



AIR POWER AND COERCIVE DIPLOMACY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Coercive diplomacy, often cited as the 'hard power' part of what is normally a polite interaction between governments, is the threat of military force to resolve points of contention between states. As detailed in *Pathfinder 177*, Air power's inherent characteristics of reach, flexibility and responsiveness has made it a powerful coercive instrument in diplomatic negotiations.

The ready threat posed by air power has been demonstrated throughout the history of aviation. The ability of air power to bombard cities and seats of government had become a point of political discussion well before any such capability actually existed. Growing concerns in Europe about the destructive potential of air power led to the Hague Convention of 1899 that prohibited aerial bombardment of cities from balloons. Later, the Hague Convention of 1907 extended such prohibitions to heavier than air aircraft. Likewise, the broader public's fear of air power being used to transport enemy troops directly into a nation's capital was exploited in literary works such as H.G. Wells' book, *The War in the Air*, published in 1908. Against such a backdrop of historic concerns regarding the use of air power directly against national interests and the general population, it is not surprising that the threat of air power has become an important element of coercive diplomacy.

The spectrum of military, and especially air power's, contribution to coercive diplomacy is extremely broad, and ranges from the effects of enforcing sanctions offensively through to selective attacks on key targets to demonstrate political resolve or to prevent an adversary from exercising coercive options of their own. Examples of the employment of air power over the last 100 years serve to illustrate the potential of air power in support of diplomatic initiatives.

The Australian decision, in 1963, to purchase the F-111, changed the balance of power within the region. The range, offensive potential as well as the precision strike capability of the F-111, represented Australia's

resolve to protect national interests with force. That resolve was clearly expressed through both the political willingness and the resource allocation to acquire such a capability. As Australia was one of the few countries the United States was prepared to sell the F-111 to, the sale illustrated a healthy relationship between coalition partners, each prepared to contribute to shared security goals and strategies. Any potential adversary had to contend with the F-111's operational threat as well as a significant strategic partnership.

A more direct application of diplomatic coercion through the threat of air power was illustrated in February 1938, at a time of heightened tensions between Austria and Nazi Germany over the forced unification of the two countries. When the Austrian Prime Minister, Kurt Schuschnigg, refused Hitler's demands to include a Nazi sympathiser in the Austrian Government, Hitler's response was to suggest that the *Luftwaffe* would enjoy visiting Vienna 'like a spring storm'. The German threat to bomb Austria's capital had credibility because Germany had already demonstrated a willingness to attack a national capital when it conducted a three year bombing

offensive on London during World War I. Further, the German *Luftwaffe* was already demonstrating an ability to attack cities as part of its operations in Spain. Fearful of the consequences, Schuschnigg agreed to Hitler's more immediate demands.

While Hitler had the advantage of credibility when negotiating with Schuschnigg, the process of coercive diplomacy at times needs to be emphasized with example. Through the selective and scalable application of air power, limited military force can be applied, and then withdrawn to lend weight to diplomatic discussions. In 1999, when Serbian forces under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević were carrying out ethnic cleansing operations in Kosovo, all normal diplomatic negotiations failed to stop the atrocities. Consequently, NATO began an



World War I Zeppelin poster

air campaign that targeted Serbian ground units operating in Kosovo as well as selected Serbian communications, infrastructure and industrial targets.

The air attacks mounted within Serbia were more than just a demonstration of resolve, each target was a financial asset of Milošević's inner cycle of supporters. Prior to the destruction of these targets, the owners were sent messages via text, e-mail and fax, informing them that the asset targeted for that night would be destroyed, and that it would be in their best interests to encourage Milošević to withdraw from Kosovo. This 'crony targeting' strategy conducted in concert with the diplomatic pressure being applied to Serbia was ultimately successful. Bereft of a power base, Milošević was subsequently handed over to face the international courts at the Hague in 2001.

The Milošević example also illustrates the sometimes-difficult demarcation line between where coercive diplomacy stops and military operations start. However, within the complex environment of international conflicts, these activities can be concurrent, with the military campaign carefully orchestrated to align with and support the diplomatic effort. The first significant example of this concept in which air power was the central military component directed in support of political activity was during the terror bombing of London by German Zeppelins and fixed wing bombers in World War I.

In December 1914, a German airship attacked mainland England. Following this minor raid, the German Kaiser personally directed a steady escalation of aerial attacks that first targeted the Thames estuary and progressively moved into central London. While hardly accurate, the attacks were not intended to cause mass destruction, but rather influence British public opinion and force the United Kingdom to seek a separate peace with Germany.

In 1917 when German fixed winged bombers attacked London for the first time in daylight, the public outcry was enormous. There was a very real threat that the population, already fatigued by three years of war would force the Government into seeking terms with Germany. By a narrow margin, the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George was able to convince his Cabinet colleagues and the population to continue with the war—and to unify the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Services to form the Royal Air Force in order to better deal with the aerial attacks on the United Kingdom. While unsuccessful, the German bombing campaign is an example of a

coercive strategy being directed at Government level quite independent of other military operations.

History shows us that air power can be an effective tool of coercive diplomacy. In the complex environment of international relations, its use must be carefully tailored to meet each specific case—there is no one template that can be applied to all situations. Importantly, history has shown that air power is just one response option, and that it must be used as part of a broad suite of options to be truly effective.



Hitler enters Vienna 1938 accompanied by Austrian Nazi Arthur Seyss-Inquart

- *The inherent characteristics of air power make it a credible tool for the government to use in support of coercive diplomacy.*
- *The range of options available for the employment of air power in a coercive diplomacy role is broad and can also be carried out concurrently with wider military activity.*
- *There is no one template for the employment of air power, each situation demands a unique response.*

Strategy is the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy.

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