

# Airpower in Counter-Terrorist Operations: Balancing Objectives and Risks

**Adam R. Grissom Ph.D. and Karl P. Mueller Ph.D.**  
Senior Political Scientists, *The RAND Corporation*

## Harnessing Air Power in Counter-Terrorist Operations

Violent non-state actors, including terrorist networks, pose a real if limited threat to the citizens of virtually every state in the international system. The operations of these networks, individually and collectively, are also corrosive to the stability and functioning of the international system as a whole. It is therefore natural that the more capable and responsible states in the system have attempted to employ their instruments of power, including military power, to mitigate both the proximate and the broader challenges posed by terrorist networks. Given the growing number and potency of these networks since the 1990s, “counter-terrorist (CT) campaigns” have not surprisingly become a hallmark of contemporary international politics.

In recent decades most, if not all, the air forces represented at the 8th Dubai International Air Chiefs Conference have been involved in efforts to disrupt, deny, deter, and/or ultimately defeat terrorist networks. While the coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have garnered much of the public attention, efforts to bring military power to bear against terrorist networks have of course extended well beyond those countries and

this region. Today there are more CT campaigns underway in more places, conducted by more powers and coalitions against more adversaries, than ever before.

In recent years a growing number of these efforts have taken the form we call “limited-liability, limited-objective campaigns” in which major powers cooperate with local forces (official or irregular) to disrupt and exert pressure on non-state adversary networks located in areas that are chronically under-governed or otherwise uncongenial to more comprehensive stability operations. These campaigns are not necessarily aimed at transforming the socio-political conditions that make an area conducive to adversary networks and therefore they offer slim prospects for decisive victory. The de facto objective is often limited to mitigating the threat posed by the adversary network or networks. The assets and resources devoted to these campaigns by major powers are likewise limited to relatively small numbers of special forces and air assets with a “small footprint” located outside the area of direct operations or perhaps a small number of locations within the operational area.

The strategic basis of limited-liability, limited-objective campaigns is therefore quite narrow. The primary aim of the major power – which faces a threat from the enemy that may be significant

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but is far from existential – is simply to disrupt the operational capability of an adversary network for some period of time. The assets, resources, and even political capital expended are minimized along with risks to metropolitan forces. The partnership with local forces may be temporary and transactional. The essential calculus is that the limited strategic benefit of temporarily disrupting the adversary network exceeds the limited strategic costs and risks of the campaign. By our count more than two dozen such campaigns are currently underway around the world.

#### **Lessons Learned for Air Power in Counter-Terrorist Operations**

The most striking characteristic of limited-objective, limited-liability campaigns is their fundamental reliance on airpower. In these circumstances, airborne assets are vital to every phase of what has come to be known as the “find, fix, and finish” cycle of targeting nodes in terrorist networks. Airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets are essential to illuminating terrorist network topography and to finding key individuals and groups in the network and characterizing them as targets in the campaign. Airborne ISR is likewise vital to fixing key objectives so action can be taken against them. And of course in many cases air assets are the preferred means of delivering effects to the objective, whether in the form of munitions or strike teams.

What is often less recognized is the equally essential role that airpower plays at the operational level of these campaigns. Coalition forces generally move to and from the operational theater by air, they are repositioned within the theater by air, and as noted above they often conduct operations unilaterally or with partner nation forces primarily from the air. Coalition forces – both ground and air units – are typically based at airfields, they are typically commanded from facilities at airfields, they survive on logistics delivered mostly over aerial lines of communication, and they rely on

weather forecasting, communications networks, and a myriad of other aerospace capabilities with an airfield at the epicenter. In many ways, with little public fanfare, the expeditionary airfield has emerged as the sine qua non of the modern CT campaign.

All of this implicitly underscores an existential strategic reliance on airpower that is even more easily taken for granted. With their reliance on persistent overhead ISR coverage, tactical air mobility, and aerial firepower to protect assets on the ground, contemporary CT campaigns can scarcely be contemplated under any conditions except air supremacy. The freedom to exploit the aerospace domain at will is the central military advantage of modern states over adversary networks. CT campaigns are naturally, if often only semi-consciously, built around this advantage. Airpower – both ISR and precision strike – also underpins CT campaigns as one of the deterrent factors contributing to contemporary terrorist networks, unlike their predecessors, being predominantly non-state entities rather than state-sponsored ones.

The development of air-centric limited-liability, limited-objective counter-terrorist campaigns amounts, in our view, to a significant military innovation. The political leaders of major powers have framed a challenging strategic problem for their armed forces: mitigating the threat posed by terrorist networks where conditions are such that standard assistance or resource-intensive conventional stability operations are unlikely to yield a positive strategic return on investment. The armed forces of the major powers have responded by devising air-centric campaigns that attempt to strike a favorable balance between operational cost and benefit.

Many lessons have certainly been learned in this process of innovation, as suggested by the striking similarities among CT campaigns conducted by different (even antagonistic) major powers. At the

tactical level, the primary lesson is undoubtedly that finding and fixing are enormously more important and more difficult than finishing. The tempo, precision, and scale of effects achieved against such enemies are all primarily determined by the degree to which the adversary network can be characterized and its key nodes fixed in time and space. Human intelligence obviously plays a tremendous role in that process. For external powers, however, airborne ISR is the name of the game. Yet for many air forces, ISR perplexingly remains a “low density, high demand” capability category (a matter of concern not limited to CT operations).

**At the tactical level, finding and fixing are enormously more important and more difficult than finishing**

At the operational level the most important lesson is arguably the importance of fusing operations and intelligence effectively. Every adversary network is different, and friendly action against a competent network will trigger response and adaptation. The art and science of orchestrating an effective campaign of action against a clandestine human network is the height of CT campaigning. Doing it well, of course, requires overcoming traditional organizational boundaries, not only between services but among military and non-military agencies, and multiple participating nations.

What is even more striking than the lessons learned about air-centric CT campaigns in recent years, however, are the questions that remain unresolved. Leaving aside the various tactical and technical controversies, there are myriad fundamental operational and strategic issues that have not received the detailed analytical examination that one might expect. These include the relative effectiveness of decapitation and attrition targeting campaigns, the effects of concentrating on particular alternative target sets within them, and the nature of the relationship between number of assets committed to a

campaign and its effects on the adversary network (which may be linear or non-linear, or perhaps both depending on conditions). Even basic issues such as whether the unintended (or for that matter the intended) casualties caused by CT targeting campaigns mean that they “create more enemies than they remove from the battlefield” have been subjected to little systematic analysis, though scant evidence has not discouraged pundits and partisans from making confident assertions about the answer.

### Conclusion

In sum, we might draw an analogy between the state of the art of CT campaigning today and the state of operational airpower innovation in the period immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. A great deal of tactical and operational experience has been accrued by a variety of major powers. Yet, unlike the 1990s when the Gulf War Air Power Survey and numerous other studies sought to analyze the operational effectiveness and lessons of that campaign, many of the fundamental questions that will guide the evolution of the air-centric CT capability to maturity still remain under-examined.

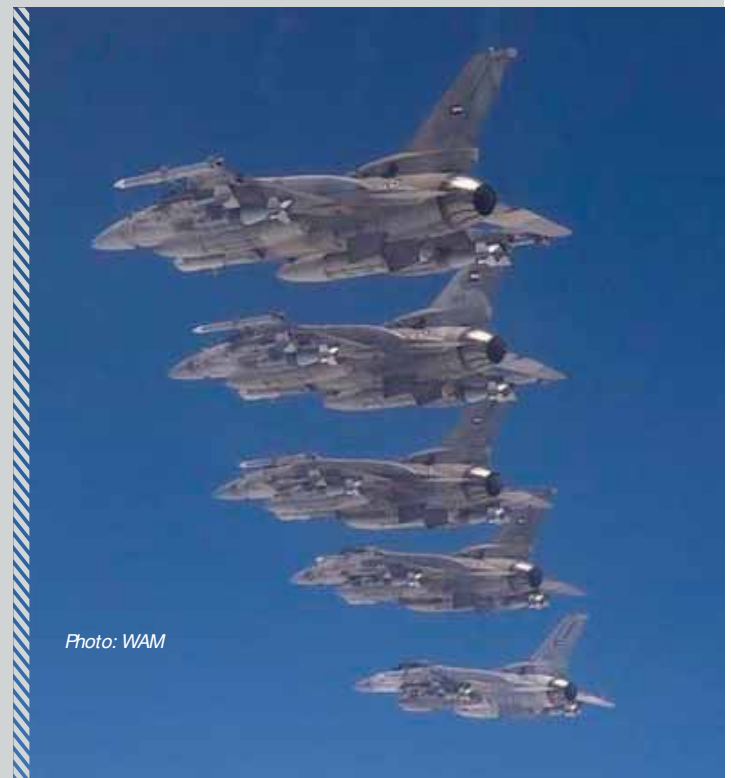


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This is important to air forces because the primary challenge in further developing CT capabilities is conceptual rather than material in character. While some sophisticated systems have been employed in CT campaigns, the essential aerial tools are not technically complex compared to those required for fighting advanced state adversaries. What is

extraordinarily complex and challenging, however, is the orchestration of those tools with all the other elements of national power to achieve the desired disruptive or deterrent effects on an adversary network. It is this intellectual problem that poses the greatest limitation today for the development of CT capabilities in powers great and small.

### References

1- Definitions of “terrorist” vary, and often exclude groups that operate within war zones or that attack military instead of civilian targets. This discussion applies the term broadly to include a variety of non-state networks that resemble terrorist organizations in structure and function.

*Adam Grissom is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California, United States. He leads a group that conducts special mission analysis for the U.S. Department of Defense and allied ministries of defense. Adam’s external academic work focuses on innovation in military organizations. He lectures on the subject and serves as a reviewer for The Journal of Security Studies, International Security, the European Journal of International Studies, and Studies in Conflict and Terrorism. Prior to joining RAND in 2000, Adam was a civil servant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from King’s College London, UK, a master’s degree in Public Policy from Harvard University, United States, and a B.A. in Political Science from Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, United States.*



Adam Grissom

*Karl Mueller is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California, United States, and teaches at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, United States, and at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Washington, D.C., United States. He writes and lectures on a wide variety of national security subjects, including deterrence and coercion, airpower theory and history, crisis stability, economic sanctions, nuclear proliferation, space weaponization, and legal and moral issues in the use of military power. Dr. Mueller’s most recent RAND publication is Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War and his current projects focus on NATO defense strategies for the Baltic States and designing wargames for the analysis of potential future conflicts. Prior to joining RAND in 2001, he served as a professor of Comparative Military Studies at the U.S. Air Force’s School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, United States. He holds a Ph.D. in Politics from Princeton University, New Jersey, United States, and a B.A. in Political Science for the University of Chicago in Illinois, United States.*



Karl Mueller

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