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FUTURE AIR POWER



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The Quest for a New Air Power Concept

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General Vaitsis, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: it is an honor and a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak at this conference. I am delighted to be in Athens. The program looks excellent. There is no better place to be than the Hellenic Air Force Academy right here right now.

Let me start with my main message: the bottom line is that airmen are illiterate when it comes to theory, strategy, and doctrine. We are smart in so many ways—masters of technology—but rather uneducated when it comes to conceptual thinking.

Conceptual thinking is perhaps more important now than it has been in a long time. We have to rethink investments and force structure. It is not so much that we need to do more with less. Rather, we have to do things differently. We cannot afford to remain intellectually lazy. We have to think big. Alexander the Great did not get his nickname because he was thinking small.

Current Military Doctrine

Part of the problem is that we have a flawed military doctrine and a military mindset that is anti-air power in its design. We invest in fifth-generation aircraft, but we are stuck with first-generation thinking.

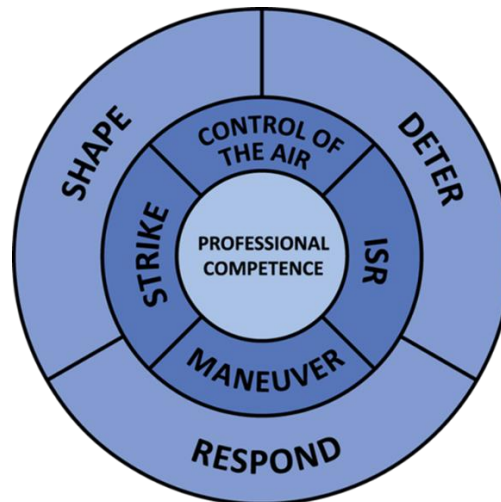
I refer to this as the “BCD complex”: we are obsessed with the notions of Battle, Combat, and Destruction.

- ❖ We are battlefield-oriented and ground-centric rather than air-minded.
- ❖ We focus on war-fighting rather than the real purpose of war, which is war-ending and peace-building.
- ❖ We are fixated on the tactical level of destroying tanks and artillery rather than thinking in terms of strategic effects.
- ❖ We prefer invasion and occupation to governance and control from the air.

Why would you seek to engage the enemy on the ground, in the tactical red zone, when you can strike from a safe distance? Perhaps this harks back to the chivalric notion of giving the enemy a fair chance to win, but that view of knightly honor no longer applies in today’s conflicts.

A Framework for the Application of Air Power

We need a new strategic model for our military interventions. Air—not land—must be at the center. We must begin by strengthening the relationship between policy and military operations. We must connect air power to statecraft.



We can approach this through a three-ring model. The outer ring refers to national strategy. We *shape* and influence our environment through presence; daily activities, training, and exercises. If shaping does not work we might have to *deter* someone from doing something. We might have to threaten and warn, we might have to forward-deploy, or enforce no-fly zones. In the worst case, if deterrence fails, we have to *respond* with military force.

The middle ring focuses on the four main roles of air power. This is how we use air power to operationalize national strategy.

- ❖ *Control of the air.* Let us not forget the importance of air superiority and air supremacy.
- ❖ *Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).* Situational awareness is Alpha and Omega. We need eyes in the sky.
- ❖ *Maneuver or mobility.* We need to get men, women, and equipment to and from the theater of operations.
- ❖ *Strike.* This can take the form of strategic attack, interdiction, or close air support, or missions against ships and submarines.

The inner ring is about professional competence. We need to foster professional mastery of airpower. We need technical skills, but we also need to emphasize the core of our business, which is to *plan, lead, and execute air campaigns*, and these campaigns take place in a political context.

Lessons from History

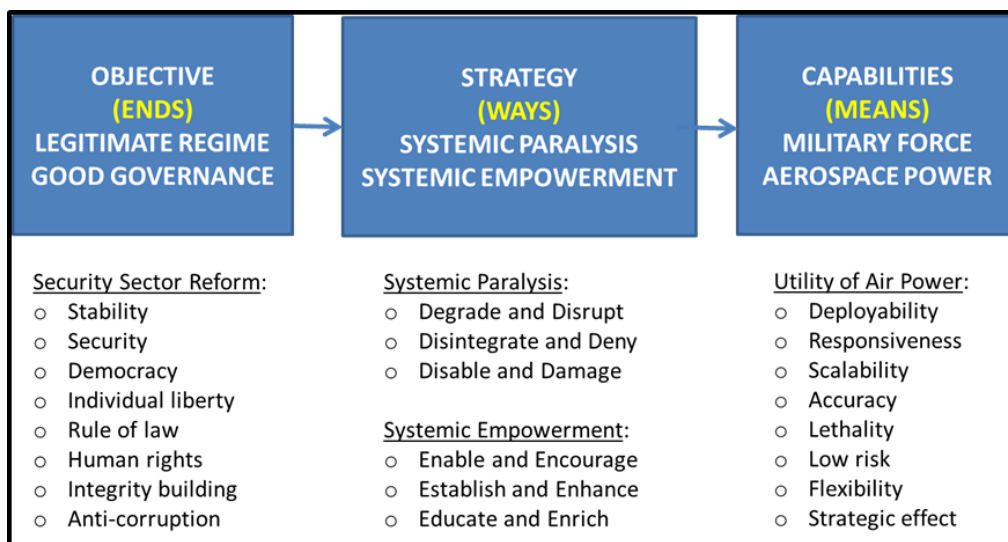
Looking back, what do our latest military engagements have in common? Operation Deliberate Force in 1995: what are we doing in Bosnia and Herzegovina today? Operation Allied Force in 1999: what are we doing in Kosovo today? Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom: what are we doing in Afghanistan and Iraq today? Operation Unified Protector: what are we doing in Libya today?

The simple answer is that all these campaigns aimed at the same goal: post-war reforms. One way or another, the nations or international coalitions for which we executed our missions are trying still to establish functioning, legitimate regimes in the countries where we have intervened. They are trying to promote good governance in these countries. They are conducting security sector reform one way or another.

I here define security sector reform in its broadest sense, which means that they seek to foster some sort of stability, security, and prosperity in accordance with the basic values of NATO (democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law, and human rights). They do this by building government integrity, introducing anti-corruption measures, and establishing decision-making procedures based on transparency and accountability. I am not saying that these objectives are perfect, but at least they lead to what Basil Liddell Hart would have called “a better state of peace.”

A New Air Power Concept

If that is what our governments end up doing, why do we not think in these terms before we go to war? After all, “every war must end.” We should define our “endgame” to harmonize with the goal our governments have in mind when they send us into combat.



Once we have defined the endgame, the next question relates to strategy. Strategy is “the art of winning by matching ends, ways, and means.”

I suggest a two-fold strategy whereby we look at friends and foes as system of systems. On the one hand, we need to punish or coerce the bad guy: we might have to destroy something and kill someone—we are after all talking about war—but it is better if we can paralyze the system, freeze it into inaction. We can do this through the *strategy of paralysis*—we seek to degrade and disrupt, deny and disintegrate, damage and disable.

But, if we want to change a regime we have to think about its successor early on. Consequently, we need to support an alternative to the regime we are paralyzing. This is the *strategy of empowerment*: we strengthen friendly forces by enabling and encouraging, establishing and enhancing, educating and enriching. These are the elements of empowerment. In other words, we should pursue a strategy that strengthens friend and weakens foe.

With the ends and ways in place we can discuss means, such as air capabilities. This is not only about flying faster, higher, and further. Rather, it is about key characteristics of air power. It is about what air power brings to the political table.

- ❖ First, air power is unique compared to ground and naval power when it comes to *deployability*. Air forces have a very high degree of readiness. Air forces can be deployed very fast and be ready for action immediately.
- ❖ Second, air power is unique because of its *responsiveness*. We can act and react in minutes rather than days and weeks. We can return to the scene fast if the opponent does not comply with our wishes.
- ❖ Third, air power offers *scalability*. It can be used as little or as much as our leaders prefer. We can start and stop in seconds and minutes. We can go instant or gradual.
- ❖ Fourth, air power can act with unprecedented *accuracy* and precision from a distance. The old saying that if you can hit the enemy he can hit you is not always true in the context of air power.
- ❖ Fifth, we can be as *lethal* as we need to be. Big or small bombs. Kinetic and non-kinetic.
- ❖ Sixth, air power is not risk free, but we can operate at relatively *low risk* to our own and enemy lives compared to ground forces in-theater. “Boots on the ground” means casualties.
- ❖ Seventh, we give the political masters and the military commanders *flexibility*, so they can deal with the prevailing and shifting circumstances. They get options.
- ❖ Eighth, air power offers *strategic effects* rather than merely tactical impact.

I suggest that this is a good starting point for a new air power strategy and a doctrine that is air-minded and air-centric. This is a way out of the BCD complex. We need to insert the unique characteristics of air power into our conceptual thinking.

This is what I mean by an air-model rather than a land-model. We should use air power for strategic effect. Our point of departure should be to connect air power to national and international policy, rather than to view it predominantly in terms of the battlefield. We must seek to affect the enemy as a political-social-economic system rather than set our sights on the classic military order of battle. To do that we have to think clearly, coherently, and creatively about ends, ways, and means.

It is fun to talk about JAS Gripen, Eurofighter, Rafale, F-22, and F-35, but it is necessary to talk about concepts, strategy, and doctrine. This air-model must be developed further. It is only a start.

Mastering the Air Power Profession

To apply air power, we must master the air power profession.

Here is *what* I suggest we do:

- ❖ We must stop using air power as a substitute for its military predecessors—we must move away from the olden ways of warfare. Rather, we must link air power to national policy and strategic effect.
- ❖ We must also become serious promoters of ideas, not only machines.
- ❖ Importantly, we must add lateral and creative thinking to science and technology; we must combine the art of air power with the science of air power.

This is *how* I suggest we do it:

- ❖ We need to establish intellectual hubs for mastering air power history, strategy, theory, and doctrine to move beyond the land-centric model of today.
- ❖ We need to create, and be able to deliver, education campaigns to explain to political leaders what air power brings to the table.
- ❖ Consequently, we must identify a team of officer-scholars whose task is to communicate the strategic value of air power to the public, politicians, and fellow officers. We need to “sell” air power, and we should do that by convincingly presenting its strategic record: achievements, limitations, and potentials.

Conclusion

We need to master conceptual thought: we have been conceptually illiterate and strategically blind for far too long. Our new concept has to be air-centric and air-minded. The Hellenic Air Force should have an advantage, because you have the tradition of philosophy and conceptual reasoning. All you have to do is identify the officers who should follow in the footsteps of Socrates, Plato, and Aristoteles.

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About the Author



Dr. John Andreas Olsen is a colonel in the Royal Norwegian Air Force, director of security analyses in the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, and visiting professor at the Swedish Defence University. He was the deputy commander and chief of the NATO Advisory Team at NATO Headquarters, Sarajevo, from 2009 to 2012. His previous assignments include tours as dean of the Norwegian Defence University College and head of its division for strategic studies. Colonel Olsen is a graduate of the German Command and Staff College and has served both as liaison officer to the German Operational Command in Potsdam and as military assistant to the Norwegian Embassy in Berlin. He has a doctorate in history and international relations from De Montfort University, a master's degree in contemporary literature from the University of Warwick, and a master's degree in English from the University of Trondheim. Professor Olsen is the author of *Strategic Air Power in Desert Storm* (2003) and *John Warden and the Renaissance of American Air Power* (2007); coauthor of *Destination NATO: Defence Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2003–2013* (2013); and editor of *On New Wars* (2006), *A History of Air Warfare* (2010), *Global Air Power* (2011), *Air Commanders* (2012), *European Air Power* (2014) and *Airpower Reborn* (2015); and coeditor of *The Evolution of Operational Art* (2011) and *The Practice of Strategy* (2012). Olsen has received several awards for his performance as a commander and for his published work.