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The No-Fly Zone

Alan Stephens

The public debate preceding the decision to establish a no-fly zone over Libya to protect much of its population from the armed forces of the dictator Muammar Gaddafi was largely ill-informed. Many participants offered little more than the usual assertions: that no-fly zones don't work, cost too much, and cause excessive casualties on both sides.

History reveals that those criticisms are wrong on every count. Indeed, for more than 80 years, the enforcement of extended air blockades has been perhaps the West's single most cost-effective military option. This should not be surprising. Unlike other options, such as invasion, occupation, and counterinsurgency warfare, the full application of a no-fly zone represents an enormous asymmetric advantage for the West.

The concept of controlling events on the ground with air power was first applied by the (British) RAF in the Middle East and on the Northwest frontier of India in the 1920s and 1930s, where garrisons totalling some 60,000 soldiers were struggling to contain uprisings by widely dispersed tribal forces. Hoping to achieve a better political outcome and also to save money, the British Government replaced most of its Army divisions with a few RAF squadrons. The result was that, through a combination of deterrence, carefully targeted strikes, and psychology, rebellions were controlled and costs were reduced ten-fold. There were relatively few casualties.

This first 'substitution' of air power for land forces exposes one of the misconceptions about no-fly zones; namely, that they can only contain hostile air forces. On the contrary, once control of the air has been gained, a no-fly zone can be extended into a 'no-surface-movement' zone. Air supremacy can be exploited to blockade armies (and navies, if necessary), prevent the enemy from massing, enable precision air strikes against centres of power, destroy heavy weapons, maintain 24/7 surveillance, and so on.

This is precisely what happened during the air campaign phases of the US/NATO-led wars in Iraq (1991 and 2003), the former Republic of Yugoslavia (1995 and 1999), and Afghanistan (2001).

On each occasion, air supremacy was quickly established, thus permitting the prosecution of close attack, strategic strike, and information missions. Moreover, during the operations in Yugoslavia, no Western ground forces were needed, and each campaign led to a satisfactory political resolution within weeks. By contrast, in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, almost as soon as the successful air campaigns were followed by land force invasions and occupations, social and military chaos ensued. Ten years later, progress in both countries remains problematic at best.

There are of course limits to any military strategy, and an air blockade is no exception. Air power's effectiveness can be circumscribed when enemy forces disperse and/or go underground, as for example in cities or remote tribal lands. (By the same token, an enemy who disperses or hides also circumscribes his own capabilities.)

Expense can be another concern. The air-exclusion zones enforced against Iraq by Operations Southern Watch and Northern Watch between 1991 and 2003 each cost about \$1.3 billion annually. (Then again, it is costing the International Security Assistance Force presently occupying Afghanistan about \$1 million a year for every one of the 131,000 coalition soldiers it has on the ground.)

It is also the case that costs must be balanced against political outcomes, long-term consequences, and casualties. Comment has already been made about the first two. As far as civilian casualties are concerned, again contrary to popular opinion, air strikes associated with no-fly zones have one of the lowest rates. In the past five years, air attacks have been responsible for only five per

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cent of all civilian casualties in the Middle East and Central Asia, compared to 20 per cent for small-arms fire and 33 per cent assassinated by insurgents. In Afghanistan, investigations by United Nations and Afghani officials have revealed that most civilian deaths attributable to coalition forces have been caused by Special Forces.

The NATO-led no-fly zone in force over Libya at the time of writing (late-March) provides a topical point on which to conclude.

Whether or not Operation Odyssey Dawn ultimately leads to a satisfactory outcome remains to be seen. What can be stated with confidence is that as long as Western ground forces are not committed, the operation will not lead to a political and military quagmire like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Furthermore, it is clear that air supremacy was won within days, with minimal allied and civilian casualties; and air strikes halted Gaddafi's army when it was on the perimeter of the key rebel stronghold of Benghazi, and apparently on the verge of victory. As long as NATO's political will remains resolute, air operations exploiting the no-fly zone will ensure that at the least, Gaddafi cannot win, and civilian lives will be saved.

In the complex global village of the 21st century, when traditional applications of military power have lost much of their utility, this may well be a very good result.