

Air Power, Coercion, and ... Irregular Warfare?

By Lieutenant Colonel Richard Newton

In both theory and application, air power has the ability to change people's behaviours through the parallel mechanisms of influence and coercion. Although irregular warfare is a struggle for the allegiance and support of the population, the antagonists play by different rules. The government forces must win the allegiance of the people, while the insurgents force the support through coercion. Therefore, coercive applications of power by the government need to be applied against the adversary leadership, i.e., the decision-makers, and positive, influencing actions are employed to convince the populace that the government can defend them and will provide the services necessary to earn and maintain their allegiance. Air power, traditionally employed in a kinetic manner, has a powerful role to play as both a coercive and an influencing mechanism in irregular warfare. This article looks at how those air power might be used at the strategic level to force insurgent leaders to quit the fight and join the political process, and at the tactical level to restore security and stability.

Introduction

*Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in **magnitude** and also in **duration** (emphasis in original). Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.¹*

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

Of the four functions (of force), deterrence/coercion is the one that if achieved alters directly the opponent's intentions, so making it possible to win the clash of wills rather than the trial of strength.²

Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*

Air and space power is 'the ability to project power from the air and space to influence the behaviour of people or the course of events'.³

AP 3000, *British Air and Space Power Doctrine*

Irregular warfare is a political struggle, but still a fight, for the allegiance and support of the population. The population is the prize to be won, the battlespace where the fighting occurs, and sometimes even, the enemy fighting force. Rupert Smith's characterisation of irregular warfare as 'war amongst the people' is now common usage.⁴ In fact, it is widely acknowledged that the new strategic environment, fraught with state and non-state adversaries, pervasive news and pseudo-news media exposure, global criminal cartels linked to political extremists, and well-meaning but often clumsy, supra-national interest groups, is complex, messy, and uncomfortable.⁵ Although the current and predicted struggles may be for the 'hearts and minds' of the people

caught in the midst of these disparate, far-flung conflicts, the nature of warfare has not changed and Western military professionals are adapting to the new strategic reality. Airmen especially need to get in the game. It is time we stopped apologising for our air-mindedness, roll up our sleeves and figure out how to do what air power does best in helping to bring the current conflicts to resolution and seeking to prevent future irregular conflicts.

According to the *Global Strategic Trends*, asymmetric conflict between rebellious groups and nation-states is a situation unlikely to change for the next three decades. The strategic challenge is how to discourage these irregular actors, either through coercion or deterrence.⁶ For modern military planners the challenge becomes effectively using air power, arguably the U.S. and U.K.'s strongest and most versatile tools, to achieve political objectives in what is now acknowledged as the most likely form of conflict—ideologically motivated, irregular warfare, for political ends.

In theory and in application, air power has the ability to change behaviours through the parallel mechanisms of influence and coercion. Moreover, air power has afforded U.S. and British soldiers an asymmetric advantage over their adversaries for at least the last seven decades. The ability of air power to both deter, dissuade opponents from acting, and to coerce, force our enemies to act by manipulating costs and potential benefits, is well documented—but the conventional wisdom is that air power's ability to coerce is only applicable in regular-conventional war. This errant

perception has fostered a fractious 'boots on the ground' attitude within our respective defence communities. Robert Pape, in *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, noted that guerrillas were immune to coercion.⁷ This paper suggests the opposite is true; that insurgent leaders can and must be influenced, either deterring them from or denying their forces the ability to conduct politically motivated violent actions or coercing them into negotiating an end to their campaigns of violence.

Irregular war is political war. While all wars are ostensibly fought for political purposes, the adversaries' strategies differentiate regular-conventional war from irregular war. In the former case, military actions take the fore with diplomatic, economic, informational, and social elements following attainment of the military objective (think World War II). Combat normally takes the form of uniformed military forces meeting and clashing on or over a battlefield. Political, social, and economic changes happen after the fighting ends. In irregular warfare the adversary's objective is to win (or force) the political case among the population. There may not be recognisable military forces on one or both sides. David Galula in *Counterinsurgency Operations* makes the case that an insurgent knows it is foolish to attack the government conventionally and thus must 'carry the fight to a different ground where he has a better chance to balance the physical odds against him'.⁸ Galula, as so many others, says that the 'different ground' is the population. The contest in irregular warfare therefore, becomes a tug-of-war for control of the population

through tacit or explicit agreement or through intimidation. This is war among the people.

The idea that the struggle in irregular warfare is for the 'hearts and minds' of the population certainly holds true, especially for U.S. and U.K. political and military leaders who are held accountable to their own populations, the global community, and the affected population of the region in question. The irony is that our two nations must 'play nicely' while the insurgents are free to use whatever tactics and capabilities, nice or not nice, they choose. In fact, the two sides do not even play the same game (as in chess and checkers—same board, different games). Certainly, in the present incarnation of irregular warfare, our adversaries cannot make serious claim that they value the opinion of the affected people. Irregular actors/insurgents need only acquiescence and passive loyalty from the people and they don't care how it is achieved or maintained.⁹

So, what do insurgents value? Power! Insurgents, whether nationalist, separatist, religious, socialist, ethnic, economic, or whatever, want to be in charge. Insurgent leaders want to decide who gets what rather than allowing the incumbent political apparatus that right. In general terms, the insurgent's goal is to replace the government (and its foreign supporters) through violence and eventually rule the region, area, nation, etc. as the new government. Determining the legitimacy of the insurgent's claim, supporting the methods they choose to employ, and accepting the insurgent movement's cultural, social, and economic standards is what makes

insurgencies so complex, messy, and uncomfortable. Clausewitz' concept of the Remarkable Trinity, the reasoned and rational interaction between the government, the military, and the population, barely applies to the insurgents because the people have so little free choice when the insurgents are in their midst. We will explore this further in the section on coercion and irregular warfare.

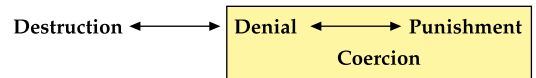
In Western liberal democracies, the people vote to decide who their rulers will be. There are mechanisms in place to peacefully change the leadership when the elected leaders and governments fail to meet expectations. Irregular actors and insurgents, despite their public rhetoric, are generally autocratic and predominantly intimidating in the way they win and hold power. The people have little, if any, choice in the decision. To be completely candid, though, people living at the subsistence level barely care who is in charge as long as their physiological (food, water, shelter) needs are met and their families are safe and secure enough to live without fear. Religion, ideology, group-think, and tribal culture may provide a sense of belonging and structure, but they become important only as a means of gaining the basic levels of human needs—physiological and security. At the end of the day, whichever side in an insurgency helps people feed their families and keeps midnight armed visitors away from their doors will win the tug-of-war for the populace. Whether it is freely given allegiance or obedience through intimidation only matters to the 'good guys.'

Coercion, Denial, and Persuasion,

According to the *Concise Oxford English*

Dictionary, coercion is the act of persuading (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats. This definition has a definite negative connotation. It is not unfair to say that airmen's emphasis for planning and employment has tended towards kinetic targeting and rather than the range of coercive mechanisms that might be used to change enemy behaviour. Perhaps this is a legacy of the air control period between the World Wars, or maybe it is a failure to truly understand and apply the theoretical traditions of Douhet, Trenchard, and Mitchell to the new version of modern warfare. It does not matter. The time is now for serious planners, no matter what colour uniform, to understand and apply air power's powerful influencing effects, in concert with those being exerted by the soldiers and marines on the ground.¹⁰

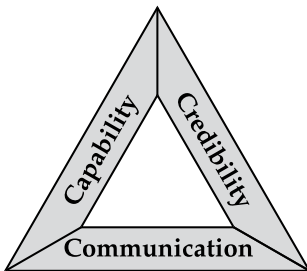
Karl Mueller notes that coercion ranges from destruction through punishment, or that force which is directly aimed at the enemy's will. Punishment is force used as a negative reward for undesirable behaviour, but does not substantially effect enemy capabilities. Denial is also aimed at the enemy's will with the intent of changing enemy behaviour by making a particular course of action appear pointless.



Destruction, suggests Mueller, is a physical objective intended to affect an opponent's ability to make or continue fighting. However, destruction is not directed against enemy will. Punishment and denial constitute coercion because they

orient on the enemy's will and with the intent to force decision-makers to make policy choices. Coercive punishment would use air power as a punitive measure in response to an adversary's actions. Coercive denial is the use of air power to shape enemy expectations about the future. One is a reflexive, while the other is preventative. Evidence shows that persuading the opponent that political objectives will not be attained (denial), rather than threatening punishment unless combat actions cease, provides the critical leverage for coercion in irregular warfare.¹¹

Coercion has three component elements; credibility, capability, and communication. The first, credibility is the overt and intentional act of ensuring the adversary believes we possess and will use whatever capabilities we threaten to employ.



Credibility is about reputation and willpower. The enemy nearly always has a better understanding of our political will than we generally give them credit for. Therefore, the rule for planners and for politicians is, 'Do not threaten unless you are truly prepared to act'. Second, capability, deals with the tools used to deliver the threatened effects; whether weapons, bombs, intelligence-gathering systems, security forces, or specialised capabilities. And the third, communication, indicates

the ability to accurately, reliably, and quickly transmit and receive the desired actions, threats, and demands.¹² To illustrate, during the interwar years, the RAF was able to control recalcitrant tribes in the Mideast, effectively implementing an 'air scheme' to replace battalions on the ground. British political officers or RAF Special Service Officers who spoke the languages and were fully immersed in the cultures of their regions would deliver messages to the errant tribes stating British or colonial demands, timelines for compliance, and laid out the expectations/ threats should demands not be met (communication). When demands were not met, the RAF bombed their villages (capability). And, the RAF was able to continue bombing, day and night, not allowing villagers to re-enter and collect their valuables or resume normal life patterns, until the demands were addressed (credibility). Unless each of these 'Cs' is fully addressed suggests Mueller, the intended coercive impact falls short or fails.

Robert Pape suggested that coercion forces an opponent to consider the relative costs and benefits of not fighting versus continuing to fight. While his book was written primarily about regular-conventional war, his argument bears consideration. Like Mueller, Pape notes that the challenge is convincing the adversary leadership that acceding to government demands is a better course of action than resisting them.¹³ The devil, as is usually true, is in the details and historically this has been where the U.S. has come up short. In order for coercion to be decisive, it must 'target' the opponent's critical requirements and critical

vulnerabilities, those elements of national or combat power absolutely necessary to wage war or the 'Achilles heel' with the potential to negate all other strengths and capabilities. Insurgents and other irregular actors have different critical requirements and critical vulnerabilities than peer and near-peer, conventional adversaries. The skills and the tools used for targeting and systems analysis in regular-conventional warfare, however, come up lacking in irregular conflict. Therefore, planners and targeteers preparing for the current and most likely future fight must develop alternative skills sets in order to analyse, comprehend, and address the peculiar requirements and vulnerabilities of the irregular actors they are facing.

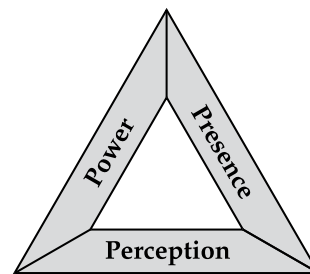
Those alternative considerations will likely fall into the realm of persuasion, or the more positive area of incentives and rewards. Too often, air planners remain safely within their comfort zone of 'Warheads on Foreheads', using air-delivered firepower to threaten or punish instead of seeking ways to deliver incentives and rewards via air power.¹⁴ This reversal of mindset, from the nearly exclusive tendency towards coercive targeting to a more comprehensive approach, which includes a more positive orientation towards inducement and persuasion, will be critical to increasing air power's impact in irregular warfare.

Coercion in Irregular Warfare

Gp Capt A.P.N. Lambert observed that if force was to be of utility in irregular warfare, then it would be in a 'more subtle, and hence coercive, application'. The difficulty in applying coercion theory to irregular

warfare, especially in its present incarnation, is knowing who to coerce, i.e., who in the insurgent movement has the power to make decisions and the strength of position to lead the movement to our desired outcome. Successful coercion depends on understanding the decision-making apparatus of an insurgent movement, an extremely difficult undertaking because of the secretive nature of an insurgency, but also the cultural, ethnic, and social differences between adversaries. Closely related to this first issue, is discerning what is valuable enough to influence the adversary's decisions, i.e., those motivating and influencing factors, or the threats and incentives that will force decision-makers to act in ways that will end the violence and lead to negotiated solutions. While coercion exists in the cognitive domain, it acts in the physical domain to generate influencing effects.

We can take Lambert's observations and flavour them with a bit of Karl Mueller's work, to model coercion in irregular warfare as the interaction between power, presence, and



perception. As previously established, coercion is primarily about force or the threat of force. Insurgents have the power to intimidate the populace and in the process compel the government to act and/or react. The government counters insurgent

actions by using its full range of civil and military powers to defend the population and eliminate or neutralise the insurgent threat. *Power* is wielded through *Presence*.

Insurgents will normally operate at the local levels to provide or displace government authority and control. The fertile grounds to grow insurgent movements are those areas ignored by or denied to government institutions. Governments able to establish a presence in remote or hostile regions, providing and maintaining educational, judicial system, policing, and some level of medical and veterinary services, all the while effectively defending the population from insurgent intimidation, are often successful countering insurgent efforts. It is important to highlight that presence includes both defending the populace from intimidation and providing essential government services.

Underpinning the entire model is *Perception*. Irregular warfare is fought for, about, and with influence. Perception efforts are aimed at making the insurgent leadership comprehend the consequences of not meeting government requirements and ensuring they understand the opportunities available to resolve the issues through the political process. It includes the threatened use of force, made credible by the government's demonstrated ability and willingness to use the force. Reputation matters; coercive efforts/influence are only as good as the extent to which the adversary believes the government will take all legal and ethical means at its disposal to achieve the desired end-state. In addition, perception includes those

programmes and activities that maintain the government's credibility and legitimacy among the people, influencing them to shift or sustain their support to the government. Reputation from the people's perspective also matters. Incentives to induce/influence the people to support the government rather than the insurgents are important, but they are only effective when the populace perceives that the government is committed to their safety, welfare, and protection over the long haul.

The Power-Presence-Perception model can help planners design effective campaigns for irregular warfare. Understanding that insurgents will use actual and threatened violence to force government actions and drive popular expectations. Insurgents know to focus on the political leadership; those individuals responsible for making national-level decisions about continuing or quitting the fight. The insurgent leadership generally has a full understanding of the government's critical vulnerabilities and exploits those vulnerabilities to exhaust the government, with the ultimate goal of wresting political power from those currently in charge—politics from the barrel of a gun to paraphrase Mao. This powerful and simple image reinforces our understanding of the essence of irregular warfare; politics with a healthy dose of violence added in.

If political power is the insurgent's objective (end), what is the role of the people? David Galula, one of the foremost counter-insurgency experts, makes the case that the insurgent knows it is foolish to fight the government conventionally and thus

must 'carry the fight to a different ground where he has a better chance to balance the physical odds against him'.¹⁶ Galula, like so many other counter-insurgency theorists and practitioners, says that the 'different ground' is the population. The people then, become the means for securing or maintaining political power.

In discussing the roots of rebellion and insurgency, Ted Robert Gurr wrote in *Why Men Rebel* that political violence begins with development of the discontent, transitions to the politicisation of that discontent, and finally results in violent action against political objects and actors.¹⁷ He suggests that in order to counter political violence the government's objective must be that element able to identify and articulate the collective dissatisfaction, energise and mobilise the society, and then orchestrate the programme of political violence and destructive information that eventually brings down the government.

In the war of exhaustion the insurgents must necessarily fight, the enemy's path to achieving its desired end-state is usually through the government's security forces. But not in ways regular-conventional soldiers would prefer. The irregulars know they are likely to face overwhelming combat power should they engage in large-scale confrontation with government forces. Therefore, they will avoid those fights unless there is significant political gain to be won.¹⁸ Actual and threatened guerrilla attacks, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, ambushes, and homemade rockets force the government to defend everywhere, exhausting friendly units, expending

scarce funds, and diverting talented people to provide security that would probably be better employed addressing the grievances and solving the problems that spawned the insurgency in the first place. To put it simply, insurgents engage in fighting but avoid warfare.

This fact does not diminish the importance of the people, especially in a Maoist, 3-phase model of insurgency; Strategic Defensive (organisation and build-up, establish foundation), Strategic Stalemate (gain support, build reputation, preserve resources), and Strategic Offensive (war of movement, demoralise the government, establish solid popular support).¹⁹ Mao Zedong understood the importance of the population in the Chinese model of revolutionary warfare and designed a methodology based on mobilisation of the masses to isolate the government and supplant government authority from the bottom upwards; protracted people's war. In his primer on revolutionary warfare, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Mao noted that weapons are an important factor, but not the decisive factor; it is the people, not things that are decisive this sort of warfare.²⁰ He goes on to caution his admirers and imitators to 'not cut the feet to fit the shoes'. Mao's writings were about revolutionary warfare in agrarian China where the people were the richest source of power and after the Marxist-Leninist, top-down approach proved ineffective. The 3-phase model of insurgency was a model worth considering, but should not and could not be applied to every insurgent situation.

A problem for planners is that Western irregular warfare doctrine is

heavily weighted towards the Maoist model. Not every group of irregular actors, though, chooses to follow the 3-phase model. Those using a Marxist-Leninist approach use a top-down method and do not go through the subversive, build-up phase. Instead, 'professional' revolutionaries of the vanguard elite conspire to lead the state to a new political and economic order. In the Cuban model proffered by Castro and Chè Guevara, the insurgent army is held out as the galvanising force and the vanguard of the new order. Military successes are used to discredit or embarrass the government, which pushes the people to switch their allegiance to the insurgent alternative. And finally, the Urban Guerrilla model proposed by Carlos Marighella uses focused attacks on the wealth and the power of the ruling and economic elites in order to force government over-reaction, thus turning political crisis into repression and anarchy. These three insurgent models hold the people in a different, less essential stature than does Mao's rural, mass-based model. More importantly, though, this cursory review of other models affirms the idea that while irregular conflicts and the actors involved may hold similarities, there are important differences that must be considered, especially with regard to the importance of the population, when designing coercive mechanisms to support counter-insurgency strategies and campaigns.

According to Gp Capt Lambert, coercive force is effective only if its target can affect the outcome. Typically, he says, the targets are the leadership, the population, and/or the enemy forces.²¹ While this perspective on coercion has

considerable merit, we must remember that it was written in the context of regular-conventional warfare. When applied to ideologically-driven, politically-motivated, irregular warfare, the options for coercive action are intentionally constrained. Politics, culture, history, geography, and economics will all come into play and limit the character and the application of coercive force by the government. The enemy's guerrilla tactics, surreptitious methods, and distributed network of small, autonomous fighting units will further limit the coercive measures that might be employed against the insurgent organisations.

There are commonalities among ideologically-based mass movements, whether religious, political, economic, or nationalistic, or if Maoist, Marxist-Leninist, Cuban, or Urban Guerrilla. One of those common traits is the central role played by key leaders. Eric Hoffer, in *True Believers: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, observed that every mass movement has True Believers, men of fanatical faith who embody and articulate the core tenets, inspire and mobilise the masses, and lead the group to action.²² Depending on the developmental phase of the mass movement, those leaders will either be *men of words*, *fanatics*, or *men of action* (Hoffer's titles). It helps our understanding and later application of coercive theory to spend a bit of time reviewing Hoffer's research.

Men of words, said Hoffer, are the visionaries and charismatic orators who pioneer the movement by discrediting the prevailing order and institutions, articulating a hope

for the future, and offering a vision for achieving that better future. Interestingly, without the man of words to unify the masses, humans tend to accept their current situations, no matter how dismal, as the normal state of affairs.²³ It then takes the *fanatic* to ignite the flames of rebellion and mobilise the large, uncommitted portion of the population. Fanatics are those who can see the future articulated by the men of words and are prone to the physical actions needed to achieve that envisioned future. The fanatic, according to Hoffer, thrives on chaos and will push the man of words aside while still spouting the man of words' doctrine and slogans in order to inflame and mobilise the masses.²⁴

Where it takes the man of words to pioneer a movement (develop the discontent) and the fanatic to give substance to and mobilise mass movements (politicise the discontent), it is *men of action* who consolidate the effort and institute the enduring elements that ensure the movement's survival, longevity, and success. Hoffer notes that men of action 'save the movement from the suicidal dissensions and the recklessness of the fanatics'.²⁵ Men of action concern themselves with administering, preserving, and expanding any gains won during earlier phases of the insurgency (turn discontent into political violence).

To illustrate with a modern example, Osama bin Laden might be considered the *fanatic* for the al Qaeda movement. Through his efforts, commitment of personal fortune, and force of personality, he has mobilised Muslims from around the world to support al Qaeda and

its related organisations. But, it was Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian, and Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a Palestinian, members of the Muslim Brotherhood and teachers of Ayman Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, who were the *men of words* and provided the ideological inspiration for the global jihadi movement. Sayyid Qutb's book, *Milestones*, continues today as a manifesto of radical Islam. And it has been Ayman Zawahiri, controlling, administering, and sustaining the network, who can be considered al Qaeda's *man of action*.

It is these True Believers, Hoffer's fanatics and men of action, who inspire, mobilise, guide, and sustain the moral and physical strength of an insurgent movement who should be the focus of coercive actions. In example after example, from around the world, it has been consistent—without effective leadership mass movements, no matter if good or evil, will fall apart. Furthermore, so long as the insurgent leadership has little or no desire or impetus to negotiate a settlement and rejoin the political process, then the government is obliged to continue the struggle if it wishes to remain in power. Coercion in irregular warfare must change the political algebra sufficiently to provide the needed desire and impetus among the True Believers to negotiate rather than continue fighting.

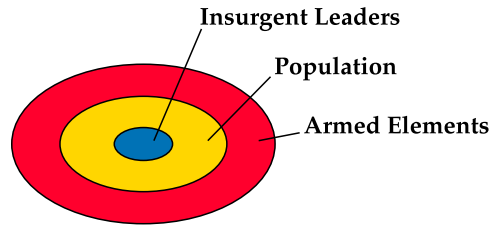
Counter-insurgency theorists Sir Robert Thompson, David Galula, and Sir Frank Kitson, in addition to countless observers and historians of insurgent movements, have established that no counter-insurgency succeeds without widespread popular appeal. This

irregular warfare 'truth' has led some to attribute centre of gravity status to the population. While such a view might be acceptable at the tactical (or local) level, at the operational and strategic levels the centres of gravity cannot be the populace.

Clausewitz' original definition of centre of gravity called it that 'hub of all power and movement upon which everything depends'. British doctrine defines centre of gravity as the, 'characteristic, capability, or influence from which a nation, an alliance, a military force or other civil or militia grouping draws its freedom action, physical strength, cohesion or will to fight'.²⁶ Using these definitions, and understanding that it is the insurgent movement's leadership that must be convinced to cease fighting and accept the political process, it is the True Believers who are the capability from which an insurgency maintains its cohesion and will to fight; they are the enemy centre of gravity in irregular warfare. The True Believers are the focus of coercive mechanisms and must be convinced that they have no hope of political victory, that continued resistance will not lead to a better political outcome, and that compliance with government demands or offers is an acceptable option for the insurgents to join the political process.²⁷

Applications of force to compel the population to support a government and withhold their physical and moral support from the irregulars has proven to have the opposite effects than those desired (consider the examples of occupied peoples in Europe during the 1940s). General Kitson probably said it best, '... the government not only has to

counter the steps which the enemy are taking to get their cause across



to the population, but also has to put across its own programme in an attractive way'.²⁸ The government may be forced to defend itself from insurgent claims of misuse of power, ethnic favouritism, economic failure, financial transgressions, religious deviation, or human rights abuses. Insurgents are rarely required to provide proof; they have the luxury of making allegations and placing the government on the defensive. Governments, which are typically held to rigid standards of scrutiny and accountability not applied in equal measure to the insurgents, are then forced to expend efforts proving the claims false while the insurgents move on to develop the next allegation. Also, the insurgents need only intimidate the population into compliance, whereas all but the most repressive and corrupt governments must reassert and defend their legitimacy to govern, winning back the hearts and minds of their populations. So, while coercing the population may be a valid strategy from the insurgent's perspective, a government exercising a coercive approach towards the population can expect to reinforce the insurgent's anti-government messages, source additional allegations of abuse or misconduct, stoke anti-government sentiment, and

encourage insurgent recruiting.

Coercive action against irregular forces is problematic. The very nature of guerrilla warfare, i.e. elusive guerrillas who rarely hold terrain and avoid combat operations except on the most favourable of terms, makes coercive punishment largely useless against insurgent armed elements. The Clear-Hold-Build-Win strategy that has proven so successful countering insurgencies of all models is based upon coercive denial, preventing or discouraging adversary forces from acting. It begins with government security forces driving irregular armed elements and political enforcers out of an area (Clear). Then the insurgent presence is replaced with friendly forces and government services (Hold). Finally, the government arms and trains the locals to assume responsibility for their own defence while programmes and services restore the allegiance and active support of the people to the government (Build and Win). The government's challenge is providing sufficient forces to protect every village, town, and vital node from insurgent intimidation or attack. In irregular warfare, coercion by denial is costly in terms of resources, troops, funding and time, but it is the only strategy that has been shown to be effective against determined insurgents.

Over time, coercive denial makes the True Believers, the insurgent leadership, realise they have little to no chance of prevailing. Coercive denial threatens what they value—power and status. Enemy power and status are not military objectives however, thus a comprehensive approach is needed to prevail against

irregular actors. Government threats to civilians have little, if any, effect on the True Believers. Therefore, the government's actions must threaten the insurgent leadership's basic physiological needs (food, water, shelter) and then their safety and security needs through an indirect approach to isolate, marginalise, and discredit the leaders and their message.

When designing the campaign, one should probably begin with the assumption that the True Believers will be 'untouchable', either because they do not wish to be found or they enjoy geographical, political, or social sanctuary. The government's options for capturing or otherwise directly applying coercive impact will be limited by borders, terrain, threat, the leaders' real or perceived political status, and/or their social status in the world or region.²⁹ Neutralising and compelling insurgent leadership to change attitudes and behaviour is the 'complex, messy, and uncomfortable' part for most military planners. The comprehensive approach uses political, diplomatic, social, economic, and judicial methods, in addition to military options, to isolate, marginalise, and discredit the True Believers.

Meanwhile, at the local level the Clear-Hold-Build-Win strategy pushes irregular forces out of an area, protects the people from intimidation and exploitation by the insurgent armed elements, and restores government authority, credibility, and legitimacy in a region. When given a free choice, people will withhold their support until the likely winner emerges. The government can threaten True Believers by

forcing the insurgent political organisers and armed elements into inconsequential spaces, effectively denying them from exercising any power over the people. It is the combination of an effective denial effort at the local level, combined with strategic-level programmes to isolate, marginalise, and discredit the insurgent leadership that provides the comprehensive coercive force to compel the True Believers to seek a political settlement.

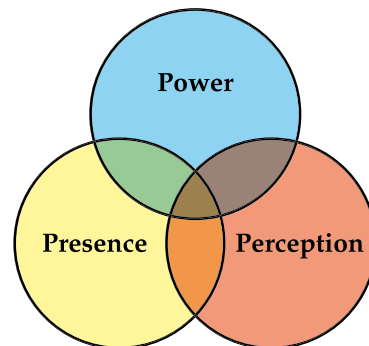
Airpower, Coercion, and Irregular Warfare

*The British and you [Afghan Army] have the guns, the Taliban have the guns, we are just the people whose land you are using to do your fighting. We hear fine words now, but will you be here in the future to protect us when the Taliban come back to punish us for co-operating with you? Or will you do what you have done in the past, come here, say fine words and then just leave?*³⁰

The above exchange occurred during a 2010 meeting with tribal elders in Showal, a village in Helmand province Afghanistan, to discuss reconstruction and stabilisation projects being offered in the aftermath of recent combat operations. During the meeting, as village leaders failed to embrace the reconstruction projects, work-for-pay opportunities, and infrastructure upgrades (school, irrigation, clinic, bazaar) being offered, one elder questioned the Afghan and British officers with the above statement. The villagers' concerns were at the basic level of human needs; physiological and safety. While they accepted that the Army was strong enough to force the Taliban to leave their village for the moment, they

questioned the government's ability to prevent further intimidation (it was noted later that Taliban insurgents were in attendance at the meeting) and provide a safe and secure environment for them and their families over the long term. Further, the village elders needed assurances that the government would take whatever means necessary to protect the village should they accept government reconstruction projects and aid. The same story has been told, albeit with different actors, in the Philippines, Colombia, Nepal, Kampuchea, Vietnam, Algeria, and so many other irregular conflicts. The normal epilogue to these stories usually goes something like, 'You soldiers might as well kill me yourself, right now, because tonight when you are gone, the [insert name of insurgent armed force] will come and kill me anyway'.

Coercion in irregular warfare, as illustrated by the examples given and others implied, is about the interdependence between power, presence, and perception. Air power, like land power, acts within



these three domains to provide coercive effects. How air power is exercised to influence irregular actors is necessarily dependent upon

each situation. Despite similarities among them, every war is different. It is incumbent upon planners to understand each component's strengths and limitations in terms of geography, political constraints, and social perceptions in order to develop strategies appropriate for the irregular enemies they are likely to face. The Israelis' 2006 campaign against Hezbollah illustrates the consequences of favouring one component over another instead of taking a holistic approach. Hezbollah, an adaptive, elusive enemy, able to hide among the population, effectively blunted Israel's air power advantages by aggressively using the collective power of regional and global information systems as a coercive tool to influence Israeli government actions through third-party actors.

'Boots on the ground' is a critical requirement for successful counter-insurgency at the local level. The soldier and the policeman patrolling in the village provide a very potent deterrent force, operating in all three domains of coercion; demonstrating the government's power, providing the presence and assurance of the government's commitment to the people, and building the perception and understanding to counter the insurgent's message and pre-empt further threats to the people. And, while the protective-deterrent role is absolutely critical to the overall scheme to force the insurgents to cease fighting, strategic-level coercive actions must be directed at insurgent leadership. Air power's agility, in addition to its speed, reach, and ubiquity gives it the ability to provide an asymmetric advantage from the tactical through the strategic levels.

Modern aircraft are fully capable of conducting more than one mission, often on the same sortie. For example, a single unmanned aerial vehicle has the endurance to loiter over a target area for long periods of time in order to establish patterns of life, collect signals intelligence, and track a potential high-payoff target (HPT) in its intelligence and situational awareness role, identify and strike adversary air defence threats it may discover in its air control role, and provide the vital air-land integration and terminal attack linkages a forward air controller needs to manage ground assisted air interdiction, close air support, and close combat attack sorties from fast jets and attack helicopters supporting troops on the ground in its attack role.

Air power's ability to find, fix, track, and target irregular forces and insurgent leaders has powerful influencing effects in all three domains—Power, Presence, and Perception. First, an aircraft overhead establishes temporary presence. The UAV loitering in the local area for example, may be a visible, and is often an audible reminder that government forces are at hand and actively working to defend the people and hunt the insurgents. The people on the ground, whether insurgent leaders, irregular forces, or the people caught in the middle, have no way of knowing whether or not the sensors on board the aircraft are looking at them. Next, the ability of modern aircraft to deliver very precise air-launched weapons, day or night, is well known and repeatedly publicised. Again, the people on the ground have no way to know if the aircraft is armed or not. The threat of air-delivered weapons is

a coercive power that is difficult to counter and the resulting sense of helplessness from being unable to fight back or defend against these measures exerts significant influence on enemy behaviour. The perception third of the triad is achieved when the insurgency's leaders comprehend the full extent of the government's ability and commitment to restrict and counter enemy actions; force the leadership into unassailable areas, limit communications, restrict movements, and penetrate heretofore sanctuaries with multi-spectral sensors. Perception is further enhanced when such programmes convince the populace that the government is able to effectively protect them from insurgent threats and intimidation.

Coercion has a dual role to play in irregular warfare. At the strategic or operational level, it is focused on the insurgent leadership, with the intent of forcing the leaders to cease their political violence and encouraging them to join the peaceful political process. At the tactical, or local, level meanwhile, coercive actions are aimed at the armed elements that terrorise and intimidate the population. The goal at the local level is to deter the guerrillas by protecting the people, making it too dangerous for the irregular fighters to operate, and denying them access to the support they need to survive.

Air power has a significant ability to put what insurgent leaders' value; political status, power over the people, and power to threaten the government, at risk. It begins with the remarkable intelligence collection and processing capabilities air power brings to the fight. Airborne

platforms above the battlespace, some dedicated to the intelligence and situational awareness role and others providing intelligence and situational awareness as an adjunct to their primary roles, have proven their ability across the different intelligence disciplines; signals, imagery, electronics, communications, etc. Insurgent leaders' perception of counter-insurgents' ability to find, intercept, track and collect on electronic systems is a deterrent to their use and threatens their sanctuary, with resulting constraints on the insurgents' ability to command and control the armed and supporting elements.

Air and space-based surveillance systems may also provide strategic coercive effects. Satellites, long-endurance UAVs, fit for purpose aeroplanes, and surveillance systems mounted on non-ISR aircraft all combine to provide near constant surveillance of areas of infiltration routes, sanctuaries, and other areas of strategic interest from high above the battlespace and often without violating the sovereign airspace of the nation providing the insurgent leadership sanctuary. Air power's ability to reconnoitre and observe insurgent activities in politically or geographically denied areas from the global common spaces is a potent influencing capability. Knowing that their actions are or might be watched, even though safely in a political or social sanctuary, influence insurgent actions by forcing them to conceal their actions, constraining the location, duration, and extent of the training and preparatory actions, and limiting the timing, routing, and size of group movements. Remarkable reconnaissance and surveillance

capabilities, when combined with very capable and precise air mobility and attack capabilities, may be to directly threaten the insurgent leadership if political obstacles can be overcome, thereby degrading, shaping, or eliminating the insurgents' sanctuaries, forcing the leadership into difficult and undesirable places, and limiting their abilities to control and employ forces.

In the hunt to capture, kill, or otherwise marginalise the insurgent leadership, coercive actions that play heavily in the attack and intelligence and situational awareness roles normally take the fore. The considerable contributions of air mobility as a coercive force providing manoeuvre and speed to eliminate safe places are often forgotten. In addition, air mobility forces offer significant alternatives to negative coercive effects. At the strategic level air mobility forces have given Western political leaders opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to Muslim communities in need and thereby raise doubts about the al Qaeda's anti-Western rhetoric. For example, after the December 2004 tsunami that devastated the staunchly Muslim province of Aceh in Indonesia (230,000 dead), the Western world mobilised a massive relief effort and the first inter-theatre transport aircraft were landing with supplies and relief workers within days. Intra-theatre airlift aeroplanes and helicopters were soon at work distributing food, water, and supplies, evacuating stricken residents from danger zones, and transporting the relief workers into areas inaccessible by land.

Nine months later, in October 2005, a

7.6 magnitude earthquake destroyed much of Musaffarabad, Kashmir, 60 miles north of Islamabad, Pakistan. Over 80,000 people died and up to three million people were left homeless with Himalayan winter fast approaching. Within a few days, Western nations, under the NATO banner, began airlifting food, shelter, medicine, supplies, and a field hospital into the region. On scene, NATO helicopters deployed into the region began distributing the supplies, evacuating disaster victims, and carrying relief workers into areas inaccessible by road. Engineers rebuilt facilities, repaired roads, cleared debris, and constructed camps for refugees. NATO air controllers managed the airfields and coordinated with civil authorities to handle the exponential increase in air traffic flying into the region. By February 2006, NATO was able to transition operation of the relief effort to the government of Pakistan and Western air and ground forces returned home. These are but two of many examples of air mobility providing a powerful contradiction to anti-Western messages of exploitation and the weaknesses of non-believing Western democracies. Air mobility helped sow seeds of doubt and effectively demonstrated air power's ability to influence the insurgents' target audiences with positive, contrary effects. Unfortunately, the initial messages of Western charity, willpower, and commitment were not followed up with an effective strategic information campaign to take advantage of the initiative that had been gained.

At the tactical level, air power can expand the soldiers' abilities to deter insurgent actions, deny access

to the people, and increase the insurgents' risk of operating in an area. Surveillance of critical routes, villages and neighbourhoods, and tactical areas of interest helps remove the insurgent's sanctuary of the night. The persistence of aerial surveillance, both day and night, has proven to influence insurgent activities at the tactical level. In a conflict not often studied, Dr. Christina Goulter noted that British use of Wellington bombers equipped with Leigh Lights, powerful searchlights originally developed for night anti-submarine operations, allowed soldiers on the ground during anti-guerrilla operations in Greece to influence insurgent operations and had a direct effect on irregular forces' morale. 'The insurgents came to associate reconnaissance aircraft with attacks, as the two effects of reconnaissance and attack were usually close in time and space.'³¹ She goes on to describe how the insurgents, unable to be absolutely certain if aircraft were benign or lethal were forced to assume the worst case. The very presence of aircraft overhead had a significant coercive effect.

This case is by no means singular. Once the El Salvadoran air force acquired AC-47 gunships (Power) and became proficient at night operations (Presence), FMLN insurgents would break off their attacks at the sound of a multi-engine aeroplane circling overhead (Perception). In Afghanistan today, the effect of a drone circling in the vicinity has the power to shape insurgent activities. The current crop of irregular adversaries fully comprehends the integrated capabilities of the 'unblinking eye' and precision strike. As a coercive force, the perception of

air power's ability to see and strike, nearly at will, provides the soldiers on the ground with considerable power and influence at the tactical level.

Air mobility has an equally powerful role to play as an influencing instrument at the tactical level. The ability to insert troops and keep them resupplied without respect to ground transport and its attendant opportunities for ambushes, mines, and choke points is an asymmetric advantage provided by air mobility that forces insurgent actions. In the continuing cycle of action-reaction-adaptation, as adversary forces have learned to counter the coercive impact of highly responsive air assault forces, technology has given friendly forces the ability to mass precision parachute-borne forces on an objective and keep them resupplied, often from stealthy, stand-off ranges through the use of precision air-drop systems. The ability to insert and sustain ground forces from the air is complemented by air mobility's influence on the insurgent's message. An Afghan villager tells the story of his daughter's leg being badly cut in a farming accident. Western helicopters brought her to a hospital where she was successfully treated and returned to her village and her parents, saving the long and dangerous journey by road where she likely would have died. What convinced the girl's father, as it has so many others, to support the government was realisation that the Taliban insurgents are unable to provide such humanitarian services.

Paul Colley observed that influence was a goal at the strategic level of warfare, but had great utility at the tactical level of all contemporary warfare.³² The coercive potential

of air power, in all four of its roles (control of the air, intelligence and situational awareness, air mobility, and attack), provides an asymmetric advantage that must be fully understood and integrated into campaign planning for irregular warfare. Irregular actors/ insurgents normally hold the initiative and they invariably play by different rules than does the government and government forces. Air power offers a powerful means of influencing the enemy leadership, deterring and denying enemy actions, and helping persuade the populace to support the government.

Conclusion

Effective air power in irregular warfare acts within three domains of coercion; power, presence, and perception. The inherent attributes of air power, **when appropriately applied**, offer the government tremendous advantage, however the application of air power is very dependent upon the situation at hand. Air attacks inspire emotional responses and their use must be carefully considered in light of second or third-order political, cultural, and social effects. This is a reality that must be faced, head-on, as one considers coercive and persuasive applications of air power in the context of guerrilla warfare, hybrid warfare, fourth-generation warfare, or whatever moniker one wishes to use to characterise the current incarnation of irregular war-fighting.

Also, as one considers the coercive and persuasive effects of air power in irregular warfare, it must be done from a holistic perspective. Irregular warfare is an inherently land-centric enterprise. It is unlikely that air

power will be a war-winner; however it very likely will be a war-decider.³³ The current edition of AP 3000, *British Air and Space Doctrine*, gives planners a good starting point when considering the application of air power's coercive impact on irregular forces. The next step is effectively applying those concepts to the current and future conflicts, most likely of an irregular or hybrid nature, which our nations **will** continue to face.

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Notes

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1976), pg 92.

² Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pg 376.

³ AP3000, Fourth Edition, *British Air and Space Power Doctrine* (London: Air Staff, Ministry of Defence, 2010).

⁴ Smith, pp 3 – 4.

⁵ General John R. Galvin, 'Uncomfortable Wars: Toward a New Paradigm', *Parameters* (Dec 1986).

⁶ *Global Strategic Trends—Out to 2040* (Shrivenham, U.K.: Ministry of Defence Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre, 2010), pg 77.

⁷ Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (New York:

Cornell University Press, 1996), pg 74

⁸ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964), pg 7.

⁹ A not-too-strenuous internet search from the last few years yields countless stories of midnight visitors, gunmen terrorising the local population, in rural and urban settings, to ensure they provide food, refuge, recruits, 'taxes', and information to the insurgents. The stories were the same whether the conflicts were nationalist, separatist, socialist, religious, ethnic, or economic in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Gaza, Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, Somalia, Colombia, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, and on and on. Insurgents needn't *win* the hearts and minds. They have the luxury of *taking* them.

¹⁰ Colin S. Gray, *The Airpower Advantage in Future War: The Need for Strategy*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Airpower Research Institute, Dec 2007), pg 31. '...it would be bizarre, actually impossible, as well as foolish for the country's military planners and strategists not to look for every effective way in which airpower can deliver advantage'.

¹¹ Karl Mueller, 'The Essence of Coercive Air Power: A Primer for Military Strategists', *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), pg 47.

¹² Mueller, pg 50.

¹³ Pape, pg 15.

¹⁴ A 2008 article in *Air Force* magazine (Anna Mulrine, 'Warheads on Foreheads', *Air Force*, Vol. 91, No. 10 (Oct 2008), pp 44-47.) noted that the U.S. Air Force's contribution to counterinsurgency in Iraq was looking for individuals and small groups to strike with bombs from unmanned aerial vehicles.

¹⁵ Gp Capt A.P.N. Lambert, 'Air Power and Coercion', *Air Power in its Wider Context*, Stuart Peach, ed., London: HMSO, 1998, pg 267.

¹⁶ Galula, pg 7.

¹⁷ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), pg 12.

¹⁸ The classic case is the 1968 Tet Offensive in South Vietnam. Although a tremendous tactical loss for North Vietnam and their Viet Cong allies, it was a strategic victory because it invigorated the anti-war movement in the U.S. and destroyed the Viet Cong as an effective fighting force, letting the U.S. eliminate a future political problem for North Vietnam.

¹⁹ Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2>, May 1938, pg 19, accessed 21 Apr 2010.

²⁰ Mao Zedong, pg 24.

²¹ Lambert, pg 278. This list is vaguely reminiscent of the 5-Ring model of strategic paralysis proposed by air power theorist, John A. Warden, III, 'The Enemy as a System', *Airpower Journal*, (Spring 1995). Warden placed the enemy leadership at the centre of five concentric rings. If prevented from directly targeting the leadership, then strategists and planners should design a campaign to isolate or neutralise the centre through actions in the outer rings. The further one ventured from the centre, suggested Warden, the more difficult and the longer it would take to achieve strategic paralysis of the leadership. The additional rings, in order from the centre outwards, were Organic Essentials (energy, money), Infrastructure, Population, and Fielded Forces.

²² Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002, originally published in 1951).

²³ Gurr, pg 24. ‘The existence of what the observer judges to be abject poverty or “absolute deprivation” is not necessarily thought to be unjust or irremediable by those who experience it... if people have no reason to expect or hope for more than they can achieve, they will be less discontented with what they have, or even grateful simply to be able to hold on to it’.

²⁴ Eric Hoffer, 144.

²⁵ Eric Hoffer, 149.

²⁶ *Joint Doctrine Publication 01* (Shrivenham, U.K.: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Dec 2008), pg 3-22.

²⁷ This is based upon Joint Doctrine Note 2/08, *Integrated air-land Operations in Contemporary Warfare* (Shrivenham, U.K.: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Aug 2008), pg 2A-7, though it is my interpretation to relate these doctrinal conditions to the political nature of irregular warfare.

²⁸ General Sir Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, and Peacekeeping* (St Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2007 reprint), pg 77.

²⁹ By ‘political sanctuary’ it is meant the protections that accrue once insurgent leaders are afforded diplomatic recognition by the United Nations and the like, e.g., Yasser Arafat from the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. ‘Social sanctuary’ is status accorded by the global or regional media. While the government may restrict the leader’s movements and access, their life is not in danger because of their ‘celebrity’ status, e.g., Nelson Mandela from

South Africa and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma.

³⁰ Kim Sengupta, ‘Under their flag, but still under fire’, *The Independent*, 26 Feb 2010, pg 37.

³¹ Christina J.M. Goulter, ‘The RAF in Counter-Insurgency Warfare: British Intervention in Greece, 1944-45’, *Air Power, Insurgency, and the “War on Terror”*, Joel Hayward, ed. (Cranwell, UK: Royal Air Force Centre for Air Power Studies, 2009), pg 105.

³² Air Commodore Paul Colley, ‘Soldiers are from Mars and airmen are from Venus: Does air power do what it says on the tin?’, *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2008), pg 106.

³³ The terms are from Colin S. Gray. An excellent example of this was reported by Anthony Lloyd in *The Times* on Monday, 1 Mar 2010, pg 35. ‘Significant leaders of the Pakistani Taliban have been killed or captured in an onslaught of frontier ground and air attacks.... The kind of hits the leadership has taken...the [Pakistani Taliban] is no longer significant.... It doesn’t exist any more as an umbrella organisation that can influence militancy anywhere’. The men of action have been eliminated and the movement is currently ineffective.

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