



## ROLE OF COUNTERLAND OPERATIONS

Last Updated: 21 October 2020

**Counterland operations are defined as airpower operations against enemy land force capabilities to create effects that achieve [joint force commander \(JFC\) objectives](#).** Counterland operations aim to dominate the land environment using airpower to assist friendly land maneuver while denying the enemy the ability to resist. Although most frequently associated with support to friendly ground forces, counterland operations may also be conducted independent of friendly ground force objectives or in areas where friendly land forces are not present. Recent conflicts in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq illustrate situations where counterland operations have been used with small numbers of friendly land forces or [special operations forces \(SOF\)](#) who provided [target](#) cueing. This independent attack of enemy land forces by airpower often leads to success when seizing the initiative, especially in the beginning of combat operations.

**Counterland operations are a form of maneuver warfare that seeks to destroy an enemy's fighting ability through focused attacks against key enemy targets.** Air Force forces, with their inherent speed, range, and precision attack capabilities, are combat multipliers for the JFC. The destruction of decisive points, forces, and capabilities by striking enemy military targets such as fielded land forces, command and control (C2) nodes, vital logistics, or supporting infrastructure degrades the enemy system and ultimately contributes to an enemy incapable of effective resistance. Persistently applied, airpower can disrupt the enemy and destroy its ability to fight as a coherent, effective whole, thus wresting initiative and dictating tempo.

**Counterland operations can support and facilitate maneuver warfare on land.** World War I saw the first widespread use of airpower in support of allied land operations when combat aircraft began cutting supply routes, strafing trenches, and bombing fielded forces. Military leaders soon realized that airpower added a synergistic element to conventional ground forces because of its ability to attack behind enemy lines and support offensive breakthroughs. Since then, counterland operations have occurred in every major war as well as numerous smaller conflicts characterized by protracted, low-intensity conflict. Airpower has proven invaluable in supporting friendly ground maneuvers by diverting, disrupting, delaying, or destroying an enemy's operational military potential.

**Counterland operations can serve as the main attack and be the decisive means for achieving JFC objectives.** Although often associated with support to friendly ground forces, counterland operations also include operations that directly support the JFC's theater strategy rather than exclusively supporting a land component. In some cases, counterland operations can provide the sole US effort against the enemy. This occurred in Libya during Operations ODYSSEY DAWN and UNIFIED PROTECTOR. During these US and NATO led operations, there were not significant numbers of US or NATO ground forces, and air operations were employed to achieve the operational and strategic military end states. In concert with [strategic attack](#) operations, during Operation ALLIED FORCE, the NATO independent counterland battle against Serbian ground forces helped end Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo.

In other campaigns where a friendly ground force presence is required to achieve the desired end state, counterland operations can decisively engage enemy fielded forces prior to engagement by friendly ground forces. During Operation DESERT STORM, counterland operations severely damaged the Iraqi army and achieved JFC objectives aimed at weakening enemy forces prior to the start of ground operations. In the end, the devastating effects of counterland operations paved a path for coalition forces to roll back a demoralized Iraqi army in Kuwait. These historical examples illustrate that directly attacking enemy land forces by airpower forces can quickly gain control over the battlefield during early combat operations.

**Counterland operations are not associated with a particular type of aircraft or weapon system.** Instead, a variety of airpower assets conduct counterland operations to deliver lethal and nonlethal effects against enemy land forces and infrastructure. Predominant weapons systems used in counterland operations include aircraft equipped with cannons, bombs, standoff missiles, rockets, and electronic warfare systems. Air assets, space systems, cyberspace systems, and SOF provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) as well as target cueing, navigation aids, and battle damage assessment. Each weapon system has unique characteristics that should be considered, determined by the nature of the threat, [desired effects](#), and environmental conditions. Fighters, bombers, gunships, remotely piloted or unmanned aircraft,<sup>1</sup> helicopters, cruise missiles, and surface-to-surface artillery and missile systems are a few examples of joint assets that commanders can use to execute counterland operations. Also, joint space and cyberspace capabilities can be employed to deny or disrupt enemy command and control, communications, navigation, ISR, missile warning, integrated air defense systems, and supporting systems.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Air Force refers to some of its larger unmanned aircraft as remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) to differentiate its operators who have been trained to similar standards as manned aircraft pilots.

### Counterland Operations Achieved JFC Objectives

In the first week of November 2001, bombers and fighters supported by SOF destroyed Taliban forces defending the enemy stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. These actions facilitated the Northern Alliance's capture of the town on 9 November 2001. Soon, counterland airpower cued by SOF teams routed Taliban forces throughout Afghanistan until Kabul itself fell just days after Mazar-i-Sharif. Within two weeks, Coalition forces took control of Afghanistan by relying on the powerful combination of counterland airpower and distributed ground forces using small-unit tactics.

