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Weapons DON'T Win Wars

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As the United States has been undertaking an air strike campaign in Iraq and Syria for several weeks, the familiar question in US foreign policy debates reappeared: can airpower alone do the job? Wrong questions, though, lead to wrong answers. Too much focus on military means and ways results in the tacticization of strategy and the neglect of the political context. The United States should strive to defeat the Islamic State strategically, employing military force if necessary, but not by force alone, because weapons can win battles but cannot win wars.

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The advancement of the Islamic State (IS) across northwestern Iraq and eastern Syria, and, even more pressingly, the shock inflicted by the beheadings of two American and one British citizen warranted a feeling of “something must be done about it” from the United States. In a prime-time nationally televised address on September 10, President Barack Obama presented his plan to eradicate this “cancer”, viz. the Sunni jihadists.¹ And by “eradicate” the US President meant it literally, as the political objective was to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the IS by airstrikes. Obama’s (over)reliance on US airpower to get the job done would make the fans of General Giulio Douhet – a preeminent interwar airpower theorist and leading proponent of strategic bombing – gush with pride. However, the following day, retired US Air Force General Michael Hayden – and former director of both the CIA and the NSA – questioned the pertinence of Obama’s plan while offering a catchy and memorable quote: “[t]he reliance on air power has all of the attraction of casual sex: It seems to offer gratification but with very little commitment.”² More than a comment able to grab people’s attention by combining sex and violence, this was a concealed criticism of Obama’s strategy. The rift between the Commander in Chief and his generals continued a few days later. None other than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he would not foreclose the possibility of deploying ground forces in the fight against the IS, notwithstanding the fact that this would run counter to Obama’s policy.³ Nevertheless, President Obama repeated his vow to not commit US armed forces to fighting another ground war in Iraq.⁴

Apparently, the debate at the grand strategic level unfolds as a contrast between airpower versus “boots on the ground”. The point made here is that there is a serious danger of losing sight of the big picture. I should hasten to add that the debate over which (military) path works best to defeat the IS is of no minor importance: it involves a huge cost and a long effort, and, more importantly, it pertains to the lives of thousands. After all, the choice of military means is central in sketching out a war plan. But there is more to strategy than means: strategy is a synergy of ends, ways, and means. The danger lurking here is that military means are confused with strategic ways, while political ends are neglected altogether. Instead, what we are witnessing happening is “a tacticization of strategy;” i.e. emphasis is laid on tactical planning and execution, whereas little consideration is given to the political and strategic meaning of the tactical behavior.⁵ This is not say that the tactical or the operational level is subordinate to the strategic or the political level. Again: strategy is a synergy of ends, ways, and means. The argument made here is that whether weapons are deployed from the air or the ground is not all that matters. War is not about fighting. War is about the peace that follows. And it has not been made clear yet what kind of peace the United States is after.

The reluctant strategist

It should be clear that President Obama is half-heartedly waging this war. After spending so much effort to disentangle the United States from the decade-long war in Iraq, Obama is all but reluctant to get the US armed forces drawn in another protracted conflict there. Obama was unnecessarily honest when he said at the end of August that “we don’t have a strategy yet” for fighting the IS.⁶ But he was certainly unconvincing when he insisted, two weeks later, “our objective is clear.”⁷ “Degrading and ultimately destroying” the IS does indeed signal determination, but it is far from a realistic and attainable goal. It may so be the case that Obama could not have promised anything less than that in a public speech, or that he could not have gone much in detail about the exact goals of the military campaign. But one can also surmise that the US President was more concerned about appearance than essence: first, he wished to fix the “no-strategy-yet” political gaffe; second, he desired to present his war campaign as being different to those in the recent past, and not vindicate the Cassandras who warned against leaving Iraq prematurely. Obama said with emphasis: “[b]ut I want the American people to understand how this effort will be different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will not involve American combat troops

fighting on foreign soil.”⁸ President Obama is begging the question: American boots on the ground was not all that went wrong in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Besides personal motivation, there are practical reasons for Obama being reluctant to get bogged down in Iraq (again). A war-weary American society and the complicated politics of the Middle East make another protracted military campaign highly unattractive. Having thought to respond to the “something-must-be-done-about-it” pressure, Obama presented his “no-strains-attached” doctrine and employed America’s strongest weapon—its airpower—to execute the job. But what is precisely the job to be executed? Since September 23rd, the US-led coalition has launched hundreds of air strikes in Iraq and Syria targeting safe havens, oil refineries, dams, and training compounds. Alas, airpower is not about bombing targets. The purpose of airpower is to affect the course of events on the ground, thus creating a strategic effect for the political purpose of the war.⁹ In other words, bombing may inflict a cost on the Sunni jihadists, but may not be enough to bend their will, or to gain control of the events on the ground.

Control of the course of events on the ground is what makes the US Generals believe that the deployment of ground forces will, sooner or later, be necessary to defeat the IS. This brings in mind J. C. Wylie’s sound advice: “[i]f the strategist is forced to strive for final and ultimate control, he must establish, or must present as an inevitable prospect, a man on the scene with a gun.”¹⁰ Wylie is right, but yet again, is “final and ultimate control” what the United States is after in the region? The United States should clarify its political objective because weapons, whether deployed from the air, the ground, or jointly, do not win wars. A glance at US engagements of the recent past is enough to prove this point.

What’s past is prologue

Airpower is considered America’s strongest weapon and its preferred method of warfare, as it has built up a reputation of getting the job done and of doing it with minimum casualties. The strategic question, though, is whether the preferred method of action can produce the desirable strategic effect in the specific context it is applied, and whether the political objective can be achieved with this action. A quick look at US strategic experiences during the past decade in Afghanistan and Iraq offer valuable lessons. In both occasions, US airpower was advanced as the preferred method of action, but it could not secure strategic success akin to victory, not because of poor performance, but because of insurmountable strategic and political factors.

In response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States embarked on military operations to thwart (or if you like “to degrade and ultimately destroy”) terrorist groups in Afghanistan with allied air strikes hitting Taliban and al-Qaeda targets. Operation Enduring Freedom was executed by US airpower (largely), US and a few allied Special Operation Forces, and Afghan allied ground forces (not so much different from Obama’s current plan). In about ten weeks, the Taliban government was toppled with US airpower performing superbly and with very few American “boots on the ground.” The near absence of US ground forces in Afghanistan could not be repeated against the more powerful Iraq. Nevertheless, US airpower held again the leading role, and Operation Iraqi Freedom was as light on the ground as it was possible for taking down Saddam’s regime. Once more, US airpower performed nobly as a tactical enabler and, in about twelve weeks, Saddam was overthrown.¹¹ But tactical excellence was ultimately proved futile because even excellence in tactical performance cannot substitute for strategic misreading.

What the two operations have in common is that the peace that ensued deteriorated rapidly into a condition of chaos and irregular warfare, and overall the consequence of US victories in the battlefield could not translate into victory in war. Notwithstanding the tactical excellence and the swift military victories, the US strategy was flawed mainly because the strategic challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq could not be met by military means. As Colin Gray observes in his analysis of the two operations,

“when the political ends are absent, unclear, or flatly contradictory, strategy worthy of the name is impossible, and one is reduced to an effort comprising tactics alone. This tacticization of strategy is

*inevitable when the strategy function cannot be performed because of the absence of identified, firm, and achievable political goals.*⁷¹²

Airpower is a tactical tool with strategic consequences. But even a tactically superior air force can be wasted if it is not directed with strategic sense. So the question that should be posed to the US decision-makers is not what the choice of weapon should be or how it should be employed, but what the political objectives are and whether they are feasible.

Start from the end

The all but familiar problem the United States might be confronting in its latest engagement in the Middle East is that of winning the battle but losing the war. US airpower, in most likelihood, will execute the job remarkably. The ultimate challenge, though, is to translate the victory in the battlefield into a satisfactory political outcome. War is about the peace that follows, and beginning with the political end in mind is the logic that connects and gives meaning to strategy. A caveat is in order, however. One should be aware of the paradoxical nature of strategy, and that once you believe you have found the answer, the question changes. If the wrong question is asked in the first place, though, then the answer will also be wrong. So the question is not between airpower and landpower. For that matter, airpower, landpower, as well as seapower, spacepower, and cybepower are, and can only be, tactical in nature. Lest I am misunderstood, the military means and ways are of vital importance. But weapons don't win wars; it is the strategic planning, execution competency, and political vision that win wars.

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