

Air Power and the Gulf Crisis

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Brief Analysis

How important is air power? This question dominates the current debate about U.S. military options against Iraq, and has a significance for the shape of U.S. forces following the current crisis. Though the military significance of U.S. air power is uncertain, the United States should fully exploit this capability if it must use force against Iraq. Iraq will lose control over its air space should war occur. Virtually every indicator reinforces this conclusion: Iraq's air force is qualitatively inferior; Iraq's air defenses cannot match U.S. air defense suppression capabilities; and Iraq cannot replace lost equipment. Once the U.S. has debilitated Iraqi air strength, its aircraft can operate with relative impunity.

Less clear is the military significance of this superiority. Some argue that air power, if used in a massive, sustained campaign, will inflict so much damage on Iraq that it will be forced to withdraw from Kuwait. Others severely discount the value of air strikes. To some extent, the debate over the utility of air power has been influenced by the political attitudes of the participants. Advocates of a military solution sometimes appear to support an air option because it offers the prospect of a low-cost means of achieving decisive military results. Those opposed to use of force sometimes appear to denigrate the potential effectiveness of air power in order to undermine the credibility of the military option. But the debate over the utility of air power also reflects a long-standing military dispute. Air power advocates see it as the decisive weapon of modern war. Critics point to past failures, especially in Vietnam, and insist on the importance of combined arms operations.

This debate is likely to transcend today's crisis. Indeed, the results of a conflict in the Gulf -- should it occur -- can be expected to have an important influence on defense policy and budget allocation decisions among the military departments. If air power delivers, the U.S. Air Force could expect to benefit. If large armored forces are necessary for victory, the Defense Department would have to allocate extensive resources to the Army.

Alternative Roles for Air Power

There are three main alternative air power strategies for a campaign against Iraq.

1. Bombing alone: massive air attacks against economic, military, and political targets are employed to force an Iraqi surrender;
2. Extensive bombing, followed by ground action: air strikes against strategic and tactical targets are sustained for an extended period of time, followed by employment of friendly ground forces against a debilitated enemy army;
3. Limited bombing, accompanied by ground action: ground operations begin a few days after the start of hostilities, relying on the air forces mainly to support the army.

In all three options, air power is an important, perhaps decisive weapon. It enables the U.S. to seize and retain the initiative without fear of decisive Iraqi counterattacks. The bombing-only option assumes that the destruction wrought by air power is sufficient to force Iraq into compliance with U.S. war aims. By contrast, the last two options assume that it will be necessary to rely on ground forces as well. The last option assumes that wars can be won only on the ground, and that air forces provide only a supplement to armies. The first two strategies make best use of air

power as the most important comparative advantage of the U.S. over Iraq. The third option, in contrast, minimizes this edge, and may not permit its full exploitation. It is based on the belief that Iraq can adjust to an air attack, and that "gradual escalation" may lengthen the war and increase U.S. casualties.

What Can Air Power Do?

In assessing the alternative roles of air power, it is important to differentiate the political from the military results of air attacks. From the military perspective, air power unquestionably can inflict enormous damage to Iraq over time, both strategically and tactically. Logistically, air power can make it much more difficult for Iraq to sustain its forces in Kuwait and its own economy and military industries. Some believe sustained air bombardment could force Iraqi troops in Kuwait to surrender, but that this may underestimate the endurance and staying power of Iraq's army.

The political effects of air attacks depend in large measure on the determination of the Iraqi leadership and the willingness of the Iraqi people to endure suffering. Air power can make their lives miserable, but it cannot in and of itself move Iraq out of Kuwait. However, based on Iraqi behavior during the Iran-Iraq War, there is reason to believe Iraq's leadership would be sensitive to the threat posed by hostile air forces and missiles.

During that war, Iraqi cities were often hit by Iranian air and missile strikes. Though the damage inflicted was minimal, the Iraqis reacted by investing heavily in a crash long-range missile program. Iraq hoped its new missiles would compel Iran to cease its attacks on Iraqi towns and cities. This suggests an unusual sensitivity for a totalitarian society. According to one theory, Iraq's leadership worried that the disruptions resulting from the Iranian attacks could undermine the instruments of control necessary to prevent political unrest. If such concerns were well-founded, it suggests that bombing operations may produce disproportionate political and social implications.

Implications

Unlike Iran, the U.S. would not need to focus its attacks on large urban areas. Rather, the U.S. could concentrate air operations on specific high-value targets. The destruction of electric power plants, oil refineries, and military industries would clearly demonstrate the impotence of the regime and the costs of its policies to Iraq. Moreover, destruction of this infrastructure would constrain future Iraqi military capabilities for some period of time.

Thus, air power can set back long-term Iraqi capabilities and undermine support for Saddam's regime. However, it is uncertain whether bombing alone could win a war within a reasonable time frame, because so much depends on Saddam's reaction to the attacks and whether he can retain control. If Saddam cracks under the pressure of the attacks, air power would achieve a decisive result. If he displays determination, an air power-only strategy could lead to a military stalemate.

Thus, it would be dangerous to assume that air power alone can defeat Iraq. However, any military campaign should take maximal advantage of U.S. air superiority. This suggests reliance on the second strategy outlined here, which emphasizes use of air power without ignoring the critical need for ground forces.

W. Seth Carus, a fellow at The Washington Institute, was the John M. Olin Foundation Fellow at the Naval War College Foundation for 1989-90. He is author of the Institute studies **The Poor Man's Atomic Bomb: Biological Weapons in the Middle East** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=77>) and **The Genie Unleashed: Iraq's Chemical and Biological Weapons Programs** (Policy Paper #14, 1989). He is co-author, with Hirsh Goodman, of **The Future Battlefield and the Arab-Israeli Conflict** (Transaction Books, 1990) and, with Patrick Clawson, of **Iraq's Economic and Military Vulnerabilities** (Policy Focus #14, October 1990). ❖

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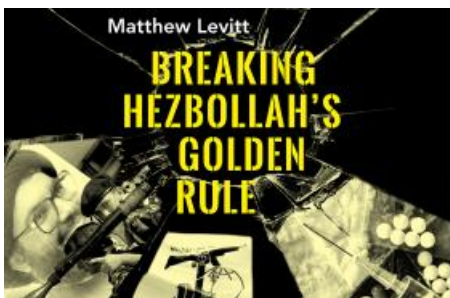
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