

AERIAL COERCION:

what does it mean and can it work?

In the changing face of world politics it could be argued that the study of military coercion is more important now than at any time in history. The end of the Cold War, the proliferation of WMD following the break up the Warsaw Pact, the emergence of new states and the rise of political instability, has meant that the emphasis of national and international security policies has moved increasingly away from deterring predictable threats towards reacting to unpredictable threats after they emerge.¹

The chance of major world powers using military force to persuade states to change their patterns of behaviour, in situations short of all-out war, has increased significantly. Security situations are becoming increasingly politically sensitive and, to complicate matters still further for military planners, this trend has been accompanied by the growing influence of the media, the need for governments in open democratic societies to justify military action and the increasing unwillingness of Western populations to commit large percentages of national wealth to military spending. As a result of this shift in emphasis, there has been a growing role for air power in military strategy and in particular an increasing reliance on the use of aerial coercion.

This essay studies the use of aerial coercion and explores whether the use of Air Power alone can persuade states to alter their behaviour. To define aerial coercion, it firstly examines the concept of military coercion and then outlines the use of Air Power in this role. It then goes on to assess whether the use aerial coercion can lead to a success in achieving military and political aims.

THE DEFINITION OF AERIAL COERCION

THE CONCEPT OF MILITARY COERCION

In defining military coercion it is important, initially, to understand the difference between force and coercion. The difference between these closely related, but quite distinct, uses of military power is based on the intention for which they are used. Thomas Schelling,² working in the early 1960's distinguished between 'brute force', and 'coercive force' which is the use of violence to hurt or punish an adversary in an attempt to compel a certain type of behaviour. This distinction was refined by Michael Clarke³ who argues that force performs the function either of 'denial' or 'coercion'. Denial does not involve any form of negotiation with the enemy; it is a purely physical act that denies something to the other side either by constraining them from getting to it, or by simply destroying it. Coercion, on the other hand, implies an amount of bargaining between the user of force and the target, and can take the form of threats, hurt or punishment.

The aim of military coercion is to persuade a target state or population group to change their behaviour, by convincing them that the consequences of resisting the coercer's demands are so terrible that they have no choice but to comply. A clear understanding of the objectives of the operation is essential, and as accurate an assessment as possible is required of who in the target group has the power to respond in the desired way, and who has the influence to carry the rest of the group with him.



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Military coercion is, therefore, a highly psychological concept that requires an accurate understanding of how the culture, politics and collective psychologies of a target group are likely to work. It is essential to identify the centres or gravity of the target group, to decide who to hurt and what the victim will find unbearably painful. Depending on circumstances, therefore, coercive operations can focus on one or more levels within a target group: the leadership, the civilian population or the armed forces.

To carry out military coercion, a coercer needs to make the target perceive certain things:⁴ he has to believe that he cannot withstand attack; that the options are moving against him; that he is isolated from his patrons; that he has no prospect of victory or success; that his losses will grow unless he changes his behaviour and that he will get some kind of reward if he gives in to the demands of the assailant. To persuade a target of this, the coercer has to have the capability to inflict significant damage. Extremely high credibility, which is a function of a coercer's resolve and capability, is therefore, essential and coercers should possess military capabilities superior to their opponents to avoid the threat of retaliation.

Military coercion can be applied across the whole spectrum of military operations, from nuclear to conventional (both within war and within incidents short of all out war), and more and more nowadays, as part of PSOs. In all cases, military coercion is often perceived as a quick and easy solution to otherwise militarily and politically difficult and expensive international problems. Pape⁵ summed up this concept when he described the use of military coercion as "an attempt to achieve political goals on the cheap".

THE USE OF AIR POWER IN COERCIVE OPERATIONS

Aerial coercion is simply the use of Air Power in a coercive context. It offers military planners flexibility and as a coercive instrument, it has grown more and more powerful as the range and payload of aircraft has increased and weapons have become more accurate and destructive. The characteristics of Air Power that make it such a significant military instrument generally, have also contributed to the rise in prominence of aerial coercion.

Air power can operate at great range, destroying targets deep in enemy territory and attacks can be repeated from safe bases where back-up facilities and combat support are virtually unlimited. Precision weapons make it highly discriminating and it offers highly destructive performance at reducing human cost. The use of Air Power gives commanders the ability to switch targeting at short notice across wide geographical areas, and surprise can be reinforced by the intimidatory effect that aircraft can have on target armies and populations. Where air superiority has been achieved, Air Power can demonstrate the assailants ability to strike, retaliate, punish or hurt almost anywhere without warning and it is also possible to cancel further air attacks from secure bases far more easily than it would be to disengage ground troops.

Because of these characteristics, Air Power appears to be an obvious instrument to use in coercive operations. Michael Clarke⁶, however, cautions against an over-reliance on the use of Air Power. He states:

“air power, like any military instrument, has to be evaluated in terms of the context of its application. Generalizations are therefore very dangerous and the ‘lack of depth’ in historical experience of air power – particularly in a century in which there has been so rapid a technological change – provides few reliable pointers to the future”.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AERIAL COERCION

The success of aerial coercion depends very much on the nature of the operation and the complexity of the psychological and political factors impacting upon it. Planners often have to base their decision-making on approximate knowledge of a target group, what will affect them and how they will feel and interpret pain, and the success or failure of an operation can depend largely on the accuracy of their assumptions.

NUCLEAR AERIAL COERCION

At the extreme end of the violence spectrum, air delivered nuclear weapons represent a classic coercive use of Air Power. The two nuclear bombs that were dropped in Japan in 1945 performed the coercive role extremely effectively. The sign given to the Japanese was that more and worse bombardment would follow, and any further pain would be intolerable, and it is believed that this fear led to the Japanese surrender. But, even in this supposedly clear-cut case, there is debate whether the surrender was due entirely to the nuclear attack. Michael Clarke⁷ describes the



Aftermath –
Hiroshima 1945



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controversial argument that it was the breakdown of the Japanese military, more than the horror of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, that finally persuaded the leaders in Tokyo to face the reality of their situation and forced their surrender. He argues, however, that this use of aerial coercion was so classic and obvious that it has potentially blinded some military planners to some of the contemporary subtleties and problems of using aerial coercion with conventional weapons.



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CONVENTIONAL AERIAL COERCION

When using conventional coercion, the first and most important criteria for success is that the threat being made is credible, both militarily and politically, as threats will be tested and the target will attempt to call the coercer's bluff. Firstly from the Military perspective, to wage a successful aerial coercive campaign the coercer must be substantially the stronger power and must have air superiority to avoid damage to its air assets and limitation to its operations. This is also important to avoid the threat of mutual coercion, where the target will hope to deter the assailant from carrying out the threat. However, this is not a simple equation; target nations may be substantially weaker in conventional military terms, but may resort to methods other than direct military force, such as WMD, or terrorist or guerrilla activities. Secondly, in today's open society, threats made by a Western democratic force against a target state must also have political credibility. In this media age, the devastation that can be caused by air attacks causes acute political sensitivities, and although all military instruments can cause unacceptable collateral damage, there is a greater symbolism attached to attacks from the air. Popular opinion can very easily be swayed by media images of the effects of air strikes, and an assailant's support can very quickly be lost. A target, who can gain a great deal of resolve if an assailant does not have strong backing from the international community, can easily exploit this.

The difficulties of using aerial coercion in a conventional conflict short of all-out war are illustrated by the current crisis in Iraq

The difficulties of using aerial coercion in a conventional conflict short of all-out war are illustrated by the current crisis in Iraq. This is an extremely complex situation with many political and psychological factors surrounding it. The international community is united in the belief that Iraq must be forced to comply with international will in terms of the stockpiling of WMD; however, there is considerable debate about the reliance on the use of Air power to achieve this. Opinion is divided amongst those nations who advocate the use of aerial coercion as the initial and main instrument of persuasion, and those who consider that Air Power should only be used as a last resort if diplomacy fails. In particular, Russia has stated that the continuation of aerial coercion would have a damaging effect on the Russian/American relationship. Furthermore, most of Iraq's Arab neighbours are opposed to the use of aerial coercion and consider that it would be nothing short of disastrous for the region.

The question of air superiority is not in any dispute. However, the Iraqi Government must be gaining strength from the fact that the resolve of the American-led forces to use Air Power could be weakened, or the scale of the planned attacks limited, by this political pressure. In addition, the possession of WMD, gives the Iraqi' bargaining power significantly above their conventional capabilities. The support of the international community for the use of aerial coercion is weakened by the very real concern that Saddam Hussein could retaliate to attack by deploying, against Israel in particular, chemical, biological or even nuclear WMD.

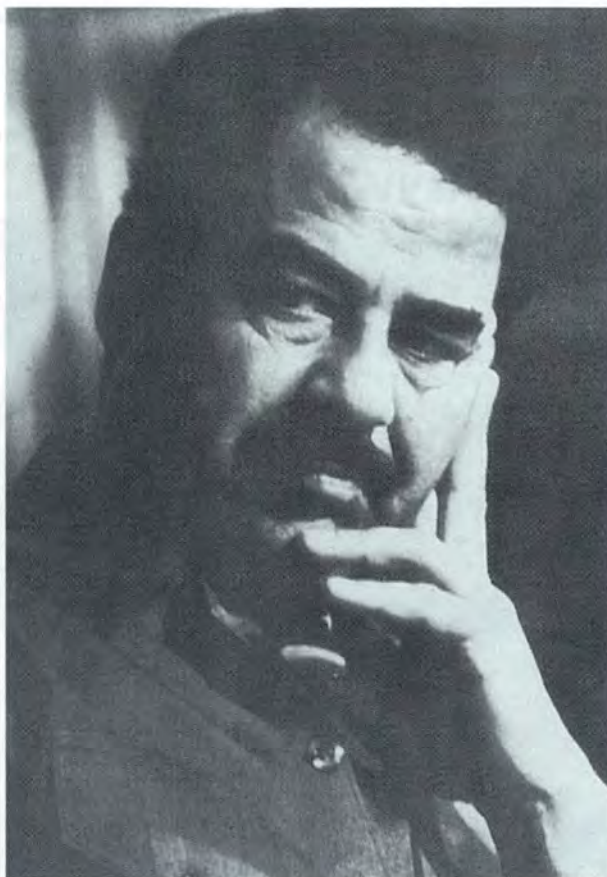
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**Bombs filled with botulinum toxin.
(photo UNSCOM)**



Analysis of the Iraq crisis also highlights the way that psychological factors can impact on the effect of aerial coercion. The Iraqi Government appears to be willing to accept extremely high costs, including civilian suffering, to achieve their objectives. The collateral damage caused by air attacks, some of which could impact on the civilian population, would have to be punitive and significant to cause Saddam Hussein to back down, and there is considerable reluctance amongst the international community to tolerate this scale of destruction.

The problem, therefore, facing the international community is how it can force the Iraqi Government to comply with its demands and ultimately give up their WMD. It is unlikely that aerial coercion alone will do this. If the threat of air strikes is sufficiently credible Saddam Hussein will back down and give in to some demands. However, history in the region suggests that the level of destruction allowed by the international community will not solve the problem permanently, and the crisis will re-emerge. Therefore, instead of bombing Iraq into submission, the West needs to clearly define its objectives in the region, and identify the area of Iraqi society that it should target to force the Government to back down. The solution, if there were one, would appear to lie in a combination of political and diplomatic pressure as well as military coercion.



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THE USE OF AERIAL COERCION IN PSOS

The political risks of using aerial coercion in isolation are even more significant in PSOs. Failure of aerial coercion could undermine other areas of the PSO, and in modern open societies, might undermine domestic support for the coercive operation. Additionally, the use of the extremely destructive capability of Air Power can appear to be out of proportion, when the whole point of a PSO is to try and prevent escalation. The presence on the ground of under-armed international troops, aid workers and civil administrators can also complicate a coercive operation, as taking these people hostage could give a target the opportunity of applying mutual coercion.



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In his analysis of the recent conflict in Bosnia, Per Erik Solli⁹ discussed the inherent risk of using aerial coercion in a PSO. He contended that although Air Power created opportunities for planners, it also presented many pitfalls and its use was the most comprehensive challenge to the UN and NATO co-operation. Firstly, uncertainty of the consequences of the use of force led to disagreement and dissension among UN, NATO and the various states involved in planning and managing the operation. Secondly, coercive operations had to be integrated into multifaceted peacekeeping ground operations.

Aerial coercion was used in Bosnia to force Serbs to comply with heavy weapons exclusion and no-fly zones. The Serbs were persuaded to accept the heavy weapons exclusion zone, due primarily, it has been suggested⁹, to the contribution of Operation Deliberate Force and use of NATO's Air Power. However, Lambert¹⁰ maintains that it was the combined effect of the bombing, the inability to deploy troops, the increasing military successes of the Moslems and Croats and the strong diplomatic pressure all peaking at the same time that caused the Serbs to capitulate.

Operation Deny Flight, (enforcement of the no-fly zone) prevented the Bosnian Serb forces from using their Air Power effectively, but there were limitations to the operation. Firstly, there were concerns about the implications of the use of Air power for UNPROFOR on the ground, and secondly, there was the risk of a political outcry if a NATO fighter shot down an aircraft carrying civilians or wounded. Although Serb flying was significantly curtailed and their aircraft were shot down, there was a considerable reluctance to rigidly enforce the no-fly zone and it was violated on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

These examples show that Air Power has a positive and powerful role in coercive operations across the spectrum of conflict, at all levels of violence. As a means of persuasion it can be extremely effective, due mainly to the flexibility and destructive capability it gives to military planners, and also to the levels of fear that it can instil in a target population. Its use can however, be limited in politically sensitive operations, especially PSOs, where there are concerns about the level of violence used and the proportionality of the use of air strikes. In these situations, persuasion may be achieved by the synergistic application of aerial coercion combined with the use of land or sea coercion and diplomatic or political pressure.

The examples outlined in this essay reinforce the position that aerial coercion is a tool to be used selectively, depending on the political and psychological circumstances of a particular operation. As Michael Clarke suggested, the history of Air Power and Aerial coercion is a short one, and it is important that military planners do not rely too heavily on lessons learnt from a relatively small number of operations. The use of Air Power often appears obvious, but conflicts and societies are very different, and a number of political and psychological factors have to be carefully considered, before the decision is made to make aerial coercion the main instrument of a campaign.

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NOTES

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