



## AIRPOWER AND COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy can be broadly defined as the government level interaction that occurs between official representatives of different states. It is employed in international relations in an effort to maintain amicable relations between countries. When disagreements or points of contention arise between states, 'soft power', in the form of persuasive diplomatic overtures, is generally the first mechanism to be employed in an attempt to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

If subtle diplomatic initiatives do not achieve the desired results, however, recourse to coercion may be considered necessary. To coerce is to achieve compliance by intimidation or appeal to authority, and as a last resort, to compel by threat of force.

Coercive diplomacy can thus be considered a tool of 'hard power' and is defined as an attempt to change an entity's behaviour, from an undesired to a desired state, by the threatened use of force. Past experiences, however, demonstrate that the demarcation between the threat of force and the actual application of force is not easily discernable. The actual use of force is initially discrete and increased incrementally, with the scalability and reversibility of the application of force being the key factor to success. Coercive diplomacy gives the adversary the choice between continuing with their current course of action and facing increased application of force as punishment, or complying with the coercer's demands, and having the threat of force removed.

Hard power, applied through military force, is usually the last tool in a range of available options, and is not readily sanctioned or easily enacted. The use of military force is never without contention, as recent UN Security Council debates over the prospects of international intervention in Libya and Syria attest.

The link between coercive diplomacy and air power may not be readily apparent, but increasingly air power is regarded as an optimal form of engagement in the military sense for two primary reasons. First, it does not normally necessitate a foreign presence in the target country, and the risk of casualties to the coercing force is minimal. Second, the inherent flexibility of air power gives it the ability to scale up or down the responses while continuing to generate the desired effects with

precision and discrimination.

For an adversary to be successfully compelled to change their course of action (for example, their invasion of a neighbouring state), or be dissuaded from a contemplated undesirable action (such as the killing



of the citizens of that state), they must be convinced that the coercer's threatened use of force is credible. Credibility will be determined both by a demonstrated ability to carry out the threatened action, and critically the intent and will to do so. Without both the clarity of the coercer's intent and an appreciation of the coercer's capability, the adversary may perceive little risk and may not comply with the coercer's demands. Air power has the ability to provide the most vital and credible component of coercive diplomacy: a demonstrated and scalable strike capability.

Contemporary military operations are subject to a number of constraints. Primary amongst these is the need for legitimacy, which can only be achieved through international consensus. Air operations, with their ability to apply precise, proportional and discriminatory force, often provide a more politically palatable option than ground operations that are viewed as less discriminate and more invasive. Avoidance of unintended civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure has become a key tenet in contemporary military endeavours,

and precision air power can play a key role in minimising ‘collateral damage’.

The international intervention in Libya between March and October 2011 provides the most recent example of an attempt to coerce a leader to alter his undesirable behaviour (in this case the persecution of Libyan citizens), primarily through the use of air power. The NATO intervention was ultimately successful in protecting civilians—as called for under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973—but cannot truly be considered a case of successful coercion, as Muammar Gaddafi did not comply with the United Nation’s demands. Gaddafi did not call on his military and supporters to desist from the oppression and slaughter of Libyan civilians, and the intervention ended with his capture and death at the hands of the Libyan rebels—in other words, regime change. The NATO intervention could only be cited as a success for coercive diplomacy if Gaddafi had chosen to stop his actions while he still had the power to continue to resist the air operations.

A more successful example of the use of air power in a coercive role was the NATO campaign in Kosovo in 1999; where Slobodan Milosevic eventually capitulated and was brought to the negotiating table and eventually to the International Criminal Court. However, labelling it as a success is not without contention, as it illustrated the limits of air power in coercive application through its inability to prevent the genocide of Kosovar Albanians taking place on the ground.

The success of coercive air operations in the Balkans in the 1990s resulted in an expectation of the ability of air power to ensure fast and bloodless results. More recent operations, however, have demonstrated that this expectation may be overly optimistic. An air campaign may successfully cause the aggressor to desist from their undesirable behaviour, for fear of further consequences, but this does not necessarily imply that their motivation has changed, nor prevent subsequent undesirable behaviour.

The success of a coercive air campaign on its own may not guarantee a satisfactory end-state to a conflict. The air campaign is normally only one element in the overall military strategy, which may include simultaneous activities such as surface actions or threat of the use of ground forces or the imposition of no-fly zones to deny the adversary access to territory. In addition, concurrent initiatives such as the imposition of economic sanctions

and continued diplomatic engagement may also contribute to the conflict’s resolution.

There is no single framework or template that can be prescriptively followed to ensure the success of coercive diplomacy, as each situation will have unique circumstances that require a tailored approach. However, irrespective of the mechanism employed, the effect sought is for the adversary to comply with the requested action rather than risk further consequences, including military defeat.

Air power can play a decisive role in diplomatic coercion, but it must be recognised as one of a set of tools to be applied within a broader spectrum of strategy. Similarly, coercive diplomacy itself is but one element of a spectrum of strategies that strives to resolve international issues.



- *Coercive diplomacy is often used in international relations when traditional diplomacy has not achieved the desired results.*
- *Diplomatic coercion seeks to apply only limited force, giving the adversary the ability to choose to alter their behaviour while the damage is limited.*
- *Air power is often the instrument of first choice of coercion, but should not be considered a tool to be used in isolation.*

*To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.*

*Sun Tzu*



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