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Recce-Strike Provides a Generational Opportunity to Refocus Air Power

Jack Duffield

Air forces should be advocates of land recce-strike, which can hold the close fight with organic support, freeing air capabilities for the missions that justify them.

Commentators have increasingly noted the use of UK air power in a counter-UAS (uncrewed aerial system) role, with £200,000 missiles launched at one-way attack drones that may cost as little as $50,000 (or around £37,500) to build. Early testing of APKWS rockets on Typhoon offer a cheaper route, but still at about £20,000 per rocket, fired from aircraft costing tens of thousands of pounds per hour to fly.

It is worth understanding how this situation arose. For more than 35 years, precision-guided munitions had been the principal tool of UK air power. In the context of an almost complete absence of air-to-air combat, the RAF released thousands of air-to-ground munitions during overseas interventions and counterinsurgency campaigns in the early 21st century, while peer-level air combat receded to the training environment. The character of strikes in such operations has also changed over time. It began with counter-IADS and air interdiction operations in the Gulf War, then shifted decisively towards close air support for ground patrols in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

The Air Historical Branch argues that this shift to medium-level precision bombing was not a deliberate choice. Instead, it was shaped first by available technology and the capability gap with the USAF, and then by political demands to minimise UK casualties. Airstrikes became the primary expression of UK air power, and the under-employment of highly capable platforms was justified first by protecting British ground forces, and ultimately by avoiding British Army regular force deployments altogether, such as during Operation ELLAMY. Politically palatable, and far preferable to friendly casualties in low-intensity counterinsurgency, this approach nonetheless drew on only a fraction of what combat aircraft such as Typhoon can do. Air-to-air counter-UAS is the latest version of the same pattern; aircraft designed and equipped to outmatch their Russian counterparts are employed in combat against the most basic airborne targets.

Focusing Force Elements on Optimal Mission Sets

The highest-value uses of advanced air power are well-established: deep strikes against strategic targets and battlefield interdiction, while ensuring control of the air, enabled by specialised SEAD (Suppression of Enemy Air Defences) /DEAD (Destruction of Enemy Air Defences) operations. For the reasons above, the RAF has not focused on these missions against a peer adversary for decades. The Gulf War and its aftermath suggest that the RAF will fight a future war in a manner

constrained by its training, experience and equipment, regardless of their ambition. Rebalancing air assets towards the missions that justify their cost therefore requires something fundamental in UK force employment to change.

The opportunity for such a change has arrived through the UAS revolution in land operations, which has already reshaped how Defence thinks about success in the field. The current commander of 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team, Brigadier Ed Cartwright, identifies four UAS capabilities as essential to the new era of land operations: tactical intelligence and situational awareness, tactical strike, operational-level reconnaissance, and a longer-range strike capability that is effective at 35-70km range. Together these form the backbone of a reconnaissance-strike complex which the British Army's senior leadership increasingly regards as the future of land warfare, now that technology has overtaken doctrinal advancements.

What is striking is that these four capabilities map almost exactly onto the main operational tasks performed by UK air power in the early 21st century. Servicing these with UAS allows land forces to generate organic close air support at a lower cost per munition and shape the battlespace at ranges that can decisively impact ground engagements, but would otherwise pull high-value aircraft away from higher-impact work. The recce-strike complex therefore offers a route to redirect air power away from close support and back towards the missions best suited to advanced platforms.

Some analysts warn that expanding UAS capabilities at the expense of conventional munitions risks learning the wrong lessons from Ukraine. They are right that drones are no panacea; their limitations in deep strike are stark compared with exquisite VLO (Very Low Observable) aircraft and composite air operations. But judged by the total military power available to NATO and the breadth of options it can present, the displacement of traditional close air support by a UAS-enabled recce-strike complex is something the RAF and their counterparts should welcome.

UAS and the Recce-Strike Complex

Buying modern UAS is the visible part of a recce-strike complex, but thee missions require first-class orchestration to be a credible battlefield capability. The mass needed to pose an attritional threat, controlling more than 9,000 systems across a 24-hour period as in Ukraine, cannot be generated through traditional command and control or manual operation. Instead, land operations must blend human capability with remotely controlled and autonomous sensors and effectors, which can be employed as natively as rifles, mortars and machine guns. Mastering this at scale would allow UAS to provide decision advantage instead of a training and capacity burden. This degree of integration and orchestration is a precondition for land forces to truly take control of the close support mission. The primacy of organic close-support and the need for orchestrated autonomy at the heart of recce-strike are nuances often missed in discussion of the lessons that can be learned from Ukraine.

If land forces can deliver a well-orchestrated recce-strike complex, the advantages would go beyond increases to the lethality of land forces. Relieved of the close support tasks that have absorbed much of the RAF’s combat mass since the Gulf War, air power could be concentrated on the missions that justify expensive platforms. This includes deep strike against strategic targets, control of the air and the SEAD/DEAD, VLO and composite operations that enable both. Air power is not limited to crewed fast jets in this construct. It spans a spectrum from traditional standoff intelligence and C2 (Command and Control) platforms, through long-range strike weapons such as STORMSHADOW and its eventual replacements, to autonomous collaborative platforms such as StormShroud. The orchestration that the land complex depends on will apply across that spectrum too. Devolving close support to the land domain gives the air domain increased scope for focusing its own portfolio on the missions best suited to air power alone.

What changes most is the character of air-land integration itself. The continuous, ubiquitous tactical integration of the counterinsurgency years must give way to dynamic and close synchronisation at decisive points. Targeting and manoeuvre must still be coordinated, and the battlespace reserved automatically, and sensibly as piloted and autonomous systems share the same contested areas alongside counter-UAS, GBAD (Ground-Based Air Defence) and artillery, most acutely where land fires reach into ranges often conceptually reserved for air power.

In air-land integration, autonomy and effective mission orchestration offer truly revolutionary advantages. Planning, operations and targeting staffs will lose decision advantage and freedom of action even in battlespaces that they otherwise dominate, unless they embrace the complex air-ground environment and natively trust their technology to carve paths through the chaos of warfighting. This environment has been incubated in operational military airfields, where the RAF Regiment already co-ordinate ground and counter-UAS operations in the same tight area as manoeuvring aircraft. The pace of operations will increase in the transition to conflict, and both their demand and scale will grow, far beyond the capabilities of manual C2 and deconfliction. Air-land integration can gain a decisive edge with methods of orchestration that run across the air-land boundary and embraces the multiplying power of autonomous systems and UAS.

This is still the early period of UAS adoption, even with the acceleration forced by Ukraine. But a properly orchestrated recce-strike complex allows land forces to take full control of the close fight, and air power to recapture its highest-value missions. That combination will give the UK and its allies the widest range of credible military options against peer-level adversaries.

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