Viewpoints

Air Power: Independent Action and Independent Effect

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Introduction

The perennial debate over air power fighting independently is still alive and kicking and continues to be the subject of emotive discussion. Indeed, historical experience has shown that, in many cases, the proclaimed capabilities of air power - to wage and win wars - have been exaggerated. Nevertheless, it would seem that there are several sound arguments for re-claiming a primary, independent role for air power today, but this time perhaps with some credible chances of success. Broadly outlined these are:

- The revolutionary improvement of many air power capabilities largely fostered by the computer-based IT revolution of the last 25 years.
- The evident success of air power in some of the most important conflicts of the post-Cold War period since the first Gulf War; notably Kosovo (1999) and Libya (2011), were it has provided the leverage for victory.
- A favourable cost-benefit balance that air power offers to decision makers and military planners when considering the "overall costs" of a military option.
- The low vulnerability of air power, and, as a consequence, the fact that it is no longer necessary to divert assets in order to achieve and maintain "air superiority" - as used to be the case in the air wars of the past.

- Last, but not least, the practical and doctrinal improvements to *Air Command and Control*, which has become much more flexible and more responsive to the challenges of the dynamic environment of today's theatres of operations.

But things, of course, are often more complex than they appear at first glance and there are at least three major challenges that can be used to counter the points above and trip-up the premise that air power can and should operate independently.

The first problem is that "operations" are an inherently joint business. In any military operation, even in the smallest, there are unique and valuable talents and attributes brought to the fight by other Services. Furthermore, the strong interdependence amongst the different operating domains is quite obvious and, in turn, this means that the employment of air power, at the operational level of war, can hardly be envisaged outside of a joint context.

The second problem is that the full spectrum of possible military operations, ranging from non-combatant operations and humanitarian assistance to state-on-state war, is so wide and multi-faceted that the idea of air power doing the job alone simply does not work. Modern warfare is far too complex to be successfully dealt with by a single arm.

Finally, the argument can be put forward that the likely challenge and complexity of any recent or future scenario is such that a response has to be "manoeuvrist" in nature to be successful, which places a premium on the variance of capabilities as well as on the ability to skilfully combine energies in a "synergistic" effort. Another acknowledgement of the importance of jointery.

If we agree that operational success stems from a joint effort, we are presented an interesting paradox. One in which, on one hand, we see air power acquiring enhanced capabilities and value, but on the other, it is increasingly difficult to think of air power as the lone "war winner" envisaged by some theorists in the past. This is perhaps the reason why many military thinkers continue to point out that the relevance of air power and air forces in military operations is entirely situational.

This statement is probably true, but we may wonder if it is still possible, at the strategic level of war, to think of an air power-based strategy rather than a land power - or a sea power-based strategy for crisis resolution, and, in this case, establish the likely implications. Indeed, nobody should feel uncomfortable with the assertion that in Iraq and in Afghanistan a land power-based strategy has been used, whereas in Kosovo and in Libya we have seen the application of an air power-based strategy. This obviously does not mean that land power or air power were the forces intended to win the war alone, but it does mean that land power or air power embodied the decisive capability upon which the joint campaign had to be built.

In order to clarify this concept it is beneficial to look back and see what has actually happened in the last quarter of a century or so.

The first Gulf War, as affirmed by many analysts, was a true turning point in the history of air power. In fact, for the first time ever, air superiority was achieved very quickly, and this left a significant surplus of air power capabilities and firepower for other military purposes. The final result was that, thanks to air power, the Coalition achieved the operational and tactical paralysis of the Iraqi Army, meaning that the ground war would last just 100 hours. This undeniable success of the air arm and the revelation that the Americans and their allies could benefit from this new asymmetric advantage in the future, opened up a brand new perspective for air power employment. This novel outlook, merged with the new political environment of the post-Cold War era in which a new feeling of security in the West marked the transition from the concept of "wars of necessity", to the possibility of fighting "wars of choice", as part of a global peace stabilization effort sponsored by the UN. In this situation, air power was seen by both politicians and the public alike, as a viable military tool of leverage to achieve limited political objectives.

The period 1991-2001 could be labelled as the "decade of coercive air power". Operations Southern Watch and Northern Watch in Iraq; Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force in Bosnia and Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, are the most well-known cases of this new era. Air power was clearly the weapon of choice for supporting coercive diplomacy and for fighting limited (light) wars of choice. It was an era where the use of military force, centered on air power-based strategies was freely used to either prevent unacceptable Courses of Action (COAs), control escalation, protect civilians, or to enforce compliance with international law and stop human rights violations.

The attacks of September 11th 2001, however, prompted a radical change to this approach. In America, as well as in the rest of the Western world, a new sense of urgency about the need to guarantee security at home, quickly supplanted the feeling of confidence acquired with the end of the Cold War. The implications of this change were soon palpable. Coercive diplomacy was rapidly replaced by a much more aggressive political approach, whose main objective was the disruption of terrorist bases worldwide. From a military strategic perspective, the publicly supported need to eradicate terrorism unlocked the possibility to fight pre-emptive, preventive wars, to commit massive military forces, if necessary putting boots on the ground and to accept some level of attrition and losses. It is clear that coercion could not suffice as an option any more, and, in fact, it was replaced by strategies of denial. All these elements characterized the main wars of the next decade (2001-2011). It is almost needless to say that both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, a land power-based military strategy was employed and since control of the air was immediately established, air power regressed to a supportive role. This was even more evident when, in both situations, the Coalition forces became more and more involved in counter-insurgency and irregular warfare.

The war in Libya in 2011 represented a significant diversion from the previous approach. In fact, Libya saw a mix of some of the themes seen in the two previous decades. Although the Coalition intervention was triggered by the need to stop the use of heavy weaponry against civilians, the will to help the anti-Gaddafi forces with the final aim of overthrowing the Gaddafi regime was blatantly clear. Nevertheless, the strategic context and the political posture of the moment were very different from those of the Years 2002 and 2003. The Global War on Terrorism was still a priority but had ceased to be a strong driver for robust commitments. This new political stance and the resumed unwillingness to suffer continuous losses obviously had a significant effect on military strategy. The possibility of putting boots on the ground was excluded from the outset and air power became once again the weapon of choice for what was expected to be a new "light" and "short" war.

From the brief historical summary presented above, we can highlight at least three key points. The first point is that in the last 25 years we have been utterly incapable of predicting future events and of anticipating future patterns - such as the invasion of Kuwait, the September 11th attacks or more latterly the so-called *Arab Spring*. At the same time though, with hindsight we can actually outline a pretty clear logical pattern in the military strategies adopted to deal with the major crises of the post-Cold War period. More specifically, we may say that strategy has not been as accidental and unpredictable as events, and, in turn, the role and relevance of air power although still situational has followed a similar logical pattern.

The second point is that, in general, when looking at the social and political trends of the last few years, we see an increasing public sensitivity about the use of force and of a growing political reluctance to commit military forces abroad, especially in some particularly delicate areas of the globe. This more cautious approach leads to a pretty clear aversion against putting boots on the ground and thus risking the difficult, protracted disengagements seen in some previous conflicts. A further consequence of this is that the use of force may be acceptable only as long as the risk of collateral damage is minimized. That is, civilians and the national infrastructure base should be spared. In the light of this, we may have already entered, or may be about to enter, a new season of coercive diplomacy, which would actually be fully coherent with all the above-mentioned conditions. In this case, air power could once again be the weapon of choice, and therefore there would be scope for air power-based military strategies.

The third point is that air power (probably thanks to the great advances and the new capabilities already discussed above) has proved to be extremely effective in supporting coercive strategies. Indeed, although we cannot say that coercion itself is an exclusive domain of air power, we can certainly say that in comparison with other arms, air power offers some unique advantages. These include mass, and, if necessary, massive firepower with a lower logistical footprint, no or very low attrition and no or very low friendly losses. It is also potentially more cost-effective over the longer term.

But if we have indeed entered a new phase of coercive diplomacy, in which the use of air power-based strategies will be more likely, in the post-Afghanistan era air power needs to be able to meet some key requirements whilst successfully facing new, big challenges. As for the requirements, it would certainly be necessary to fill some capability gaps, part of which emerged amid the lessons identified during the Libyan conflict. In particular, it will be necessary to develop the true ability to fight under threat conditions (because the air space of future adversaries will be increasingly less permissive); a greater ability to carry out deep, precision strikes; much better stand-off ISR and more robust support capabilities (AAR, EW etc.); adequate protection/defence capabilities in the cyber domain and unhindered use of space capabilities.

As for the challenges, we should remember that the main precondition for the adoption of coercive strategies is the presence of an actual capability edge of the coercer over the coerced. This means that it would be necessary to maintain the present asymmetrical air power advantage. But the idea that the US and its allies will always enjoy the benefits of air dominance as a given does not match with some existing and very visible trends. To begin with, the high costs of technology and of air power capabilities combined with enduring budget cutbacks will make it difficult to maintain the present capability gap over the longer-term perspective. The obvious consequence of losing this asymmetrical advantage would be that, at least in certain situations, air superiority or air dominance might not be taken for granted any more by Western-led coalitions, thus making an air power-based coercive strategy impracticable. To tackle this situation it will be necessary to avoid overconfidence and to compensate decreasing numbers with some mitigating measures.

To conclude, we may have reached a sensible compromise regarding these issues. The fact that the two major engagements of this new century (Iraq and Afghanistan) have seen air power playing only a supporting role seems to confirm the idea that air power relevance is highly situational. However, we have seen air power achieve an extraordinary level of maturity and capability in the last 25 years and when employed as weapon of choice in support of coercive strategies it has proved to be extremely effective. Overall, from an operational perspective we may agree that success will always be down to the joint effort, since air power may suffer from serious situational limitations (COIN, Irregular Warfare). Yet if we move to the strategic level, it does make sense to think of air power as a force really capable of playing a decisive role, thus creating scope for air power-based strategies.

Even the recent events in Syria, where limited coercive military action was envisaged for a while, may confirm that we are at the dawn of a new era of coercive diplomacy which will likely see the adoption of air power-based military strategies (as seen in the 90s). In order to be ready for these new strategic conditions, focusing attention and resources on filling capability gaps will not suffice. Air power capabilities and competencies must be made to fit into a truly holistic approach to warfare. The uncertain extent and severity of coming crises clearly means that some situations might require a land power or a sea power-centered military strategy.

However, I believe that more often than not in the years ahead, political risk-benefit evaluations will lead to the conclusion that air power-based military strategies are the most viable and therefore the most likely option. Yet we must be aware that this option may not necessarily be a short way to achieve political objectives.