes, defeated the 50,000-man Taliban and Al-Qaeda armies and toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan within a few weeks. Starting from October 2001, U.S. fighter jets and bomber aircraft conducted 6,500 strike sorties and dropped 17,500 munitions against targets in Afghanistan, within 76 days. Analysts termed this new way of warfighting –the combined use of small groups of Special Forces and modern precision airstrikes– the “Afghan model” (6).

From March to October 2011, a coalition of NATO member states and several other partner nations waged a remarkable air campaign to support local rebel forces fighting against the regime of the Libyan dictator. What began as an attempt of the West to protect the Libyan population, ultimately led to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. The coalition’s precision airstrikes reversed the tide of the civil war and enabled the defeat of the regime forces. NATO airplanes executed 26,500 sorties (including 9,700 strike sorties) and employed almost exclusively precision-guided munitions to destroy more than 5,900 military targets. The air campaign secured the political objectives of the Alliance, thus toppling Qaddafi, with minimum civilian losses, zero friendly casualties, and a cost of a few billion dollars. The latter is considered relatively low, compared to the losses of thousands of American soldiers and the trillions of dollars the US spent on the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (7).

Finally, airpower enabled France to project power in Mali in January

2013. Just 48 hours after Sarkozy decided to respond to Traoré’s request, Rafale fighters of the “Armée de l’Air”, supported by French air tankers, traveled almost 6,000km from their airbases in France to conduct the first strikes against advancing jihadist formations. Airpower also supported the herculean logistical effort associated with the build-up of combat ground forces. Almost half of the 19,000 tons of the necessary military equipment were transferred to Mali by cargo airplanes from France and regional bases, within weeks after the decision to interfere. Operation “Serval” succeeded in halting the Islamist offensive and secured key political and economic interests of France in the region (8).

However, available academic sources, covering the first year (2022-2023) of the air war over Ukraine, reveal that airpower failed to produce any significant strategic effects. One possible explanation is that neither side has gained complete air superiority to conduct decisive air operations with strategic outcomes (9). Much like the “machine-gun fences” in the trenches of World War I, an array of surface-to-air missiles and enemy fighters prohibited any attempt of penetration of the adversary’s airspace. Stefanovic et al. (2023) vividly described the skies over Ukraine as an aerial version of the battle of Somme of World War I (10). In October 2022, the Russian Air Force launched an extensive bombing campaign of Ukrainian government buildings, and civilian infrastructure that destroyed more than 30% of the country’s power generation capacity, among other facilities. The gains of these punishment campaigns were short-lived since they failed to break the Ukrainian’s will to resist (11). Every wise security analyst should keep in mind that the conflict is ongoing. It is too early to conclude whether air power will have a strategic impact on the war or will remain another tactical weapon in the arsenal of the two adversaries. There is still a lot of research to be conducted for this war, to fully understand all the possible effects of airpower.

To conclude, it must be stressed that airpower is a practical issue with political and strategic implications. It became the dominant instrument for political and military leaders as it represented an inexpensive and rapid way to alter the course of events and influence the opponent’s behavior. Airpower was engaged in all sorts of major and minor conflicts of the 21st century, conventional and unconventional, between state and non-state actors. It was used to coerce adversaries, to change regimes (or support friendly regimes), and even fight terrorism and support counter-insurgency operations. Airpower faced every modern security challenge and remains one of the most delicate tool for the implementation of a country’s national security strategy objectives.

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