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Perception, Reality, and 21st Century Strategy

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In 1962 the artist-come-pop-psychologist Andy Warhol famously depicted cans of soup as art, thereby changing the context in which viewers of his canvas ascribed value to the particular object. Among other things, Warhol was demonstrating that perception can become reality. His point was cleverly made, but it was scarcely original. Ideas, analyses of events, strategies, and so on, do not necessarily have to be sensible, logical, or even truthful, to create an effect: they simply have to be believed.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss perception and reality as they relate to air power and military strategy. Two key points need to be made at the outset.

First, the topic ‘perceptions of air power’ is worth an entire conference in its own right, not just one section of one presentation. The subject is long-standing, complex, and often emotive. Few better examples of this reality can be found than a report into command arrangements in the Australian Defence Force written in 1988 by then-Brigadier John Baker, subsequently a general and chief of the defence force.² Among other things, Baker suggested that the proper use of air power was not well understood, an educational and public relations failure he attributed primarily to air forces. His observation was characteristically astute in its broader implications.

Two decades later, perceptions of the utility of air power remain contentious, as demonstrated, for example, by the current widespread criticism of Remotely Piloted Vehicle operations in Afghanistan.³ In a familiar reaction, RPV strikes have been singled out for their alleged excessive collateral damage by a spectrum of critics, including Western media, politicians and academics; Afghani and Pakistani officials; and the Taliban. Even the West’s senior in-theatre commander has joined in. In an extraordinary statement, US Army general Stanley McChrystal has asserted that the use of air power in Afghanistan ‘contains the seeds of our own destruction’.⁴

Yet if there is one success story to emerge from the fiasco in Afghanistan, it is the use of RPVs for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and for precision strike - capabilities that represent the coalition’s greatest military comparative advantage. American counter-terrorism officials have praised the RPV program as a ‘resounding success’ which has eliminated scores of terrorist leaders and ‘thrown their operations into disarray’.⁵ Furthermore, the authoritative *New England Journal of Medicine* has reported that air attacks, including those by RPVs, have been responsible for only five per cent of all civilian casualties in the Middle East and Central Asia, compared to twenty per cent for small arms fire and thirty-three per cent assassinated by insurgents.⁶ Contrary to General McChrystal’s bizarre assertion,

investigations by United Nations and Afghani officials have revealed that most civilian deaths attributable to the coalition are caused by special forces.⁷ Perception and reality are seriously at odds. The second key point is that the warfighting model favoured by the West for about six hundred years, based on invasion and occupation, is no longer tenable. The model's decline started with the French reoccupation of Indochina in 1945, gathered pace during the American war in Vietnam, and reached terminal velocity with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Western strategists can no longer ignore the profound implications of globalisation and interdependence; and they can no longer ignore the profound distinction between wars of necessity and wars of choice.⁸

Simply put, the era has passed in which predominantly white, predominantly European, predominantly Christian armies could stampede around the world invading countries their governments either don't like or want to control. The practical and ethical effects of globalisation have made that kind of mentality obsolete. Moreover, the subjects of invasion have learnt how to extract costs that far exceed any benefits an occupying force might realise.

These days, once we deploy an invasion force, the Viet Minh, the (Algerian) FLN, the Mujahideen, Hizb'allah, Somali warlords, the Taliban, al-Qa'ida and their ilk fight on their terms, not ours.⁹ They are adaptive, imaginative and, perhaps most important, infinitely patient. Thus, today in the Middle East and Central Asia, the most advanced armies the world has ever known are spending trillions of dollars trying to counter home-made roadside bombs and socially-primitive suicide bombers. Regardless of the short-term outcomes of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it will be decades before the West understands the full cost of its actions there.

Those two key points - realities if you will - establish the context for this paper.

Perceptions of Air Power

A revealing insight into popular perceptions of air power can be gained from three of the best-known air campaigns, all from World War II: the Battle of Britain; the Combined Bomber Offensive against Germany and Italy; and the bombing of Japan.

By mid-1940 the civilised world was on the brink, and the fall of the besieged United Kingdom would have been disastrous. In the event, the defeat of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain became the first occasion since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 that 'the forces of violent revision' around the world had been halted.¹⁰ The Royal Air Force's victory unquestionably was one of history's great feats of arms.

There are, however, a couple of significant misperceptions commonly associated with the battle. The first is that the RAF was outnumbered and almost on its knees; and the second is that halfway through the battle, in response to British bombing raids on German cities, a furious Hitler made a monumental strategic blunder by shifting the focus of the Luftwaffe's attacks away from the RAF and on to London and civilians.

In reality, at the start of the battle, the RAF's Fighter Command had forty-four operational Hurricane and Spitfire squadrons, while at the end it had fifty-three; simultaneously, its operational pilot strength increased from 1200 to 1796 – that is, by almost fifty per cent. By comparison, the Luftwaffe's single-engine fighter pilot strength fell twenty-five per cent, from 906 to 673.¹¹ As far as the Luftwaffe's bombing campaign was concerned, it was always Hitler's and Goering's intention at some stage to shift the focus from the RAF to Britain's war economy and national morale: it was simply that they misjudged the timing.

Turning to air power's most controversial campaign, sixty-five years after the event, forests are still sacrificed to the debate over the effectiveness and morality of the Combined Bomber Offensive. It is rare for a semester to pass without someone, somewhere, in some university, convening yet another seminar on the rights and wrongs of the CBO.¹² The reality of that academic phenomenon suggests that the

campaign is widely regarded as both immoral and a failure: were it perceived otherwise, we would have stopped revisiting its detail long ago.

Three observations are pertinent here. The first is that under the Hague Conventions dealing with the laws of armed conflict as they existed at the time, the campaign was legal. Whether it was moral is another matter, but the CBO is scarcely unique on that score, not only in relation to the Second World War, but also to many other wars fought in the years since.

The second observation concerns casualties. During World War II, less than five per cent of civilian deaths were caused by air attack; that is, ninety-five per cent were killed by other means.¹³ Numbers in themselves can never tell a story, or distinguish right from wrong, but they can expose double standards.

In a campaign lasting five years, the bomber offensive killed some 500,000 German civilians. By comparison, the siege of Leningrad by the German Army killed around one million civilians in 3 years; while in just eight months the siege of Stalingrad killed one-half to three-quarters of a million. Twenty years earlier, during World War I, the Royal Navy's blockade of Germany had starved to death some three-quarters of a million civilians and was a major catalyst for a subsequent revolution that claimed many millions more. Forty-five years after World War II, a very different but no less lethal form of coercion created a similar outcome, when the trade embargo enforced by the United Nations against Iraq from 1990 to 2002 was responsible for the deaths of 350,000 to one million civilians, many of them children. None of those indicative actions, or scores of similar events, attracts anything like the continuing opprobrium of World War II's bomber offensive.

The third and last observation concerns the effectiveness of the bomber offensive. Notwithstanding the unfavourable public perception, the fact is, in what for the allies was a war of national survival, and also for Australia the only war of necessity we have ever fought, the CBO arguably made the single greatest contribution to victory, other than the Soviet campaigns on the Eastern Front. For some four years the bomber offensive was the only allied campaign that took the war directly to the Nazi homeland. Additionally, it alone was the second front in Europe that the Soviet Union desperately needed, noting that, ultimately, World War II was won and lost on the Eastern Front. After a slow start, in the final eighteen months the CBO brought Nazi Germany and its war economy to its knees. Contrary to popular opinion, it did not stiffen German morale - quite the opposite, it made the workforce depressed, resentful and unproductive. The campaign caused massive dislocation and destruction of war production, and it greatly facilitated the advance on Berlin of armies from both Western and Eastern Europe.¹⁴

Five months after victory in Europe, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States Army Air Forces ended World War II in the Pacific without a single allied soldier having to set foot on the Japanese home islands. These were terrible events, and it remains a deeply chastening and emotional experience to visit the memorial at Hiroshima. Yet had an invasion been necessary, the allies may have suffered as many as a million casualties, and it is likely that many millions of Japanese soldiers and civilians would have died fighting or by suicide.¹⁵

None of the foregoing is intended to justify the killing of civilians by one means in preference to another, or by any means at all. The purpose of the discussion has been to examine the nature of perceptions - nothing more, nothing less.

That dichotomy between perception and reality in relation to air power persists today, as recent campaigns have shown. Over the past twenty years, Western coalitions have fought five major wars: Operations Desert Storm (1991), Deliberate Force (1995), Allied Force (1999), Enduring Freedom (2001), and Iraqi Freedom (2003). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue today under the nebulous rubric of the global war on terrorism.

Fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan has been characterised by highly successful air campaigns, followed by ground invasions which have become enduring quagmires. Indeed, the grave situation the West continues to face in both places is a direct consequence of the continuing presence of our armies of occupation. It is fifty years since so-called 'expeditionary' forces from the United States and its allies, including

Australia, occupied Vietnam, with all of its disastrous consequences, yet we still do not seem to understand that one person's expedition is another person's invasion.

It is not as though we lack precedent to inform. Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force in the former republic of Yugoslavia were noteworthy for the fact that the allied combat commitment was to all intents and purposes limited to air power, with land power, when necessary, being provided by indigenous troops. Each campaign was successful, achieving its political objectives with few allied casualties.

Yet in the early days of Operation Allied Force, media comment generally consisted of a chorus of misperceptions regarding the alleged limits of air power, with the choir being led by such international luminaries as John Keegan, Gwynne Dyer, Lawrence Freedman and Martin van Creveld, soon to be joined locally in calls for a ground invasion by the voices of, among others, Greg Sheridan, Paul Kelly, and Michael O'Connor.¹⁶ John Keegan at least was sufficiently gracious to acknowledge a week before Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic capitulated in June 1999 that perhaps, 'rather as a Creationist Christian ... being shown his first dinosaur bone', his perception of air power might have been wrong for the past forty years.¹⁷

Misperception extends to images of leadership and to campaign planning. Historically, the theory and practice of warfare has properly concentrated on armies and their commanders. Occupying territory and defeating the enemy army almost invariably was the key to (ultimate) political victory, because the army embodied the state through its relationships to the sovereign, the church, the ruling elite, and the treasury. Often, the army also physically blocked enemy forces from access to the civilian population. Thus, beat the army and you beat the state. However, during the past seven decades, it has become increasingly evident that war is now concerned more with acceptable political outcomes than with seizing and holding ground, just as it has also become evident that air power has constantly expanded its ability to influence, even control, behaviour in all environments. These developments imply a fundamental shift in how wars should be planned and commanded. But that has not been the case.

Of the five campaigns under review here, four - Desert Storm, Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom - were commanded by army generals, and each applied combat power primarily with aerospace force. (The reference is to all aerospace-derived capabilities, not just air forces. Much of the air power was generated from space, naval, and army platforms.) Yet the commanders concerned, Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf in the Gulf, General Wesley Clark in the former republic of Yugoslavia, and General Tommy Franks initially in Afghanistan and Iraq, all had a limited, perhaps even inadequate, understanding of how to plan and conduct a predominantly aerospace campaign.¹⁸

Powell and Schwarzkopf never fully appreciated the strategic nature of the air campaign constructed for them by the USAF and were always preoccupied with the ground phase of the war; Clark's air campaign (which he insisted on controlling personally down to the most detailed level, despite his unfamiliarity with almost every aspect of air operations) has been described as little more than a disconnected series of 'random acts of violence', in which his response to the desultory results of the early weeks was to demand more and more targets to attack, with little regard to the effect (if any) their prosecution might have; while Franks' involvement in the ill-conceived Operation Anaconda (which he later described as 'an unqualified and complete success', in contrast to the British Royal Marines' judgment that it was 'a military disaster') says more about his army background than anything else.¹⁹

The performance of all four stands in sharp contrast to the mastery of his brief demonstrated by USAF general Michael Ryan during Deliberate Force in 1995, one of the few occasions on which an airman has held a significant joint operational command.²⁰ But it is perceptions that matter, as indicated by recent reports from the United Kingdom of an attempt to replace Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup as chief of the defence staff because he allegedly does not understand land warfare.²¹

The End of an Era

Historical eras come and go. In the case of warfare, such demarcations are commonly identified with the emergence of ‘revolutionary’ technological developments, such as the bow and arrow, gunpowder, mechanised forces, aircraft, and so on. Western defence forces, including the ADF, have managed technological change exceptionally well. But it is questionable whether they have managed strategic thinking as effectively, noting that in recent decades superficially successful battlefield actions have rarely been translated into satisfactory political outcomes.

In an era variously described as ‘the age of the unthinkable’, as a time of unprecedented interdependence, and as a period of radical realignment of world power, we need to define change less in terms of mere technical competence, and more in terms of adapting our thinking to the prevailing political and social context.²² Only by understanding the context of the 21st century will military organisations retain their utility - indeed, even their relevance.

For some six hundred years the West has controlled the levers of international affairs through its domination of ideas, politics, trade, culture, finance, technology and, not least, warfare. Plainly there have been exceptions, such as the glorious cultural, scholarly, and military achievements of the Ottoman Empire from the 13th to the 20th centuries; Japan’s brief period of domination in the Asia-Pacific; and the Soviet Union’s ultimately failed but nonetheless extraordinary experiment with Marxism-Leninism in the 20th century. Overall, however, it is fair to say that for six centuries the West, led first by old Europe and then by the United States, has enjoyed an era of unprecedented pre-eminence.

A central feature of this era has been the assumed right of the West to invade, occupy and exploit non-Western polities; that is, in today’s idiom, to conduct expeditionary wars of choice in the pursuit of self-interest. This is no longer acceptable. The distinction between wars of necessity and wars of choice must become the intersection for the end of this obsolete model of strategic thought, and for the beginning of the new.

Without exception, wars lead to injustice and depravity. They also invariably generate unintended consequences, which may turn out to be worse than the alleged *causus belli*.²³ Using the Australian experience as an example, a case can be made that of the many conflicts in which we have fought, only the Second World War was a war of necessity. In other words, it was our free choice to participate in World War I, Malaya, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Sixty thousand Australian deaths from a conflict that was supposed to be won by Christmas 1914 is all that needs to be said about the unintended consequences of the Great War, while it will be decades before we understand the full costs of the campaign against ‘terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan. After almost ten years it is still not possible to foresee a satisfactory political resolution in either place.

The West’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have been dominated by generals who persistently confuse arithmetic with strategy. So frequently has the mantra that more boots on the ground can defeat insurgents been chanted that for many media commentators it has become a self-evident truth, to the extent that the full scope of its implications has not been tested.²⁴ The fact is, though, that there is no self-evident truth here.

For example, the more than one million sets of boots eventually on the ground in Vietnam could not win the war for the United States between 1962 and 1975. Similarly, the Israeli Army’s massive, near-permanent presence for forty years in the occupied territories has made no difference whatsoever to Israel’s long-term security prospects. On the contrary, it is because boots on the ground are unlikely ever to provide an answer that Israel has clandestinely assembled an arsenal of some 200 nuclear weapons as their (perceived) ultimate security safeguard.

At a time when the West’s strategic preferences are being severely challenged, if not confounded, by militarily primitive groups, fashionable concepts such as ‘war amongst the people’ and its subset, the ‘three block war’, claim to reveal a way forward. So-called ‘war amongst the people’ is not a new phenomenon.²⁵ Urban and rural masses have been part of the fabric of war from the time of the sieges recorded by Thucydides 2500 years ago to the suicide bombers of today’s mega-cities.²⁶ And it was as

true for Thucydides as it is today that the context of warfare shaped by ‘the people’ has often been decisive, especially when one protagonist is perceived as indigenous and the other as foreign. What *is* relatively new is the people’s ability to decide the outcome of military conflict, not through the force of arms, but in the court of world opinion.

In the meantime, the perception that Western armies are capable of translating these theories into practice provides a justification for expeditionary operations, which in turn imposes a disturbing character on national defence policies. The concept of the three-block war, for example, has been promoted with considerable success. But it is an intellectual house of cards. First postulated in the late 1990s by the then-commandant of the US Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, the concept attempts to define a model by which land forces can successfully operate in an unfamiliar, hostile, primarily urban environment. That the theory grew out of the persistent failure of Western armies to cope with precisely those conditions during expeditionary campaigns in places like Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, the Gaza Strip and the Lebanon seems to escape attention.

Krulak speculated that in any three contiguous urban blocks a soldier might be required to deliver humanitarian assistance in the first, act as a peacekeeper in the second, and fight a life or death combat in the third.²⁷ (Some theorists have since suggested a fourth ‘block’ in the form of information operations.) The theory itself is an accurate enough description of the complex and challenging environment now favoured by many of the West’s enemies. The problem is finding an army capable of satisfying the model’s demands.

Australia’s pre-eminent strategic scholar, Robert O’Neill, has identified the qualities Western land forces need to operate successfully within the setting of expeditionary operations, war amongst the people, and the three-block war.²⁸ His findings describe an army whose hypothetical standards frankly stretch credibility.

According to O’Neill, a successful expeditionary campaign demands soldiers who are able substantially to ‘erode’ the cultural barriers that separate them from the people they are trying to help. In itself that is a sensible objective. But when those barriers are listed as language, religion, social morés, and a knowledge of local history, geography, institutions and economics, the argument strains belief. And if that is not enough – remembering that in many circumstances these same soldiers are going to be, properly enough, in fear of their lives – they also have to master civilian skills (for civic aid programs) and have some capacity to ‘enter into an informal exchange with indigenes’.²⁹

At the risk of labouring the point, we should always remember that to the local population our ‘expeditionary’ troops are their ‘invaders’. The distinction is not merely semantic: it is fundamental to any credible analysis of the contemporary battlespace. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Professor O’Neill’s army of the future is based more on wishful thinking than on an objective analysis of what armies can, and cannot, do.

The truth of the matter is that rather than assimilate with the various populations whose countries they have invaded, occupation forces prefer to isolate themselves. There is a very good reason for this: armies of occupation are far less likely to be killed if they operate from secure bases, a reality the Israelis and the Americans have tacitly acknowledged in the Middle East.

From the first day the state of Israel was established in the former British mandate of Palestine in 1948, the Israelis have been fighting amongst the Arab people of the Middle East. Conflict has ranged from major wars to the constant struggle to contain terrorist attacks, in recent years often by suicide bombers. Given the clash of cultures that characterises this situation, it is probably unrealistic to expect that the Israeli Defence Force could ever fully assimilate itself within the diverse range of Islamic states and interest groups whose incursions it must attempt to prevent. Indeed, the decision taken in 1994 to erect a number of security fences to control the movement of non-Israelis and Arab Israelis into and out of Israel is a telling monument to the realities of war amongst the people.

The first barrier was completed in 1994 in the Gaza Strip. Work on the second, a much more ambitious project along the West Bank frontier, was started in 2002; by August 2008 some 408 kilometres of the total of 703 kilometres approved by the Israeli government had been constructed. Three gates are opened for twenty minutes each day to allow the strictly controlled entry and exit of those Palestinians permitted access to their jobs or relatives on the other side of the wall.

The Israelis have every right to protect themselves, and the walls have greatly reduced the incidence of terrorist attacks. In the context of this paper, though, the most telling commentary on the barriers comes from the names they have been given by the protagonists. To the Israelis they are 'security fences'; to the Arabs they are 'racial segregation walls' and 'apartheid walls'. The sad terminology could scarcely be further removed from the simplistic notions of war amongst the people and the three-block war.

Similar problems in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen similar reactions. Western soldiers and mercenaries have been employed to turn both Baghdad and Kabul into heavily fortified, restricted-entry zones, in which the coalition's senior leadership, their support staff, and Iraqi politicians and civil servants are isolated from the people they serve.³⁰

A degree of success has been claimed for the 'surge' of ground forces into Iraq in mid-2007. This perception, which for obvious reasons suited the Bush Administration, and which continues to suit the Obama Administration, its political allies, and their senior military commanders has not, however, been adequately tested.³¹

On the positive side, the incidence of terrorism has decreased. Furthermore, the sixty-two per cent of voters who defied terrorists to cast their ballots in the parliamentary election of March 2010 displayed courage and commitment. The comparatively high turnout of Sunni voters was especially heartening, given that many had boycotted the previous parliamentary election in December 2005. On the other hand, the total turnout in the post-surge election (that is, March 2010) was fourteen per cent less than in 2005.³² Of most concern, though, is the likelihood that the inconclusive result will lead to a period of 'protracted political uncertainty' and possible violence.³³ In particular, the strong performance of the radical faction led by Muktada-al-Sadr almost certainly will mean that, regardless of the final composition of Iraq's new parliament, it will be anti-American.³⁴ The situation is, to say the least, complex.

Writing early in 2008, some six months after the start of the surge, US Army Vietnam veteran and now college professor Andrew Bacevich attributed the initial reduction in the level of violence more to the policy of offering arms and bribes to Sunni insurgents than to 'the influx of additional American troops'.³⁵ Author and journalist Thomas Ricks shares Bacevich's scepticism, arguing that the surge has not achieved its stated aim of creating 'a breathing space in which a political breakthrough could occur'; on the contrary, he believes that Iraq's leaders have used any breathing space to move backwards, not forwards. Motivated primarily by self-interest, they have failed to address such major challenges as political power sharing, a fair distribution of oil revenues, relations with Iran, and how to manage the emergence of an effectively independent Kurdish state in the north.³⁶ In Ricks' opinion, 'all the basic [political] questions that vexed Iraq before the surge are still out there unanswered'.³⁷

Seven years after the invasion, two-and-a-half years after the surge, and a month after the March 2010 election, Iraq is still a country confronted by 'extreme levels of violence, an economy in tatters, and a culture of endemic corruption'.³⁸ We are unlikely to know the difference between perception and reality until all American forces have been withdrawn, a process that should be completed by the end of 2011. Ricks's depressing prognosis is that a civil war is 'almost certain'.³⁹

The outlook for Afghanistan is no less disturbing. Even more than in Iraq, developments there bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the disaster of Vietnam. The most disturbing feature is that, once again, the West is fighting a war of dubious legitimacy, on behalf of an illegally elected government, whose administration is massively corrupt.⁴⁰ Nor, after nine years, has any of the original objectives been realised. Osama bin-Laden and Mullah Omar remain free, and have become potent rallying points for disaffected Muslims around the globe; the country has not been liberated from the Taliban; Western-style

democracy has not been embraced; living standards have not improved; and modernity and prosperity remain a chimera except for a corrupt elite.

When Western occupation forces leave, as they surely will within the next few years, the embryo Afghan National Army, like the South Vietnamese Army forty years ago, will have to assume full responsibility for national security. But according to many reports, again like the South Vietnamese, the ANA is badly led, under-trained, often unmotivated, and ill-disciplined.⁴¹ There is also the non-trivial matter of recruiting and retaining the 400,000 professional soldiers it is estimated that the ANA will need to do its job, a task many commentators regard as utterly unrealistic.⁴²

The West's challenge in the Middle East and Central Asia is not one of arms, but of culture. Pakistani officials have a unique and intimate knowledge of Afghanistan, of al-Qa'ida, and of the Taliban; indeed, Pakistan's directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence has long been a sponsor of the Taliban. Many of those officials are derisive of the West's attempt to win hearts and minds, dismissing the expeditionary force's clumsy efforts as 'mission impossible'.⁴³

Any suggestion that Western armies can fight 'amongst the people' is a dangerous myth. There is little risk in predicting that the West will have neither the patience nor the fortitude to endure the thirty or so years that almost certainly would be needed to achieve some kind of military resolution in Central Asia. Probably just as well too: the last thing we want is to foster future generations of bombers who, unlike our armies, will be expert at waging war amongst their own people.

21st Century Strategy: 'Control and Protect'

There is no question that our enemies in Afghanistan and Pakistan are dangerous and need to be contained. However, if any enduring success is to be achieved, it will come from the application of 21st century concepts, not from obsolete military thinking.

The start point for any defence policy determination should be the classic strategic continuum of 'Shape-Deter-Respond', under which policy-makers seek to shape events to their broad national interests, deter potentially aggressive behaviour that may be inimical to those interests, and respond if necessary by projecting force. Note that the focus is on the top end of the continuum rather than on the lower end, as is the case with expeditionary campaigns. 'Response' should be a last resort, not a preferred first option.

One logical outcome of applying the shape-deter-respond continuum to the context of the 21st century is a strategy that above all else seeks to 'control and protect'.

An analogy of sorts might be drawn with the notion of 'containment', perhaps the West's single most constructive strategic concept since World War II. Formulated by the celebrated American foreign service officer George Kennan, containment was intended to restrain emerging Soviet power, and was based on the premise that the US's actions should be determined by what the Soviets probably would do, not by what they might do. Thus, rather than emphasising confrontation and aggression, the policy sought to contain Soviet expansionism through a range of diplomatic, economic, political and cultural initiatives. In essence, containment was informed by best-case rather than worst-case analyses.⁴⁴

Translating that approach to the military domain, under 'control and protect' we should seek to control our strategic environment, protect our people and values, and cooperate closely with our friends, allies, and neighbours. By drawing on our key advantages of high quality people, advanced technology, and the ability to plan and act with decision superiority and precision, from a distance, the strategy reflects how we want to operate rather than how our potential enemies might want us to operate, or how we might be compelled to operate in remote expeditionary operations. Thus, we are acting asymmetrically.

'Control and Protect' directly addresses the context of the 21st century because it:

- Unambiguously distinguishes between wars of necessity and wars of choice,
- Maximises our comparative advantages,
- Minimises the risk of unintended consequences,

- Does not invent threats, and (by no means least),
- Recognises that there are things we cannot do, and should not do.

The core capabilities required to implement the strategy are long-range ISR and precision strike, which implies a force structure based on ISR systems, strike/fighter aircraft, AEW&C, air-to-air refuelling, RPVs, submarines, special forces, and the like. Prototypes of the strategy in action might be discerned in Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch, two little-known but remarkably successful United Nations-sanctioned campaigns which contained selected elements of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq between 1992 and 2003.⁴⁵

'Control and protect' does not imply that Western defence forces should forgo the ability to occupy hostile territory. Quite the contrary, the most cursory study of history indicates that this remains an important military capability. Extremists will continue to attack the West and to violate human rights. What they are unlikely to do in the future is to fight in mass, seeking instead to adopt the classic guerilla tactic of operating in small groups that make high-value, high-publicity hit-and-run attacks against civilian as much as military targets. Land forces will have a critical role to play in controlling and protecting against such attacks, but they will be land forces of a different shape and outlook from those that characterised 20th century armies.

The most useful soldiers in the 21st century will be those whose defining characteristics are speed, precision, and a fleeting footprint; and who are skilled in exploiting information superiority and stand-off firepower.

A doctrine for that model was published almost ten years ago by the American army officer Robert Scales, who proposed a combined arms methodology in which armies 'would not need to occupy key terrain or confront the mass of the enemy directly'.⁴⁶ Implicit in Scales' approach was the judgment that in many circumstances it will be preferable either to destroy selected enemy assets or to briefly but decisively strike against one vital point, rather than routinely try to occupy and seize his territory.

Under Scales' concept, doctrinally and technologically advanced land forces would use fast-moving air and surface vehicles to make rapid and unexpected manoeuvre one of their primary qualities. They would also work as an integrated whole with air strike forces, with the lead element at any one time being decided by the enemy's disposition. Should the enemy concentrate he would be identified and attacked with precision weapons launched from air platforms operating at standoff distances. Should he disperse and go to ground, he would not only negate his own ability to concentrate force, but also leave himself vulnerable to attacks by numerically and qualitatively superior land forces exploiting their rapid manoeuvre capabilities.

A key feature of the model is the brevity of the occupation phase. It is only when Western armies overstay their (strictly limited) period of usefulness and try to become something they cannot that serious problems are created.

The Scales doctrine seemed to be in evidence in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, when a small group of Australian, American and British special forces won a remarkable victory. Their objective was to ensure that western Iraq was free of Scud missiles which might have been fired at Jordan and Israel, thus dangerously broadening the pending war. Not only did the allied forces meet that objective but also they effectively controlled about one-third of the Iraqi land mass. According to the then-chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, General Richard Myers, the key to that extraordinary achievement was the availability of air - surveillance, reconnaissance, information and strike - 24-hours a day, seven days a week, which was fully integrated with the action on the ground.⁴⁷

This little-known 'control and protect' style of operation may represent the epitome of the 90-year history of air/land warfare. Yet if leading Western military journals are any guide, General Scales' forward-looking concept has not generated much debate.⁴⁸ Perhaps an explanation can be found in Brian Linn's masterful exposition on the US Army's 'inability to recognize the weaknesses of its intellectual traditions'. According to Linn, the Army's determined refusal to change its preference to fight on the

plains of Europe instead of fighting terrorists is only one of many indicators of the service's cultural rigidity.⁴⁹

The broader consequences of that problem have recently been the subject of some scrutiny. Mackubin Owens, for example, has noted with concern that 'despite spending more money than the entire rest of the world' on armed forces, the US military has been 'unable to defeat insurgencies or fully suppress sectarian civil wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite overthrowing the government of each in a matter of weeks; while Richard Kohn has suggested that there has been a decline in the quality of thinking within the US military as a whole, to the extent that it now resembles something of a strategic black hole.⁵⁰

Conclusion

It is one thing to identify a strategy for the 21st century, it is another thing altogether to have it widely understood and officially endorsed. Notwithstanding Western air forces' ninety-year history of winning, air power has a perception problem.

To the extent that air power receives any public recognition, frequently it is in the negative form of civilian casualties. No matter that every year in the modern era some 100,000 civilians are killed by small arms fire, and another 7000 or so by land mines - it is the perception that counts.⁵¹ This misleading image must be addressed if defence strategies are to break free from their obsolete 20th century mindset.

Education is invariably the start-point for any such endeavour. As far as the RAAF is concerned, it is gratifying to be able to say that, starting with the initiatives taken by Air Marshal Ray Funnell in the late-1980s, there has been nothing less than an institutional air power education revolution. That process must now be extended. It is time to shape the strategic debate.

To say that there is a dearth of informed public debate on the use of air power would be an understatement of masterful proportions. Academic papers, journal articles, electronic media reviews, conference presentations, and newspaper features that promote concepts based on our proven military strength and that challenge our proven military vulnerability are few and far between. Why, for example, was the notion of the so-called land force 'surge' the only option seriously discussed during efforts to think our way out of our current quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan?⁵² One answer is that, first, there are not enough people contributing to the air power debate in general; and second, there are not enough air power advocates in influential positions in particular. The contrast with the land warfare debate is striking.

Yet the reality is that the strategy favoured by the West for the past six hundred years, and which is still being applied in the Middle East and Central Asia today, has become militarily untenable and ethically unacceptable. Air and space power has the potential to make a major contribution to any change for the better, but too often perceptions of its utility are uninformed or unfavourable. That will have to change if Western strategy is to enter the modern era, and represent legitimate military and social values in the 21st century.

¹ My thanks to Dr Phillip Meilinger and Group Captain Tony Forestier for comments on the draft of this paper. Responsibility for the content and judgments is solely mine.

² Brigadier J.S. Baker, *Report of the Study into ADF Command Arrangements*, HQADF, March 1988.

³ The name 'Remotely Piloted Vehicle' (RPV) is used instead of the more common 'UAV' (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) or 'UAS' (Unmanned Aerial System) to avoid any suggestion that such platforms are autonomous. Most UAVs and UASs are operated in real-time by remotely located pilots and systems crewmen.

- ⁴ Quoted in Dexter Filkins, 'Stanley McChrystal's Long War', in the *New York Times Magazine*, 18 October 2009, p. MM36..
- ⁵ 'CIA to Expand Use of Drones in Pakistan', *The New York Times*, December 4, 2009; 'US drone strike kills 20 in NW Pakistan: officials', the *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 18, 2010.
- ⁶ Cited in *Pathfinder*, January 2010.
- ⁷ Richard A. Oppel and Rod Norland, 'U.S. Is Reining In Special Forces in Afghanistan', in *The New York Times*, March 15, 2010.
- ⁸ The phenomenon of globalisation is characterised by economic and social interdependence, transparency, and accountability; and it is impelled by instantaneous world-wide communications, computers, and mass rapid international transport.
- ⁹ FLN is an acronym for the National Liberation Front, an Algerian nationalist movement that eventually won power from the French in 1962.
- ¹⁰ Richard Overy, *The Battle*, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p. 122.
- ¹¹ Overy, *The Battle*, pp. 146-7.
- ¹² Most recently in Australia, see Emeritus Professor Igor Primoratz, 'Terror Bombing of German Cities in World War II: A Case Study in Applied Ethics', Special Lecture, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, UNSW@ADFA, Canberra, 28 October 2009.
- ¹³ 'Air Power and Collateral Damage: The Strategic Effect', *Pathfinder*, Issue 126, Air Power Development Centre, Tuggeranong, January 2010.
- ¹⁴ See Richard Overy, 'World War II: The Bombing of Germany', in Alan Stephens (ed.), *The War in the Air 1914-1994*, Air Power Studies Centre, Canberra, 1994.
- ¹⁵ For commentary on estimated US casualties had an invasion of the Japanese Home Islands been attempted, see Richard B. Frank, *Downfall*, Random House, New York, 1999, pp. 338-9. During the battle to capture the southern island of Okinawa in early 1945, 94,000 Japanese civilians died – about one-quarter of the pre-war population. Most committed suicide rather than be captured by the Americans, or were murdered by Japanese soldiers to prevent surrender: see '1945 suicide order still a trauma on Okinawa', in *The New York Times*, June 21, 2005. When it seemed possible that the Japanese government might surrender following the atomic attacks, a group of senior officers planned a coup to overthrow the 'peace seekers' and install a new government, 'the objective of which would be literally victory or [national] extinction'. Franks, *Downfall*, p. 317.
- ¹⁶ John Keegan, 'Are the Air Strikes Working?' and 'Mistakes of the Blitz are being repeated', in *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 March 1999, 11 May 1999; Gwynne Dyer, 'Future of just wars is not up in the air', in *The Canberra Times*, 1 July 1999, p. 11; Lawrence Freedman, 'Air power has yet to win a war', in *The Times*, 5 June 1999, p. 17; Martin van Creveld, 'The Impotence of Air Power', in the *Bangkok Post*, 25 April 1999; Michael O'Connor, 'Political airheads are way off target', in *The Australian*, May 13, 1999, p. 13. See also Robert D. Novak, 'Pyrrhic Peace', in the *Washington Post*, June 7, 1999, p. 19; and John Prados, 'The Mess Made by Bombing Belgrade', in the *Washington Post*, April 4, 1999, p. B01.
- ¹⁷ John Keegan, 'Modern Weapons Hit War Wisdom', in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 5, 1999, p. 17.
- ¹⁸ For commentary on Powell and Schwarzkopf, see David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace*, Bloomsbury, London, 2001, pp. 47, 51, and Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command*, The Free Press, New York, 2002, pp. 190-1; for Clark, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Nato's Air War for Kosovo*, Rand, Santa Monica, 2001, esp. pp. 199-204; for Franks, an original assessment is provided by a senior Chinese PLA officer, Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou, in 'Interview with Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou', Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics, Gruppo Editoriale, L'Espresso/Cassan Press, Hong Kong, January 2005; for Operation 'Anaconda', see Benjamin S. Lambeth, 'Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001', in John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *A History of Air Warfare*, Potomac Books, 2010, pp. 265-9. See also Stephen Budiansky, 'Of Tools and Tasks: Air War – Striking in Ways We Haven't Seen', *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2003, p. B01.
- ¹⁹ For an excellent summary of the Balkans air campaigns, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, 'Reflections on the Balkan Air Wars', in *Air Power History*, Spring 2010.
- ²⁰ See Robert C. Owen, *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning*, Air University Press, Maxwell Air Force Base, 2000.
- ²¹ Michael Evans and Francis Elliott, 'Forces Chief Sir Jock Stirrup Faces Calls to Stand Down Early', in the *London Times*, January 11, 2010.
- ²² See for example Bill Clinton, *The Interviews*, *Newsweek*, December 21, 2009; Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, Little, Brown, London, 2009; and Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003.
- ²³ See Kenneth J. Hagan and Ian J. Bickerton, *Unintended Consequences: The United States at War*, Reaktion Books, London, 2007.
- ²⁴ Greg Mills, 'Ten Counterinsurgency Commandments from Afghanistan', Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 10, 2007.
- ²⁵ General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Allen Lane, London, 2005, esp. pp. xiii-xiv, 3-4, 327-31.
- ²⁶ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1975.
- ²⁷ Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War', in *Marines Magazine*, January 1999; see also Max Boot, 'Beyond the 3-block war', in *Armed Forces Journal*, March 2006; General John Abizaid, 'Combined Civil/Military Responses to National and International Events', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007; and Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, 'Lessons Learned from Contemporary Operations', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007.

- ²⁸ Robert O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century', a paper prepared for the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre 40th Anniversary Seminar Series, Australian National University, Canberra, 15 August 2006.
- ²⁹ O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility ...'
- ³⁰ James Hilder, 'Stop building walls, Maliki tells US', in *The Australian*, April 24, 2007, p. 10; Robert Fisk, 'Divide and rule: America's plan for Baghdad', in *The Canberra Times*, April 12, 2007, p. 15.
- ³¹ 'For Obama and Press, Iraq Falls Off Radar', in the *Washington Times*, March 4, 2010. Before his election, President Obama opposed the surge. However, as Afghanistan and domestic issues such as health reform and the struggling economy have increasingly demanded his attention, he seems to have been content to avoid controversy over Iraq
- ³² 'Nouri al-Maliki takes early lead at polls', in *The Australian*, March 9, 2010; 'Iraqi opposition leader Iyad Allawi alleges widespread election fraud', in *The Australian*, March 12, 2010.
- ³³ Timothy Williams and Rod Norland, 'Allawi Victory in Iraq Sets Up Period of Uncertainty', in *The New York Times*, March 26, 2010.
- ³⁴ Anthony Shadid, 'Followers of Sadr Emerge Stronger After Iraq Elections', in *The New York Times*, March 16, 2010.
- ³⁵ Andrew J. Bacevich, 'Surge to Nowhere', in *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2008.
- ³⁶ Thomas Ricks, *Understanding the Surge in Iraq and What's Ahead*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2009. Those problems include political power sharing, the distribution of oil revenues, relations with Iran, and the emergence of an effectively autonomous Kurdish state in the north.
- ³⁷ Ricks, *Understanding the Surge*. See also Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Penguin, London, 2007.
- ³⁸ 'Nouri al-Maliki takes early lead at polls', in *The Australian*, March 9, 2010.
- ³⁹ Ricks, *Understanding the Surge in Iraq and What's Ahead*.
- ⁴⁰ Amin Saikal, 'No way Obama can describe war in Afghanistan as "just"', in *The Canberra Times*, December 16, 2009; Kim Barker, 'Letter from Kabul: What the United States Must Overcome in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2009.
- ⁴¹ Bill Deane, 'Doubts about the Afghan National Army contrast starkly with official shows of optimism', in *The Canberra Times*, February 18, 2010; C.J. Chivers, 'Marines Do Heavy Lifting as Afghan Army Lags in Battle', in *The New York Times*, February 20, 2010.
- ⁴² M. Nariz Shahrani, 'President Obama's "New" Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategy: Why it is Unlikely to Work', Public Lecture, Australian National University, Canberra, 20 October 2009.
- ⁴³ Riad Kahwaji, 'Local Realities Clash with U.S. Policy in Tribal Belt', in *DefenseNews*, April 23, 2007, pp. 1, 8.
- ⁴⁴ George Kennan ('X'), 'The Sources of Soviet Conflict', in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.
- ⁴⁵ Air forces from the US, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were involved. There were no allied operational casualties.
- ⁴⁶ Robert L. Scales, 'Checkmate by Operational Maneuver', in *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2001.
- ⁴⁷ General Richard Myers, quoted in 'US Push to Base Forces on our Soil', in *The Weekend Australian*, 17 January 2004, p. 001.
- ⁴⁸ See for example *Parameters*, 2001-2009; the *Australian Army Journal*, 2003-2009; and the *RUSI Journal*, 2001-2009.
- ⁴⁹ Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 236-7.
- ⁵⁰ Mackubin T. Owens, 'Civil Military Relations and the US Strategy Deficit', Foreign Policy Research Institute, <http://www.fpri.org/> accessed 23 February 2010; Richard H. Kohn, 'Tarnished Brass: Is the US Military Profession in Decline?', in *World Affairs*, Spring 2009.
- ⁵¹ The category 'small arms fire' includes rifles, pistols, machine guns, rockets, and the like.
- ⁵² A notable exception is USAF major general Charles Dunlap: see his article 'Do We Need "Airminded" Options for Afghanistan', at <http://sitrep.globalsecurity.org/charles-dunlap/> November 2009. See also *An Air Force of Influence: A Strategic Framework for the Future Air Force*, Air Power Development Centre, Tuggeranong, 2008.