

# Rethinking Air Power: Precision, persistence and the future of force application

Air power's strategic potential remains constrained not by technological limits, but by doctrinal inertia rooted in the 1991 Gulf War paradigm. Modern capabilities of air power, such as persistent Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) tracking, mass precision effects and real time logistics observation, enable decisive air campaigns that can either terminate conflict or soften the way to it. Military history warns that such technological doctrinal mismatches persist until battlefield reversals compel reassessment, underscoring the urgent need to shorten the doctrinal lag by rethinking at the pace of technological evolution.

## The obsolescence of Gulf War Doctrine in modern conflict

The targeting philosophy that defined Operation Desert Storm in 1991 represented a paradigm shift in military affairs. The integrated air campaign designed to systematically degrade Iraqi command and control, destroy air defences, eliminate Scud missile batteries and achieve air superiority before committing ground forces, reflected a particular strategic logic: air power existed to enable ground operations, not to replace them. This doctrine, refined through subsequent interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya, has become the default framework through which military planners evaluate the utility of air power. Yet as geopolitical tensions between the United States (US) and Iran escalate, this inherited wisdom demands rigorous reassessment. The assumption that air power alone cannot achieve strategic objectives is increasingly a statement about outdated doctrine rather than inherent limitations of the medium.

## The ground force assumption

The conventional wisdom that wars cannot be won from the air rests on a historically grounded but doctrinally static premise. Critics of air-centric strategy correctly observe that air power struggles to hold terrain, control populations and destroy the diffuse organisational networks that sustain insurgent and conventional adversaries alike. These limitations are real. However, the critics conflate the limitations of historical air power with those of air power as such, a category error that obscures transformative developments in reconnaissance, precision strike, and

persistent surveillance that have fundamentally altered the equation.

The ground-centric view of victory emerged from conflicts in which air power operated with significant constraints: limited sensor reach, weapons with finite persistence, communications architectures that could not process battlefield information at machine speed and adversary forces that could disperse, conceal and regenerate faster than targeting cycles could eliminate them. These conditions no longer describe the operational environment that advanced air forces can create.

## The ISR revolution

The transformation of ISR represents perhaps the most consequential shift in the air power equation. Modern ISR systems, such as satellite constellations, high altitude unmanned platforms, networked sensor grids and artificial intelligence enhanced data fusion, have created an unprecedented capacity for persistent awareness of adversary activities across vast geographic expanses. While Cold War and Gulf War-era planners worried about “area denial” and the fog of war, advanced ISR has fundamentally compressed the sensor-to-shooter timeline and expanded coverage to continental proportions.

The implications for targeting philosophy are profound. Traditional air campaigns focused on achieving localised effects against high value, relatively static targets: airfields, command centres, radar installations and industrial facilities. Modern air power can now maintain continuous tracking of mobile targets, observe adversary logistics in near real time and identify patterns of operation that reveal intentions before they materialise into action. This is not merely an incremental improvement in targeting accuracy; it represents a qualitative shift toward what some strategists term “omniscient awareness” of the battlespace.

## Mass precision: A contradiction resolved

The phrase “mass precision” may appear oxymoronic to those trained on twentieth century military theory, which held that precision and mass were inversely related. Precision weapons were few, expensive and required ideal conditions; massed fires were inaccurate, indiscriminate and politically costly due to concerns about collateral damage. This dichotomy no longer holds.

Contemporary precision guided munitions can be delivered at scale. The economics of precision strikes have been transformed by advances in guidance technology, manufacturing efficiency and networked targeting, which allow multiple platforms to engage multiple targets with a high probability of effect. The operational concept of “mass precision” now describes the simultaneous or near simultaneous application of precision effects across a wide area, overwhelming adversary decision cycles and generating cascading system failures across their operational architecture.

