



# Air Power as a Tool for Political Signalling



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The beginning of August has caught global attention on two main fronts in Asia. One in western Asia by the targeted killing of Al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri by an unmanned combat air vehicle; the second is the visit of the US Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan amidst direct and heightened tension between China and Taiwan and an indirect one between China and the United States of America. The entire global media has covered these two important tide-rising moves in the international geopolitical and geo-strategic changing order. These moves have been analysed worldwide with both professional and sensational approaches, keeping international relations and prospective military actions as the fallout of the China-US hidden rivalry. In broader terms, both these events, followed by full-scale and offensive military exercises all around Taiwan in the South China Sea, have unfolded a direct expression of the hegemony of powers by strong political signalling through the usage of air power in their favour.

## Looking through the Air Power Prism

It is pertinent that these global actions have not been examined through the lens of air power and aerospace power capabilities, which play a significant role in these overall developments. It would be interesting to observe and analyse how the tool of air power once again proved so effective and decisive in shaping the turbulent global order and changing dynamics. It would not be incorrect to say that the capability and efficacy of air power and aerospace power are the true underpinning factors that shaped political leaders' decision-making to take such bold steps. Otherwise, it would have had plenty of ramifications in terms of military action, economic sanctions, diplomatic boycotts on the world stage, and, most importantly, the polarisation of international relations across the globe.

## What does Air Power have to Offer?

While analysing the chronology of these two events, the characteristics of speed, flexibility, lethality, deterrence, both escalation, and de-escalation have been amply demonstrated in the entire episode, with an overriding factor of intelligence (**ISR**), which is the key to targeting. Thus, in the modern revolution of military affairs and the revolution of technological affairs, the term ISR needs to be mostly culminated with accurate targeting (**T**), giving rise to the term "**ISR&T**", i.e., Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Targeting.

## Killing of Al Zawahiri through ISR&T

Just over an hour after sunrise on July 31, at about 06:18 local time (01:38 GMT), Al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had just stepped out onto the balcony, was hit by likely two laser-guided R9X Hellfire missiles, leaving his wife and daughter unscathed inside.<sup>1</sup> The precision targeting of the Al-Qaeda leader Al Zawahiri in the balcony can be completely attributed to the real-time intelligence gathering which could be from the HUMINT, intelligence gathered over a period of time through systematic surveillance and reconnaissance thus entailing all three aspects of ISR to be of the highest order. The inputs from a patterned way of life and activities help discern the ISR derivatives into a firm source of information for targeting at the right time and right place. Next comes the targeting with pinpoint accuracy, which indicates the speed and lethality coupled with precision strike capability without any collateral damage. It requires to be appreciated and learned with the holistic approach that such precise achievement of an objective would not have been possible in the absence of a medium of air and the utilisations of all the tools of air power, which makes it mostly results-driven as desired. One may recall that similar usage of air power has been effectively demonstrated in the past by killing Osama Bin Laden as per choosing of own time, place, and own terms under 'Op Neptune Spear'.

## The Aerial Fortification of Nancy Pelosi

Nancy Pelosi's in her aircraft, a Boeing C-40C jet with the call sign SPAR19, landed in Taipei on August 02, 2022. The aircraft took off from Kuala Lumpur, skirting the South China Sea in southern and eastern directions, following a circuitous route. This aircraft became the most watched and followed aircraft in history. According to Ian Petchenik, Flightradar24's director of communications, "At the peak, 708,000 people were tracking SPAR19. That sets a new record for live tracking."<sup>2</sup> To ensure the full protection of Nancy Pelosi amid China's threat, the United States carried out a

complete aerial fortification of Pelosi's aeroplane and the moving airspace around it. To keep a close eye on the emerging threats, if any, it deployed around 13 US fighter jets, tankers, electronic warfare (EW), and command and control centre aircraft (AWACS) launching from military bases in Japan.<sup>3</sup> Amid intensifying warnings from China, apart from aircraft in the air, the US also ensured the aerial fortification by deploying four US warships, including an aircraft carrier, in waters east of the island, claiming to be on "routine" deployment. As a US Navy official confirmed to Reuters, "The Japan-based Reagan is operating with a guided missile cruiser, USS Antietam, and a destroyer, USS Higgins."<sup>4</sup>

It goes without any doubt that it was the might of air power that ensured that the trip of Speaker Pelosi to Taipei went unhindered and also that any kind of threat, be it from land, air, or sea, would be dealt with complete impunity. It needs to be kept in mind that China probably also did not react to this kind of aerial fortification just to avoid any escalation. Thus, once again, air power played the role of escalation to de-escalation in a classical manner. It is unfortunate that amidst the sensation of front-end visuals and optics of media reporting, the real power and essence of air power are often missed in totality.

### **China's response through Air Power Capability**

China, gauging the mood and will of the US, decided not to take any military measures that would further escalate the situation. Whereas, it resorted to making a few bold statements such as "those who play with fire will perish by it"<sup>5</sup> and "resolute and strong measures". It, therefore, waited for Pelosi to exit Taiwan and then threatened military retaliation using weapons of air power through live-fire drills in Taiwan's territorial waters and air defence identification zone as a follow-up signal to the US, the world and, of course, Taiwan. China announced a series of military operations and drills, abiding by "resolute and strong measures". It undertook manoeuvres in the waters and skies near Taiwan and included the firing of long-range ammunition, showcasing "precision missile strikes in the Taiwan Strait." Taiwan's Defence Ministry reported that "China had sent 21 planes flying toward Taiwan, 18 of them fighter jets. The rest included an early warning plane and an electronic warfare plane."<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese military has conducted war drills in each of the six zones that encircle Taiwan and launched a DF-17 ballistic missile that passed over the island. Additionally, the Chinese military set a record on Friday, August 5, 2022, by flying the most military aircraft through the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the Taiwan Strait. According to Taiwannews.com, "there were 68

Chinese military aircraft that crossed Taiwan's ADIZ in one day" on August 5. It states that "49 aircraft, including 7 Chengdu J-10s, 6 Shenyang J-11s, 10 Shenyang J-16s, and 24 Sukhoi Su-30s, were spotted east of the Taiwan Strait median line."<sup>7</sup>

### **Taiwan chose not to play against Chinese Air Power**

In a well-calculated and balanced move, Taiwan is patiently not reacting to the Chinese provocation just to avoid escalation as it knows that it cannot, at present, match up with the numerical and technological superiority of China's airpower in any way. Taiwan's Defence Ministry said, "their armed forces are using joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance methods to fully realise the dynamics at sea and in the air." The Taiwanese military responded by using aerial reconnaissance, combat air patrols, naval ships, and standby coast-based missile systems, in addition to broadcasting warnings to evacuate Taiwan's ADIZ.

### **Use of Air Power in Earlier Operations**

The usage of air power technology in the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian major general, on January 3, 2020, while he was on his way to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in Baghdad is an outstanding case study for air power enthusiasts to enhance the understanding of ISR&T for an effective outcome of the stated objectives. The department of defence stated in their press release that "This strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans".<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the use of armed drones, satellites, and invisible eye-in-the-sky AWACS from a distance interlinked with robust communication systems enabled the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, at Abbottabad in Pakistan. In a different operation, the Predator drone was used in a similar manner to hunt down Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a follower of Bin Laden, in Iraq in 2006, and assisted in directing the fighter planes to destroy him.<sup>9</sup> Not to mention, a B-29 bomber named *Enola Gay* took off from the island of Tinian in the Northern Mariana Islands and headed north-northwest toward Japan on August 6, 1945, and bombed the city of Hiroshima, killing almost 300,000 civilians and about 43,000 soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Air Power as a Tool for Political Signalling**

It is imperative that the potential of air power in the full spectrum be read and understood in its entirety. Due to its application in the medium of air, it is but natural to remain impermanent and thus it is not seen in the real terms of optics. Air power is best felt with its effect, as it is often called effect-

based operations (EBO). The two events highlighted in the write-up, followed by the actions taken by China and Taiwan, are the direct result of the various facets of air power in shaping the global order, not only in the military but also in the global geopolitical domain. It is no longer debatable that air power has become an indispensable instrument in shaping global narratives, whether for offensive, defensive or merely political signalling purposes.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

**Keywords:** Air Power, AWACS, ISR, Technology, Neptune Spear, Electronic Warfare, Air Defence Identification Zone, Aerial Fortification

## Notes:

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