

Coercive Air Power and Peace Enforcement
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“To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence”

- Sun Tzu

Air Power is a very seductive term – in the modern conflict-ridden world it seems to be the harbinger of relief from the drudgery of long drawn out conflicts. Nowhere is it more apparent than in conflicts where attempts are made by the United Nations (UN) and the international community to bring violence to a close with minimum commitment of boots on the ground. The latest is the use of Air Power, initially by the USA, and then by NATO in the ongoing internal strife in Libya – as we go to the press, would it happen in Syria too?

Have air operations of the UN helped it meet its Charter of ushering in an environment of tranquility and stability, so that civilians caught up in a conflict start leading a normal life? Has Air Power lived up to its aura of being an enabler for peace for the UN? While Air Power has many roles to play in the ambit of operations of the UN (C2, ISR, communication, mobility etc), this paper will study its coercive effect on peace enforcement operations, taking the Bosnian conflict and the Indian experience in UN Missions as baseline parameters.

Historical Perspective

The UN Special Committee on the Balkans (1947-52) was the first mission to get off the ground after the formation of the UN.¹ From there started the saga of international involvement in conflict areas. Between 1947 and 1990, 21 UN operations were started but in the decade after the end of the cold war, i.e. till the turn of the Century, 32 new missions were launched! Between 1987 and 1994, the Security Council quadrupled the number of resolutions it issued, tripled the peacekeeping operations it authorised and multiplied by seven the number of economic sanctions it imposed per year.² The UN has been a busy organisation indeed – and its involvement in conflict prone areas only seems to be increasing, as the winds of democracy blow through hitherto uncharted territory in the Middle East, West Asia and North African countries post the ‘Jasmine revolution’ in Tunisia.

In one of the bigger missions, even by today’s numbers, which saw 19280 peacekeepers in the Congo in 1960, Air Power came into its own when it was employed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The job of elimination of the Katanga Air Force was taken up by the ‘UN Air Force’, which was an assortment of the following aircraft³ :

- (a) Six B-55 Canberra bombers of the Indian Air Force.
- (b) Four F-86 fighters of the Ethiopian Air Force.
- (c) Three J-29B Tunman fighters and two S-29C recce fighters of the Swedish Air Force.
- (d) Sixteen C-119s and a Squadron of Dakota aircraft manned by aircrew of diverse nationalities (commanded by Wg Cdr GB Singh of India).

Thus, began the role of Air Power, when it brought to bear all its facets of reconnaissance, transportation and offensive power in a conflict where an International body had assumed the role of a peace maker and a peace enforcer. Air Power was called in in other major UN Peace Keeping Operations (PKO) also, but the defining ones were the first Gulf War or Operation Desert Storm, Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia and, then in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2003 when the Indian Air force was asked to give utility and attack helicopters to United Nation’s Mission in Congo (MONUC). There is, however, a major difference between the DRC operations of the IAF and the others listed here; Operations Desert Storm and Deliberate Force were UN mandated operations while the ongoing actions in the DRC are under a pure UN peace keeping force under MONUC. Though both were authorised under Chapter VII of the UN Charter i.e., peace enforcement, the mandated operations were sublet to a member country or another organisation; thus, Operation Desert Storm was a coalition led by the US while Operation Deliberate Force was NATO led. In reality, Bosnia was a mixture of the two – the ground force was a Chapter VI raised under the UN flag and formed the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) while the air element was mandated to NATO to carry out a Chapter VII operation (Op Deliberate Force). The implications of this will be discussed later in this paper.

It is a well accepted fact that the peace keeping process consists of four stages, as espoused by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali in his 1992 seminal report Agenda for Peace⁴ viz,

- (a) **Peace Diplomacy or Peace Making.** Action to prevent disputes from arising, and, if they have already taken place, then to prevent them from escalating into conflicts; included in the term would be the efforts to prevent the dispute from spreading to other areas.
- (b) **Peace Keeping.** To deploy a ‘UN presence between warring parties after obtaining their consent’ as a confidence building measure while diplomacy tries to arrive at a solution.
- (c) **Peace Enforcement.** To act, including with the use of armed action, with or without the consent of the warring parties under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.
- (d) **Peace Building.** Wherein the UN assists in building infrastructure and civic institutions so that normal life can be led by the populace; this phase is also called post conflict reconstruction.

Any conflict is the result of incongruent and divergent thought processes or principles between two or more warring parties; when a clash takes place requiring external intervention, it implies that self arbitration has reached a point of no return and failed. A treaty or accord reached thereafter to stop the fighting is a mutually hurting stalemate – the belligerents could not reach a settlement and an outside agency was required to do it. Therefore, there does exist

the 'incentive' to break the accord, normally initiated through the actions of spoilers (marginal groups owing allegiance to clans, tribes, religious sub-sects et al)) who are present in all such situations; this is thereafter used as an excuse by major groups to step-in. The disincentive can only be a threat or actual use of timely proportionate retribution, if peace efforts on ground fail to bring the accord violators to heel. It is important to underscore the words timely and proportionate, as their importance was highlighted in the post mortem after the Bosnian conflict.

So, in what manifestation does air power come into the equation? As an instrument that carries kinetic power into the conflict zone or as an instrument of coercive power to 'persuade' belligerent(s) to the negotiating table? The spectacular showing of Air Power in the US-led UN-mandated Gulf War in 1991 gave a new spurt to peace keeping efforts. Air Power was seen to be a deliverer of peace with minimal casualties to ground troops - in the seven month period of Operation Desert Storm there were only 147 American deaths due to hostile actions.⁵ The Security Council saw a spurt of increased activity; and between March 1991 and October 1993, new innovative approaches were tried in other conflict areas (the death of 18 US soldiers in Somalia seriously undermined the will of the international body thereafter). Thus, within this period, 185 resolutions were passed as against 685 in the preceding forty six years of UN history while fifteen new peacekeeping and observer missions were launched as against seventeen in the previous four and a half decades. Between 1946 and 1986, thirteen operations had been planned, while forty seven were started between 1987 and 2006.⁶ This was predominantly due to the new capability that became available through smart air munitions. However, one aspect or basic fundamental also became clear, that, peacekeeping could not be allowed to 'creep' into peace enforcement. It had to be a calculated and well thought-of decision having the required unity of effort, unity of command and political will of the international community. These aspects were missing from the authorisation for the UN mandated NATO air power and the UN force, UNPROFOR, which went into Bosnia.

UN in Bosnia

In more ways than one, the Bosnian conflict is an engagement which can be taken as an ideal case study on how to use or not use air power in a conflict in which the UN has been called upon to mediate. Without going into the politics of the Bosnian imbroglio and for the sake of simplicity it can be said that after pitting the Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniacs, against the Serbs in Bosnia Herzegovina, the events so unfolded that the UN found itself as an unwitting belligerent on the side of the former against the latter. NATO Air Power was available on call for the UN troops on ground 'guarding' the designated safe areas. In the initial stages the Serbs had advanced in a series of steps, pausing to ascertain whether or not NATO would use force against them. The ultimatum to use air power had worked in the short term and in the words of the then UNPROFOR Commander in Bosnia Herzegovina, "it was NATO air power that helped deter attacks by Bosnian Serbs against the safe areas".⁷ Despite this assessment that the threatened use of air power had been effective at critical moments around Sarajevo and Gorazde, the Secretary General advised exercising caution based on the following reasons ⁸ :-

- (a) Use of Air Power had to be based on 'verifiable' information, and
- (b) The use of Air Power would expose the UN personnel on ground to retaliation.

The Serbs utilised the difference in opinion and the lack of political will by taking UN troops as hostages at regular intervals, thus blackmailing the troop contributing nations and arm twisting the UN in not using the one instrument of coercion that the international community had, viz, Air Power. As the Secretary General put it, "the Bosnian Serb side quickly realised that it had the capacity to make UNPROFOR pay an unacceptably high price", by taking hostages. He considered that the episodes in which UNPROFOR had used Air Power had, "demonstrated the perils of crossing the line from peace keeping to peace enforcement.....without proper equipment, intelligence and command and control arrangements"⁹.

The Secretary General's report makes for fascinating reading as one 'walks' through the deteriorating situation, with the evidence of massacres and ethnic cleansing being seen by the world and a powerless world body. Srebrenica falls and Zepa is under imminent threat and once the world gets fully aware of the horrendous deaths, NATO takes an important and long overdue decision on 25 Jul 1995 - air strikes, as against close air support, are authorised if the UN or NATO commanders assess that the Serbs pose a serious threat to the safe areas. The Special Representative of the Secretary General objects but is overruled by the Secretary General and the authority to ask for air strikes is delegated down to the Force Commander. This marked a seminal change in the way the Bosnian conflict was thereafter addressed by the international community.

Operation Deliberate Force was, thus, launched by NATO on 30 August 1995 and marked a totally different way the intransigence of the Serbs was dealt-with. The Rapid Reaction Force created for NATO went into action on ground in an offensive mode.¹⁰ The UN HQ took a diametrically opposite view to its earlier stance, reflecting the change of political will in the international community - it made clear that force would be used in self-defence, including defence of the mandate.¹¹ This was, then, a threat as used in a classical war because NATO and the UN had become belligerents against the Serbs. The firm resolve was evident on the ground as 3000 sorties were flown and 60 targets attacked in a matter of 15 days; this had the desired effect and the Serbs came to the negotiating table¹² to find a solution to the conflict.

"Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations", a 2008 study commissioned by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs analysed the crisis response capabilities of various Missions and came up with a very succinct analysis of where a non-UN led interventionist force would be required if the intensity of violence has to be halted. Based on their study of various missions, the study group plotted the intensity of violence in missions with respect to the passage of time and superimposed the availability of UN forces and non-UN led mandated forces; the findings are plotted in Figure 1.

The study goes on to say that the grey area (Figure 1), where there is a sharp increase in violence against civilians (as in Bosnia), has to be anticipated and planned-for in the post-mandate planning process; if not done, the study says, it transcends beyond the capability of a traditional UN PKO on site to tackle the crisis. The only option is to

call on external mandated military forces¹³, as what finally happened when the ‘curbs’ were removed on NATO Air Power (in Bosnia). With hindsight, it can be said that in case of ONUC in 1960 (Congo Leopoldville), coercive action was taken by the UN before the inflection in the curve – after a series of operations (Operations Rumpunch, Morthor and UNOKAT), the last resort was the use of coercive measures to end the secession for the sake of unity and international peace.¹⁴ It was here that the “UN Air Force” brought to bear all its might to coerce the Katanga rebels to make peace and usher-in a peaceful political process.

All conflicts have a political *raison d’être* for the discord. The counter strategy, whether military or otherwise, aims to get a solution that is politically acceptable to the parties involved. Air Power, if used judiciously, can act as a catalyst to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. However, there are limits to this, and if used inappropriately, the credibility in subsequent conflicts can be greatly reduced. So, to analyse Air Power as an instrument of coercion in peace keeping it would be necessary to examine the linkage between the two.

Measuring Coercion

A Rand study authored by Daniel L Byman and others defines coercion as the use of threatened force, including the limited employment of actual force to back up the threat, to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would. Coercion is characterised by two subsets – compellence and deterrence¹⁵.

Coercion is not a one way action taken only by the coercer; it is a dynamic two (or more) party process in which the target of coercion also takes remedial or evolutionary action to negate the coercion – sometimes the coercer gets counter-coerced. It does not have a discrete beginning but is a continuum, with some elements present all the time. The measure of success too is not a simple yes or no, as there are only limited effects that take place during the process – it all depends on a precise definition of the behaviour sought. Even limited effects, in tandem with other coercive measures, may be sufficient to change an opponent’s decision making, leading to change in his behaviour¹⁶. As Thomas Schelling in his landmark work, “Arms and Influence”, put it – the power to hurt, though it can usually accomplish nothing directly, is potentially more versatile than a straight forward capacity for forcible accomplishment¹⁷. Coercers must recognise that perceptions are many times more important than actualities on ground; the adversary must fear its costs, not just suffer them.

It has been brought out earlier in the paper that the capacity to escalate is an important constituent in the projected capability of a coercer. Air Power has this important ingredient as an intrinsic part of its capability – it can very easily and very quickly escalate or threaten to escalate, thereby increasing the stakes for the adversary; equally importantly, it can de-escalate at a very fast pace. Thus, the power to manipulate, space out the events and control the tempo is easily achievable through Air Power. This capability to control the intensity of violence is an invaluable tool in the hands of a commander in a peacekeeping environment who is trying to implement a UN mandate to ensure peace and not gain a military victory in the traditional sense. Schelling has explained the adversary’s desired behaviour in a different way; he brings out that while brute force of two parties can cancel each other in physical terms, pain and grief do not (emphasis added); it is this threatened pain and grief – the likely impending effect – that the coercer tries to impress upon the coerced¹⁸. Thus, one of the reasons for success of air power in Bosnia in 1995 was that, once the curbs on employment of Air Power were removed, the Serb leaders came to realise that air strikes could increase in number and intensity and inflict greater costs (pain and grief) on them.¹⁹

There are, however, domestic compulsions that restrain the freedom with which Air Power can be used. When national interests are not vitally involved, Air Power usage becomes restrictive. The approval ratings for American involvement in Somalia were only 43 per cent, with 46 per cent of those polled disapproving it (11 per cent had no opinion); what is of importance is that this was even before the October 1993 Mogadishu incident in which 18 US servicemen lost their lives.²⁰ In case of coalitions it would be worse, as was seen in Bosnia where the British and French put restrictions in the use of Air Power because they felt that their troops operating under Chapter VI, would be targeted. This ambiguity was used by the Serbs to their advantage. The massacres at Gorazde and Srebrenica were caused by the complicated decision making procedure (result of political compulsions) shown in Figure 2 — both ‘keys’ had to be ‘turned’ for air strikes to be authorised.²¹

Coercion and Non State Actors

Generally, in an intra state conflict, one or more sides of the conflict are belligerent(s) who is (are) non state actors. Thus, as conflicts have evolved in the past three decades, the United Nations has been called-in to mediate in many such crises situations. This is going to be more of a norm, as in the 1990s, 94 per cent of conflicts resulting in more than 1000 deaths were civil wars. In 2004, one source found 25 emergencies of “pressing” concern, 23 of which were civil wars. As Thomas Weiss, a prolific UN observer puts it, the future battlefields will not feature conventional front lines but would consist more of violence born out of resources and economic opportunism for which borders are meaningless. The new wars are characterised by situations where battleground states have minimal capacity and their monopoly on violence is opposed in almost equal measure by internal armed groups.²² It is, thus, necessary to study whether Air Power of the international community, whether mandated or part of a UN peace keeping force, can be instrumental in bringing peace under such circumstances.

Coercion implies threatening something or a value that an adversary holds dear to itself; where there are non state actors, this becomes a nebulous situation and complicates this core assumption. Since their chain of command is diffused and holding of fixed or identifiable assets very limited, if not non-existent, the odds or the probability of non state actors to get coerced becomes remote. Bombs cannot have a significant impact against a determined enemy who chooses to fight an infrequent guerilla war²³. The UN faced this in Rwanda and the DRC and the Russians in Chechnya. After the miniscule Chechen ‘air force’ was destroyed by the Russians, the Chechen leader Dudayev had reportedly signalled the Russian Commander, “I congratulate you and the Russian Air Force on another victory in achieving air superiority over the Chechen Republic – will see you on the ground”.²⁴ Motivation of a group cannot be measured by its physical military holdings, and the one thing that armament cannot destroy is the intangible which constitutes the driving force or impulse of a rebel group; this could be a religious or clan/tribe belief or something very

real and down to earth as sheer banditry for physical survival. The lack of a formalised state structure implies that the non state entity is more resilient than a recognised group, since the ‘belief’ cannot be destroyed by arms, Thus it was possible for the UNPROFOR and NATO Air Power to subdue or coerce the Bosnian Serb Army (partially through pressure exerted on the Serbs, it’s external sponsor) but not General Aideed in Somalia. The UN succeeded to a certain extent in Congo Leopoldville in the 1960s, as there was a formalised Katangan military structure as an adversary; however, the same has not happened in the past decade in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR) is more a movement of many groups than a state.

Indian Experience

India has always operated in an international peacekeeping environment under the UN umbrella, other than its brief dalliance in Sri Lanka, when an Indian Peacekeeping Force went-in for a short period in what was essentially seen as a destabilising conflict in its backyard. The Indian Air Force (IAF) was, perhaps, one of the pioneers in committing its resources, when it sent Canberra bombers in 1960 (frontline aircraft of those times); the deployment was under Chapter VII and during their two year stay, they were used extensively for destroying the Katangan Air Force’s assets and infrastructure²⁵ and helped bringing about the capitulation of the secessionist Katangan rebels. This was followed by Chapter VII deployments in Somalia (1993), Sierra Leone (2000) and DRC (2003) and a Chapter VI mission in Sudan (2005). The IAF took with it its experience of flying helicopters in the most inhospitable of terrains and in conditions that can only be described as challenging. While the utility Mi-8s and Mi-17s flew logistic support sorties, casualty and medical evacuations and inserted and extracted troops, the Attack Helicopters (AHs) became indispensable assets to ensure that the utility helicopters flew safely, the convoys moved unhindered on ground and that rebels and spoilers did not interfere with the mandate.

The Indian missions in Sierra Leone and Somalia were short for a variety of unconnected political reasons and it was in MONUC in DRC that the coercive nature of Air Power was used very successfully, almost on a daily basis, as evidenced by two landmark operations that IAF helicopters undertook. The intimidating effect of Air Power was exemplified in 2006 in an engagement which has become well known in UN peacekeeping circles as the ‘Sake incident’ when rebels owing allegiance to rebel Commander General NKunda, marched towards Goma pillaging, killing and raping the inhabitants; the UN base at Goma was itself threatened. In a series of coordinated actions in which attack helicopters played a pivotal role, the UN troops repulsed the rebels and re-took Sake.²⁶ In 2008, at a place called Masisi, UN troops were stoned by the locals protesting UN ‘inaction’ against NKunda rebels. AHs were called in and in a show of coercive action, that included firing of a few rockets, the situation was brought under control.²⁷ It has been a well accepted fact that the mere appearance of offensive air assets, viz, the AHs resulted in the rebels either moving out of the area or not indulging in any violent activity; psychological coercion by attack helicopters is an understated capability of this weapon system.

A paper prepared by the Centre on International Cooperation of New York University for discussion during an international workshop on Rotary Wing Assets held on 27-28 Apr 11 at New York, noted that military helicopters were required to air maintain close to 25 Operating Bases (OBs) in a week in MONUC of which 10 were in medium and high risk areas. Air operations to these ‘risky’ OBs were permitted only with Attack Helicopters (AHs) giving air borne protection. Due to the withdrawal of four IAF Attack Helicopters in 2010, operations had been affected significantly. In MONUSCO Ituri Brigade, operations to medium and high risk areas had ceased, said the paper; it further stated that if the remaining four AHs were withdrawn in July 2011 (as asked by the Government of India), the situation would become ‘grave’. This showed the deterrence and almost indispensable worth that the IAF AHs had in the mission area. The enemy was not structured, but the mere presence of the AHs in the vicinity made the rebels ‘put their head down’. The compellence or coercive nature of Air Power was thus clearly demonstrated in the past six years of AH ops in MONUC/MONUSCO. The CIC paper stated that Armed Groups (AG) made forays into villages at night and made a getaway in the morning – “however the arrival of night capable Mi-35s became a deterrent to these nightly raids....”²⁸ and underscored the coercive capability of Air Power against non-state actors.

Analysis

Air Power, as an instrument of compellance, retains its potency only if the coercer can ensure sustained application of force, with the ability to escalate when required. In conflicts where there is an identifiable adversary having physical holdings of tangible assets then coercive pressure can be brought to bear by, as Schelling put it, the threat of inflicting of ‘pain and grief’. In such cases the following imperatives arise:-

- (a) There should be a clear and unambiguous mandate available for the air component.
- (b) Sufficient air assets should be available to deliver the required ‘weight of attack’ on the adversary – this is not limited to application of kinetic power but includes intelligence (by confronting the opponent with proof of his misdemeanors), surveillance and reconnaissance.
- (c) The application of coercive assets should be intelligently graduated, with its punch being delivered before the point of inflection (see Figure 1) beyond which extra ordinarily high quantum of force would be necessary.
- (d) The coercive capability of Air Power must not be overestimated, as boots on ground would always be required in a peace keeping environment. There would be times though, when compellence of supporting groups or factions could help squeeze the main adversary into doing one’s own bidding – in the final analysis, Bosnia is a classic example of this.

In case of the adversary being a non-state actor, a combination of ‘soft’ application of kinetic Air Power with adequate and timely psychological operations is enough to help the field commander achieve his mandate; the Indian experience in DRC is proof of this deduction.

Conclusion

Human history is witness to the fact that war, inter and intra state, is and will continue to be, an incontrovertible part of our existence. The past is also witness to the process of rapprochement (both externally driven and self concluded) that has invariably taken place between the warring parties, no matter how delayed the start of the process. Modern human history, especially after the birth of the United Nations, shows that the international community is seized of the need to push belligerents to find a solution. It is true that during the period of the Cold War, the two Super Power blocs had their own agendas to play out, thus ensuring a modicum of stability in areas where their vital interests were not threatened. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world saw a rise in conflicts where mediation of the international community was required; the UN rose to the challenge and this increased engagement coincided with the revolution in military affairs and the availability of smart munitions, the lethal combination of which was seen in the first Gulf war.

Air Power came into its own in Operation Desert Storm and was brought to bear by NATO in Bosnia thereafter under a UN mandate. From a faltering adjunct to UNPROFOR, the UN force on ground, Air Power became a catalyst in 'bombing the Serbians to the negotiating table'. Though this process of coercing the Serbs was greatly aided by additional factors on the ground, the major cause for the revitalisation of its potency was the removal of ambiguity from the tasking process and strengthening of the political will of the international community. The potency against nonstate actors is altogether on a different plane; since there is no asset or real estate to be lost the use of Air Power to coerce becomes restricted. Since the aim of the coercion is to threaten 'pain and grief', the employment of Air Power has to be very judicious - while the results are not as 'impressive' as when there is a structured enemy, they have a big psychological impact on the non state actors. The AHs of the Indian Air Force were great force multipliers for the UN in DRC, as their mere presence was itself coercive enough for the rebels on ground; in incidents when the rebels tested the UN's resolve, they got a fitting and proportionate response from the air.

Sun Tzu had said that know your enemy as yourself - study the adversary minutely so as to know everything about him. This is most applicable in the use of coercive Air Power as an enabler for peace enforcement; the Security Council needs to deduce what would cause the maximum 'pain and grief' to the adversary and accordingly mandate and equip the Mission with forces to achieve this - this would ensure fulfillment of the mandate given to the UN Mission.

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