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Coercive Strategic Effect

Are air power and sea power comparable in their abilities to produce strategic effects?

Air power and sea power are both fully capable of achieving great strategic effect. However, the strategic usefulness of air power, while certainly essential, appears to be more limited in scope than sea power. In addition, the question seems to imply that some other means is actually used to bring victory in the war and that air and sea power are peripherally used to produce "strategic effect" that makes such victory possible or easier.

Making such a comparison also implies, that sea and air power are on the same level as strategic tools or enhancers. Air power, while capable of important strategic effects, and essential to the successful conclusion of a modern war, is more limited in its ability effectively to coerce an enemy than is sea power. Indeed, some air power capabilities are a subset of sea power's strategic effect.

No modern war can be won without dealing with air power, but no modern war can be won by air power alone. Similarly, sea power, especially for the United States, is also essential in achieving victory. The key difference is that, applied correctly with its full range of capabilities (which includes air, sea, and land components), sea power can bring an enemy to its knees while air power cannot.

Air Power Arguments. Robert Pape provides a useful framework from which to analyze the strategic use of air power. He divides air strategies into four general categories: 1) punishment, 2) risk, 3) denial, and 4) decapitation. Punishment generally involves attacking civilian population or industrial centers. Risk strategies hold populations hostage to the threat of future punishment. Denial involves direct attack on an enemy's military capabilities. Decapitation

strategies attempt to a) kill specific leaders, b) create internal dissention and foster rebellion and overthrow of the attacked government, and c) separate military commanders from their subordinate units by attacking command and control nodes and networks. (Pape, chapter 3)

Air power proponents, since the days of Giulio Douhet, have claimed that long-range strategic bombing was the revolution in military affairs that would forever change how wars would be fought and won. "Take the center of a large city," Douhet wrote in 1942, "and imagine what would happen among the civilian population during a single attack by a single bombing unit….I have no doubt that its impact on the people would be terrible." He went on to argue that the civil authorities would be unable to control the panicked population and a complete breakdown in the social order would follow. The populace, unable to stand the pressure, would "rise up and demand an end to the war." (Pape, p. 60) With the advent of nuclear and precision guided munitions, the argument continues today, the effects of air power are enhanced, resulting in an even greater ability to achieve strategic effects and success in a war. (Pape, 79)

The problem with the punishment theories as described above is that, with the possible exception of nuclear weapons, they do not work. Early examples of success, such as the British Royal Air Force against the Somalis and Iraqis during the 1920s, or the Italians against the Ethiopians in 1936, were presented as proofs of concept. Proponents ignored the fact that the Somali, Iraqi, and Ethiopian tribesmen were under air attack for the first time and their relatively primitive military means were totally overwhelmed by modern arms.

Attempting to punish an enemy population, especially a modern developed society, by air bombardment (or any other means for that matter) until they demand their own government to stop the war is an unrealized strategy. Germany and Japan (World War II) were the recipients of years of exceptionally intense bombardment, yet the population did not "rise up and demand an end to the war." The British population only became further entrenched in their hatred for Hitler

and Naziism by the German bombing of Great Britain. Iraq, attacked over several weeks by a campaign specifically designed to take advantage of modern precision guided munitions, did not succumb to overthrow of an unpopular government.

Similarly, decapitation does not work. Even considering the Gulf War, there are no cases where such strategy, whether applied by air power or otherwise, has worked. The closest example, the overthrow of the Russian Tsar toward the end of World War I was the result of social problems and not the direct action of an enemy.

Air power has proven successful in attacking the enemy's military power. Described by Pate as "denial" strategies, air power is used to deprive the enemy's military force from achieving its aim. Applied to armies, air power has been most effective by destroying equipment and personnel (operational interdiction) and by disrupting the enemy's ability to maneuver or resupply (strategic interdiction). Theater air attack, such as seen in the Gulf War, is the best modern example of this application. (Pape, p. 318) In opposing naval forces, air power sank ships or prevented enemy fleets or convoys from reaching port. Carrier-based air power and long range land-based patrol aircraft are the best examples.

Often forgotten, yet important, air power also includes strategic airlift, the ability to move large amounts of material and personnel quickly over long distances. While airlift is limited in total capacity, the strategic speed at which loads can be delivered is incomparable.

To use air power effectively, its advantages must be enhanced while minimizing its disadvantages. The advantages are speed of action, long range, and ability to attack targets accurately. The disadvantages are the necessity of highly technical support requirements, a prepared airfield, and the vulnerability of that airfield to enemy attack. Historical example indicates that it is ineffective to use air power to "punish" a population or to attempt a decapitation, especially at the leadership or political level. Effective use includes direct attack on

the enemy military force, (i.e., theater air attack) denying it the capability to achieve its aims, and strategic airlift.

Sea Power Arguments. Sea power proponents argue that navies are used best either to attack enemy fleets or to support an operation on the land. (Baer, p. 451) Mahan declared that the purpose of a navy was to fight other navies. He insisted on independence of action that would ensure the ability of the fleet to respond to the changing nature of war at sea. Corbett, writing at about the same time, envisioned a navy supporting land operations and/or attacking enemy commerce at sea. With the advent of airplanes, sea power also included a component of air power. In World War II, fleets still fought fleets, but with bombs dropped from airplanes instead of large guns. Navies also attacked the land by mounting and supporting large ground forces. The ideas of both Mahan and Corbett were very much alive.

Air power proponents argue that navies are obsolete. Long range aircraft, precision guided munitions, and cruise missiles present ships with so much danger that it is uneconomical to present a fleet to such a threat. Some point to the experience of the British Royal Navy in the Falklands/Malvinas War. During the height of the Argentine air attacks on the British invasion force, the Royal Navy was losing a ship a day. The losses were nearly enough to force the British to give up the attack. However, despite early successes, the loss of nearly one third of their air force forced the Argentines to slow the assault. The naval force had defeated the land-based air force. (Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands,"* New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983, p. 228)

Another principle attack on sea power is that it cannot defeat a continental power. Although naval forces can "poke around on the fringes," the continental power is not affected by such classic naval strategies as blockades, commerce raiding, or even attacks on the fleet. The "elephant" is impervious to anything the "whale' can do. The effort required to defeat Napoleon

or the apparent inability of any attacker to win by invading Russia (France, Germany, and potentially, the United States), are lifted as examples of the impotence of sea-based power.

All of the above probably are true in the case of unlimited war. If the goal is the removal of those in power or the physical occupation of the enemy's territory, a large ground force may well be required. However, in limited war, the most likely of conflicts, sea power has more to offer than air power in the strategic role. As noted above, the only time "punishment" or "risk" air strategies are likely to be successful is with the use of nuclear weapons, i.e., unlimited war.

Short of going unlimited with an enemy, and thus bringing the prospect of nuclear coercion, sea power offers a broad range of strategic assets. "Denial" attacks, at which air power excels, can be executed from sea as well as from land bases. The sea bases are not as prone to attack as a land base and do not require prior permission from a host nation to operate. Additionally, blockades, commerce interdiction, and port denial attacks are often effective in reducing an enemy's capability to resist sea power.

Sea power can mount and deliver huge quantities of personnel and material. While air lift can move small quantities long distances much faster, only sea power offers the muscle required to remain in a theater for extended time. Sea-based ground forces can then be introduced in either small numbers (raids) or large (invasions) to bring about the desired end-state of the war. All are well within the demonstrated capabilities of a modern naval force and all are effective, especially when used within the context of a limited war.

The Japanese were able to take advantage of their sea power to successfully confront a superior continental power, Russia, in their 1905 attack on Port Arthur. The subsequent Russo-Japanese War demonstrated how a sea power could use the full range of capabilities to effectively neutralize a powerful land power by keeping aims limited. The United States, during World War II, effectively used its sea power to isolate and attack Japan. The ground forces were

entirely sea-based or sea-mounted. The air forces operated as part of a larger naval strategy either directly from the sea or from bases obtained by naval forces.

Arguments by strategic bombing advocates that the destruction and fire-bombing of Japanese cities brought about the final surrender ignore the effects of the strangling submarine blockade and the devastating destruction of the Japanese naval, air, and ground forces in the relentless drives from Australia and Hawaii toward Japan. Even the effects of dropping the two atomic bombs in 1945 would not have been enough to coerce the final surrender. In short, strategic bombing does not matter (Pape, p. 316, 318, 346) and the presence of sea power does.

For sea power to be effective, its advantages must be enhanced and its disadvantages minimized. The advantages of sea power are strategic mobility, freedom from host-nation constraints, the ability to strike targets accurately with air power and other means, move large quantities of personnel and material long distances, to mount and sustain ground forces in attack on the shore, and to sustain itself at sea for extended periods of time. The disadvantages of sea power include the requirement of a long supply line which must be protected (the same problem as any other forward deployed force), and vulnerability to attack by enemy forces (the same vulnerability as any other military force.) Gaining and maintaining control of the sea and air enhances the advantages and minimizes the disadvantages..

Conclusion. Air power and sea power both have important strategic effects, but sea power, used strategically, can win a war, especially a limited war. The Douhet principle of coercing an enemy into submitting by "punishing" the civilian population has not yet been borne out in practice. It appears that the only way for such a strategy to be effective is with the use of nuclear weapons. Short of such "unlimited" warfare, there is not much use for strategic bombing. Air

power is most effective when used in a "denial" role, i.e., attacking the enemy military means of achieving its aims such as in major theater air attack.

Air power launched from the sea can function well in the denial role as well, both in the traditional means of attacking an enemy fleet or by attacking enemy military forces ashore. Sea based air power, in executing strategic "denial" missions, whether using manned bombers or cruise missiles, functions in exactly the same manner as it does from land bases.

Additionally, sea power brings more to the fight than denial alone. By its ability to establish blockades, a naval power can completely cut off an island enemy, or prevent a continental power from effectively using the sea in its own support. With air and sea superiority brought about by a coordinated naval strategy, ground forces landed in key locations further enhance the pressure brought to bear on an enemy.

Sea power is more broad a concept than is air power. Sea power includes not only the ability to operate ships at sea, but the ability to employ air power independent from host nation permission. Sea power can interdict sea lines of communications, move massive quantities of material and personnel, and impose and support ground forces on enemy soil. Air power, while important and in most cases essential, does not offer the same scope of strategic effect.