Because the dominance of America’s airpower in traditional wars has not been lost on those who threaten our national interests, we can logically expect them to turn increasingly to irregular warfare (IW). The ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan reflect the ways that US military power has had to adapt and transform to meet new challenges presented by enemies who have respect for our conventional dominance and the determination to find exploitable seams in our capabilities. Although the capabilities and effects that America’s airpower brings to the fight are not as visible to the casual observer as the maneuvers of ground forces, airpower (including operations in the air, space, and cyberspace domains) remains an invaluable enabler for those forces. Airpower can also serve as a powerful IW capability in its own right, as it did early in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. No one should dismiss IW as falling strictly within the purview of ground or special operations forces. Understanding the IW environment and, in particular, airpower’s immense contributions is critical for America’s future Air Force leaders, who will prove instrumental in ensuring that the service continues adapting to an ever-changing enemy and bringing relevant capabilities to bear in an ever-changing fight.

The Irregular Warfare Environment

Doctrine defines IW as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”1 IW includes counterinsurgency operations and foreign internal defense (FID) (providing support to/for a regime, typically against internal foes) as well as support for...
Airpower’s Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare

insurgency operations. For example, al-Qaeda and associated movements, in their quest for power and territory, will likely resort to IW methods, attacking perceived vulnerabilities in order to influence relevant audiences while avoiding direct confrontation with US, allied, or partner-nation forces. This type of warfare often takes a markedly different form from traditional, conventional warfare, requiring the addition of IW capabilities to the “tool kit” from which US forces can pull. At the same time, however, the Air Force cannot afford to lose its acknowledged edge in traditional warfare, which has enabled past military successes and will prove necessary in the future to maintain America’s position as the world’s superpower.

The long-war aspect of IW poses challenges to America’s center of gravity—its willingness to bring considerable resources to bear and remain engaged in an extended fight. Historically, democracies tend to grow weary of fighting relatively quickly, as reflected in this country’s experiences in the Civil War, Vietnam, and the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the network of radical Islamic extremists has produced a plan for a 100-year struggle, and democratic nations under their attack are showing signs of fatigue just a few years into the battle.\(^2\) This long-war aspect has implications for today’s Air Force; for instance, junior officers, operating today at the tactical level, may well be responsible for the strategic aspects of tomorrow’s war. Not only must our Airmen have knowledge of airpower capabilities in IW, but also they must articulate airpower concepts as well as educate the joint and coalition communities on the weapons and skills that airpower brings to the fight.

**Airpower’s Asymmetric Advantages**

In an IW environment, the traditionally recognized ability of airpower to strike at the adversary’s “strategic center of gravity” will likely have less relevance due to the decentralized and diffuse nature of the enemy.\(^3\) The amorphous mass of ideological movements opposing Western influence and values generally lacks a defined command structure that airpower can attack with predictable effects. Still, airpower holds a number of asymmetric trump cards (capabilities the enemy can neither meet with parity nor counter in kind). For instance, airpower’s ability to conduct precision strikes across the globe can play an important role in counterinsurgency operations. Numerous other advantages (including information and cyber operations; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR]; and global mobility) have already proven just as important. These capabilities provide our fighting forces with highly asymmetric advantages in the IW environment.

Innovation and adaptation are hallmarks of airpower. Cold War–era bombers, designed to carry nuclear weapons, can loiter for hours over the battlefield and deliver individual conventional weapons to within a few feet of specified coordinates. Fighter aircraft, designed to deliver precision weapons against hardened targets, can disseminate targeting-pod video directly to an Air Force joint terminal attack controller who can then direct a strike guided by either laser or the global positioning system (GPS). Unmanned systems such as the Predator, once solely a surveillance platform, now have effective laser designation and the capacity for precision, kinetic strike. Airborne platforms offer electronic protection to ground forces, including attacking insurgent communications and the electronics associated with
triggering improvised explosive devices (IED). Exploiting altitude, speed, and range, airborne platforms can create these effects, unconstrained by terrain or artificial boundaries between units. Forward-thinking Airmen developed these innovations by using adaptive tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment to counter a thinking, adaptive enemy.

To be sure, our IW adversaries have their own asymmetric capabilities such as suicide bombers, IEDs, and the appropriation of civilian residences, mosques, and hospitals as staging areas for their combat operations. However, they lack and cannot effectively offset unfettered access to the high ground that superiority in air, space, and cyberspace provides.

Airpower’s Contributions—
Today and Tomorrow

US airpower, in its myriad forms, is currently operating simultaneously in multiple theaters, producing invaluable combat and enabling effects across the board. For instance, the Air Force has engaged in a wide spectrum of combat operations in Southwest Asia for more than 15 years, and over 25,000 Airmen are currently deployed to US Central Command’s area of responsibility. Airpower’s capabilities have been—and will continue to be—integral to the success of US military power in this theater and in the global war on terror writ large, a fact often overlooked in accounts that focus on the more readily visible aspects of war. Nevertheless, when properly integrated with other military and civil efforts under the rubric of IW, airpower consistently delivers effects critical to winning the overall joint fight and meeting the campaign’s overarching military and political objectives.

A number of the fundamental tenets of airpower have proven particularly valuable in enabling the Air Force to bring its most potent asymmetric strengths to bear in ongoing operations. Perhaps first and foremost amongst these is the application of airpower via centralized control and decentralized execution. This imperative for centralizing planning and direction while decentralizing tactical-employment decisions has as much applicability to IW as to traditional warfare operations. The rationale for this fundamental belief should roll off a professional Airman’s tongue as easily as, say, a Marine officer would justify the inviolability of the Marine air-ground task force. By incorporating all assets under a single commander, Air Force forces and joint force air component commander (JFACC), the air component can both effectively and efficiently allocate limited airpower resources to cover competing requirements from multiple war-fighting commanders across the theater while maintaining a vigilant focus on broader goals. The fire hose of effects available from airpower operations can be focused where and when needed, according to the priorities established by the joint force commander. Decisions regarding particular employment methods and tactics will reside at a lower level, closer to the fight and to the knowledge of what is needed.

Today, air-component forces provide the following: kinetic effects from fighters, bombers, and unmanned systems; ISR that uses a variety of air-breathing, space, and nontraditional sensors; electronic-warfare platforms; and airlift/airdrop capabilities, which can range practically anywhere across Iraq and Afghanistan, provided they have not been “penny-packeted” to individual units. Most of airpower’s
Airpower’s Crucial Role in Irregular Warfare

contributions in Iraq focus on support for ground forces, but unique abilities allow it to conduct both interdependent and independent operations.

In this regard, airpower offers a wide spectrum of asymmetric capabilities that we can focus and direct as necessary, creating effects such as kinetic destruction, persistent ISR collection/dissemination (including air-breathing and space-based as well as manned and unmanned), infiltrating/exfiltrating forces and supplies, and attacks on computer networks and support infrastructures. All of this is available on an as-needed basis, almost without regard for geography or artificial surface boundaries.

Since the beginning of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, Central Command’s air component has flown over a half million combat and combat-support sorties. Though impressive, that number does not tell the whole story. First, many of these sorties are of long duration, supplying unprecedented persistence and presence overhead, ultimately enabled through a combination of air refueling and forward basing. One cannot under-estimate the criticality of being able to choose from among a variety of weapons and tools and respond rapidly, particularly in an IW environment in which the enemy very often dictates the time, place, and nature of attacks. Second, and more importantly, sortie counts or similar metrics cannot readily depict many of the effects that the Air Force brings to the fight. Although impressive, statistics represent only one part of the Air Force’s contribution in today’s war. We must not overlook either the robust intelligence analysis and dissemination capabilities that leverage the unprecedented collection afforded by today’s Air Force systems or the communications-enabling functions that make global warfare as seamless as if it were in our own backyard.

**Employing Airpower’s Capabilities**

Space-based assets rank among the least understood and recognized of the Air Force’s war-fighting contributions. Vital intelligence, communications, weather, and navigation capabilities all rely heavily on assured access to space. Space-based force multipliers are proving immensely valuable at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Take for example the GPS—it is not only critical to providing guidance for precision munitions but also vital to reporting the geolocation of friendly troops, insurgents, and civilians. Precision location allows more rapid responses for close air support, combat search and rescue, casualty evacuation, and prosecution of time-sensitive targets. Yet, a determined, capable adversary could challenge access to space, as the Chinese reminded the rest of the world with their recent antisatellite demonstration.

Intelligence made available by air and space forces serves as a critical enabler in IW. In traditional warfare, larger yields and/or quantities of weapons can compensate for targeting uncertainties, but this is generally not the case in counterinsurgency operations, in which unintended collateral damage can undermine support for the government and become a recruiting tool for the insurgency. Currently, over both Afghanistan and Iraq, space-based and air-breathing assets alike continuously monitor the situation on the ground, helping identify insurgents as well as their organizational networks, supporters, and lines of communication and supply. These platforms collect and disseminate a variety of intelligence (signals,
communications, imagery, moving-target, full-motion-video, etc.), all integral to the fight. Overhead assets also contribute significantly to the emerging field of forensic analysis, which involves backtracking from ongoing events to determine the sources from which they emanated (e.g., tracing back from explosions of IEDs to locate the bomb-making organizations and facilities that support them). In both Iraq and Afghanistan, airborne assets have developed the capacity to respond quickly to determine the launch points of mortar or rocket attacks, identify suspicious individuals/vehicles and mark them with laser designators for apprehension by ground forces, or, in many cases, destroy them outright. As with other airpower applications, centralized control of intelligence platforms (which minimizes duplication of effort and ensures support for the joint force commander’s highest-priority requirements) enables effective and efficient use of limited ISR assets—key elements of the coalition’s asymmetric advantage in IW. For example, effective ISR enables the air component to bring airpower to bear in support of small coalition or indigenous ground-force units, magnifying their organic capabilities.

Precision strike, another highly effective tool of counterinsurgency, permits us to eliminate insurgents in close proximity to civilians or friendly ground forces, thus giving coalition forces a significant firepower advantage. Highly accurate guidance systems, cockpit-selectable fuzes, and munitions of various explosive yields allow Airmen to deliver intended effects precisely while limiting unintended effects. Of course, in certain situations we may need to attack large areas with less discriminate use of firepower—a task for which airpower is also well suited.

Air mobility offers another edge in counter-insurgent operations. Our forces exercise this advantage over surface-bound IW adversaries by transporting personnel and cargo while bypassing contested lines of communications, air-dropping supplies, and quickly evacuating the wounded. In Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom last year, the air component flew over 50,000 airlift sorties, transporting over 1,000,000 personnel and 90,000 pallets of cargo that otherwise would have moved via slower, more vulnerable ground-based means of transportation. The mobility advantage also enables the infiltration, resupply, and exfiltration of relatively small ground units. By providing humanitarian assistance, medical support, and transportation for government officials to remote areas, airpower can promote the government’s credibility and improve the quality of life for its population. These types of operations, which directly affect and are immediately visible to the population in question, can have significant effects in the overall campaign against the insurgents.

Coupled with relatively small numbers of coalition and indigenous forces, airpower can bring a full spectrum of effects to bear, from humanitarian to electronic to kinetic. In some cases, the mere visible or audible presence of airpower can demonstrate commitment to a population and support to a government as well as shape the behavior of insurgents by reducing their freedom of movement and denying them sanctuaries.

**Assisting Partner Nations’ Air Forces**

The Air Force’s FID, which includes military programs that support partner nations’ strategy for internal
defense and development, primarily seeks to develop and sustain the airpower capabilities of those nations. By building partnerships in this way, the United States helps shape the strategic environment and impede potential terrorists from gaining a foothold in these countries. Ultimately, increasing partner nations’ ability to counter irregular threats allows them to fight more effectively, enhance their legitimacy, and reduce their dependence on US forces.

Currently the Air Force provides education and training essential to resurrecting the air forces of Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite getting off to a slow start, the nascent Iraqi air force is conducting rudimentary ISR and mobility missions. Operating Al Muthana Air Base (a section of Baghdad International Airport), it plans to take over activities at several other bases. US forces continue to train Iraqis in support functions needed to maintain and protect their aircraft and bases. Furthermore, they are helping develop an indigenous ability to provide air surveillance and air traffic control over sovereign airspace—an essential part of any coalition exit strategy since partner nations will need support from coalition air forces until they can independently conduct their own operations and defend their airspace. In this age of increasing emphasis on IW, the Air Force’s FID capabilities will likely receive greater emphasis and resources.

Planning, tasking, executing, and assessing combat operations are the JFACC’s forte. Clearly, planning and executing phase four (stabilize) and phase five (enable civil authority) operations pose unique challenges for the air component. An understanding of how to help rebuild a partner nation’s airpower (including complexities of legislation and funding for foreign military assistance, aspirations of partner nations, and opportunities for coalition contributions) constitutes one potential IW emphasis area for educating and training Airmen. The Air Force’s FID force structure may also need a relook with an eye towards improving the capacity to rebuild partner nations’ air forces; for example, it is no coincidence that the most successful asset of the Iraqi air force, the C-130, is the only aircraft type it has in common with the US Air Force.

**Developing Airmen for Irregular Warfare**

Force development is a function of education, training, and experience, with an objective of producing adaptive, creative, and knowledge-enabled Airmen. Our Airmen not only must know and articulate what their service brings to the IW fight today, but also must think “outside the box”—an ability that will enable them to lead and direct the Air Force of the future. Our service must continue to adapt and leverage its asymmetric capabilities against those adversaries engaged in IW against the United States and its allies. Fortunately, adaptability and an inherent capacity for thinking above the fray are ingrained in the genetic code of Airmen. Likewise, flexibility is built into the platforms with which they wage war. Developing bright, innovative, highly capable leaders who will continue this tradition of flexibility is essential to ensure that airpower maintains a place at the fore of IW conflicts.

Our Airmen must receive training and education in the capabilities and limitations of airpower;
moreover, they must unapologetically articulate airpower concepts and doctrine to the joint community, members of other services, and personnel assigned to other government agencies. Numerous ongoing initiatives focus on educating our Airmen on aspects of IW in which US airpower plays a direct role and makes a direct contribution, such as the effort initiated by the Air Force chief of staff to identify and/or train Airmen who have a solid understanding of foreign cultures and languages. In addition, expanded training programs for new recruits, increased emphasis on predeployment training for combat-support personnel, and enhanced flying training for aviators and Battlefield Airmen based on war-fighting lessons learned all reflect the new realities of IW. Just as Airmen can survive and kill the enemy at great distances from the air, so must they have the training and motivation to survive and kill at close range on the ground.

Air Force doctrine will also play a significant role in educating Airmen. Consisting of the fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of national objectives, doctrine shapes the manner in which the Air Force organizes, trains, equips, and sustains its forces, preparing warfighters for future uncertainties and giving them a common set of understandings on which to base their decisions. Currently the Air Force is revising the existing version of AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense*, 10 May 2004, and developing a new doctrinal keystone publication: AFDD 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, which will codify how the Air Force approaches IW, including its capabilities and contributions to counter-insurgency operations. This document will also form the basis of our service’s position as the joint community tackles the important business of writing doctrine on counterinsurgency. All of the aforementioned initiatives are designed to create a core of IW leaders and experts upon which the Air Force can rely.

**Conclusion**

America and its military are at war; the current threat posed by global terrorists, potentially armed with weapons of mass destruction, is as great as previous threats to our way of life posed by Nazism, fascism, and communism. Coalition and partner-nation forces join the United States in this effort. The US Air Force provides air, space, and cyber power as part of the joint and coalition war-fighting team, dedicated to winning the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan while simultaneously protecting the vital interests of our nation and the coalition in which it operates. Airpower, in all its forms, brings a vast array of direct-effect weapons and joint-force enablers to the fray, a fact not always clearly recognized or portrayed in the press. Although it is not so important that audiences properly attribute progress in the global war on terror to particular components or services, it is important that Air Force Airmen know and articulate our resident asymmetric capabilities and that they use their knowledge and expertise to ensure that our service remains as relevant to tomorrow’s fight as it is to today’s.

**Notes**


2. Rear Adm William D. Sullivan, vice-director, Strategic Plans and Policy, Joint Chiefs of Staff,
3. The strategic center of gravity is a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.


---

**Contributor**

**Maj Gen Allen G. Peck** (USAFA; MS, Air Force Institute of Technology; MA, Salve Regina College) is commander, Headquarters Air Force Doctrine Center, and vice-commander, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He has served as an F-15 aircraft commander, instructor pilot, and standardization and evaluation flight examiner. General Peck has completed two tours on the Air Staff at the Pentagon and a joint assignment as chief, Current Operations, US Central Command (USCENTCOM), MacDill AFB, Florida. The general has commanded an air operations group in Germany, an air expeditionary wing in Saudi Arabia, and the Air and Space Expeditionary Force Center, Langley AFB, Virginia. A key planner for the air war over Serbia, General Peck served as chief, Combat Plans, combined air operations center (CAOC), Vincenza, Italy, during the subsequent campaign. He also served with the commander, Air Force forces at USCENTCOM’s CAOC during Operation Iraqi Freedom’s major combat operations. As deputy combined force air component commander, he oversaw planning, tasking, execution, and assessment of coalition air operations for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. A command pilot with more than 2,700 hours in the F-15, including more than 300 combat hours, General Peck is a distinguished graduate of the US Air Force Academy, Squadron Officer School, the Air Force Institute of Technology, and the College of Naval Command and Staff; he also attended Harvard University as a National Security Fellow.

---

**Disclaimer**

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression, academic environment of Air University. They do not reflect the official position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force or the Air University.