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Air Force and Strategic Deterrence¹

Fuerza Aérea y disuasión estratégica²

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Abstract: The following article presents an analytical approximation regarding the strategic deterrence of the air force in armed conflicts and modern warfare, concluding that despite being a relevant military tool for coercion, by its own faces great challenges to achieve decisive victories in the long term in conflicts with high level of radical ideological motivations.

Key Words: Air Force, Armed Conflicts, Deterrence, Strategic Limitations.

Resumen: El presente artículo presenta una aproximación analítica respecto a la disuasión estratégica que la Fuerza Aérea posee en los conflictos armados de las guerras modernas, resaltando como a pesar de mantenerse aún como una herramienta importante de coerción militar, afronta serios desafíos por sí solo para poder obtener una victoria militar decisiva a largo plazo en conflictos caracterizados por motivaciones de ideologías radicales.

Palabras clave: Conflictos armados, disuasión, estratégicas, Fuerza Aérea, limitaciones.

Introduction

Deterrence and air power had traditionally been two concepts often put together in security studies, in order to promote the idea that a strong air force and military capability were sufficient to prevent armed conflicts in most cases, or in case these erupted, to assure a decisive military victory of the stronger actor. These scenarios helped to build a Deterrence theory which was intended to dissuade an adversary from certain conducts in order to avoid negative consequences as punishment.

As a result of this, deterrence can be simply understood as a thing or an action taken by one side to discourage or intends to discourage another side from conducting in an undesirable manner. As an example we can see how during the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union “deterred” each other for decades, based on each other nuclear capabilities and the development of the MAD theory (Mutual Assured Destruction).

This deterrence was in part achieved thanks to the delivery system of weapon each country developed and the efficiency and technological advantages of their air forces. These circumstances allowed them the possibility to strike strategic objectives in most parts of the world. This reality is described by Mueller (2010) as a natural consequence, as he stated that despite the fact the successful implementation of air power in a war scenario is relatively recent in modern history, it has become an important element of military warfare.

One of the most traditional theorists of air power was Italian General Giulio Douhet (1921, p. 3), which predicted that aeronautics would open up a new field of action, that is, a field situated unaccustomedly above ground. He also anticipated how the speed and free rein of airplanes as instruments for exploration and reconnaissance would later be used to attack enemies on and behind their own lines. Two decades after the end of the First World War, and during the Cold War, quick implementations of aeronautics into military affairs vastly altered traditional warfare, and air superiority meant a significant tool of military force to achieve victory and to project strength to military adversaries.

Strategic Deterrence

Airpower is defined by EURAC, a forum comprising 17 air chief of European nations, as the ability to project *military force* in air or space by or from a platform or missile operating from above the surface of the earth (Lom-

bo, 2002, p. 233.) This dominance of the third dimension can be applied in offensive or defensive ways, deploying military strength and at the same time sending a message to prevent future threats.

The Royal Air Force (2009, p. 16) explains how air power explores the third dimension with special characteristics such as speed, reach and height, which allows for generally greater reach than naval vessels or land vehicles. Speed permits rapid projection of military power and aids in the quick completion of missions, which reduces exposure to hostile fire and increases survivability. Reach enables distant or isolated targets to be attacked and potential restrictions to be circumvented, while height allows airmen to observe and dominate activities on the surface of the globe and above the sea, enabling direct fire to be used against an adversary's forces.

While these characteristics are useful as they could produce significant damage to the industrial capacity and deter military threats posed by belligerent states in the international community, they are not as effective when dealing to the new types of dangers presented in the XXI century.

We can evidence this in a simple way when we consider how in the Middle East during the second part of the last century, air power played a key role in the outcomes of the Arab-Israeli War in the year 1967, where Israel executed a preemptive, surprise attack that destroyed most of the Egyptian Air Force (EAF). With complete control of the air and superior combat effectiveness, the Israelis were able to seize the initiative on the ground and defeat the Arab land forces without having to defend against enemy air forces (Dupuy, 1978, p. 335).

As Jones affirms (1996, p. 1), Israel initiated the Six Day War with a preemptive air attack on Egypt, and within a week, Israeli armed forces occupied the lands of the Sinai Peninsula, to the east bank of the Suez Canal; the West Bank, and with it the city of Jerusalem; the Golan Heights; and the Gaza Strip. Within a few days, the Egyptian and Jordanian military forces were destroyed and the Syrian Army had been rerouted. The later wars in which Israel also obtained military advantages and deployed air supremacy over its adversaries, helped to deter some of them from launching future attacks and seeking instead a political agreement to end the conflict.



Military deterrence was also affirmed by the air supremacy displayed by the allied forces during the Gulf War (1991), which allowed them to engage against Iraqi objectives at will, day after day, with media coverage that provided viewers with an impressive display of the new, seemingly pinpoint accurate high-tech weaponry used against defenseless Iraqi targets (McWilliams and Piotrowski, 2001, p. 431). The coalition force of nations led by the United States, obtained several remarkable and decisive achievements in the military field against the Iraqi troops, which resulted in the successful ending to Operation Desert Storm less than two months after it was waged. This victory reaffirmed, through military force, the geostrategic imperatives of the United States in the region and showed air power's strategic effects that gained stealth, engagement capability, and precise targeting.

This military strength was shown with an unprecedented level of technology, intensive training and determined strategy by the allied coalition's successful air campaign against Saddam Hussein's troops (Lamberth, 2000, p. 115). The Gulf War was a good example of what a superior air force was capable of against a weaker state actor and inflicted great damages to the Iraqi troops in a short period of time (Cordesman and Wagner, 1994, p. 481).

However these cited major wars and military campaigns with impressive battle damage assessments occurred against other states which also used conventional military capabilities and therefore sustained heavy losses. The current reality regarding international security shows us that these types of wars are very rare nowadays, and are more a thing of the past.

Some of the most relevant threat for the international order are not exclusively related to nationalistic goals of states, and are represented more commonly by non-state actors, meaning by this, transnational organizations which rely on religion and radical ideologies to promote acts of political violence and terrorism.

Deterrence projected by military strength does not apply in the same way over combatants that are not following the same logics of a conventional army, and which in many cases see death not seen as the ultimate punishment, but as a desirable outcome in their struggle. The new reality posed by the battles that have been fought in the post 9/11 world challenges military theories regarding specific targeted operations against

war facilities and conventional strategic objectives (Fernandez and Stockings, 2006).

While owning the skies, allows greater freedom of movement, fighting an enemy that bears no uniform, blends in with his people and most importantly, utilizes asymmetrical tactics to counter more advanced militaries degrades the use of Air power. While this may be true in a conventional fight, it is not so evident in irregular combats against terror groups, crime syndicates and guerilla organizations (Fadok, 1994).

Conclusion

Men have lived close to earth's surface, and for this reason, began his battles there. We do not know when he began to navigate the seas or the time he started naval warfare, but we definitively know that for the past century, skies had become of great interest to man, as have land and sea before. Indeed, air power has constituted a remarkable battlefield of equal importance (Douhet, 1921, p. 4).

Strategic advantages of height, speed, reach and weapons delivery systems, have transformed air superiority into a key element in conducting warfare operations. Therefore Strategic Air Power will always be a dominant strategy, but only when coupled with ground warfare, as air alone does not win wars.

Many theorists claim that a successful air campaign against the enemy can break the will to fight. This affirmation could be considered as valid in the symmetrical warfare context of past century, but as 10 years of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan against an enemy that has no air assets shows this is not the case, and air superiority has not achieved the main objective of defeating the enemy in current asymmetric wars.

Conventional interstate wars allowed air power superiority to achieve remarkable victories, however new threats and modern warfare demonstrates how the effectiveness of air operations decreases if taken as an individual tool to obtain military victory. Air superiority must be accompanied with land and naval forces when needed in order to victory, and with newer systems development coming in the next decade it will be interesting to see this concept evolve and take new shape, maybe even away from fixed wing craft.

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