Sending the Right Message in Syria: Lessons from Past Airstrikes

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Brief Analysis

Sending clear signals using punitive airstrikes is difficult but not impossible, and learning lessons from past operations can help maximize the chances of success if Washington decides to strike Syria.

As speculation mounts about potential U.S. or international military action against the Syrian regime, some aspects of the prospective operation can be guessed at with reasonable certainty. It would probably involve air- and ship-delivered weapons only, not ground forces. It would also be fixed in duration, lasting hours or days -- although the threat of follow-on actions would be clear, the operation would not be designed as a no-fly zone or other open-ended aerial policing campaign. In addition, most of its objectives and targets would be linked to the Assad regime's August 21 chemical strikes against civilians. Given these parameters, one can draw meaningful parallels to the many past air operations that sought to punish transgressions by states and/or deter escalation in ongoing conflicts.

MECHANICS OF AN AIR CAMPAIGN

Every punitive or deterrent air campaign consists of a set of basic components that define its character, how it will be perceived, and its potential effectiveness:

- *Timing.* To maintain the connection between crime and punishment and deter repeated transgressions, punitive strikes are often launched shortly after the offending action. In some cases, however, governments have decided to undertake air campaigns at a time of their choosing (e.g., for operational reasons; to generate surprise; to allow time for gathering evidence).
- *Targeting.* The exclusion or selection of target sets are the defining features of an air campaign. Prioritizing targets is also vital, since air campaigns lose some degree of surprise once they begin, and can end at any moment.

- *Weaponeering.* The choice of weapons can strongly shape the nature and success of an air campaign, as can decisions regarding the level of collateral damage a military is willing to risk by striking certain categories of targets.
- *Information operations.* The communications strategy that accompanies an air operation can either amplify or disrupt the effects caused by physical strikes and cyberattacks.

LESSONS FROM PAST STRIKES

The past three decades are replete with examples of punitive or deterrent airstrikes. Washington used them to retaliate against terrorist attacks several times: in Libya in 1986, in Iraq in 1993, and against al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998. In 1995 and 1999, NATO allies struck Serbian units and strategic targets to limit ethnic cleansing and territorial conquest by Serb forces. In Iraq, the Anglo-American no-fly zones established during the 1990s included direct retaliation against any units that fired on allied aircraft, as well as indirect retaliation against the air defense system writ large. In Operation Desert Strike (1996), the U.S. military undertook short-notice airstrikes to punish Saddam Hussein for invading Iraqi Kurdistan and deter further offensives into Kurdish areas. And in Operation Desert Fox (1998), Washington launched four days of strikes against Iraq after nearly a year of military threats aimed at getting Baghdad to comply with UN weapons inspections.

Clearly, most of these operations were unsatisfactory in some regard, and their effectiveness was questioned at the time they were launched. Punitive or deterrent air campaigns are very challenging because it is difficult to change the calculus of rogue regimes without applying the existential threat posed by ground forces. In many cases, air campaigns were undertaken as a token of U.S. concern -- that is, Washington believed it was obligated to act even if military strikes had little chance of changing a regime's behavior or destroying its capacity to commit further transgressions. Whatever their efficacy, these strikes point to useful lessons about the timing, targeting, and tactics employed in punitive air campaigns.

WHEN TO STRIKE?

Most of the strikes mentioned above were launched swiftly in order to show resolve and deter future provocations. Operation Desert Strike took place four days after Baghdad's 1996 invasion of Kurdistan -- seemingly a necessity if Washington hoped to prevent the conquest of additional Kurdish areas, though the haste cut into planning time so sharply that much of the campaign's targeting was botched. Operation El Dorado Canyon, the 1986 strike on Libya, took place ten days after the bombing of U.S. troops at the La Belle disco in Berlin. Operation Infinite Reach, the 1998 cruise missile strikes on al-Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan, came thirteen days after the terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Yet Washington took over two months to conclude investigations and launch cruise missile strikes following the Iraqi-backed assassination attempt on President George H. W. Bush in 1993. Although no single formula is appropriate for all situations, one lesson is clear, particularly from the poorly targeted 1996 and 1998 strikes: it is better to give planners a reasonable amount of time to design an effective operation rather than strike right away purely to connect the punishment and the crime.

WHAT TO HIT?

Determining the proper targeting for air campaigns has been consistently problematic. Ideally, the U.S. military could present policymakers with a comprehensive list of high-value targets to strike. More often, however, target sets are not fully mapped, and many of the enemy's most valued targets are either not recognized or not locatable. Thus, the targeting of past campaigns has been flawed from the outset, and secondary targets (often long-vacated buildings) have been chosen on the basis of their vulnerability, not their real punitive or deterrent value. In Syria, the United States has likely identified and located many valuable regime targets after two-and-a-half years of closely

watched fighting. Yet a surprising number of important targets probably still have not been assessed accurately. Overall, the main targeting lesson from the air campaigns of the 1990s was that relatively successful campaigns found what they needed to hit, while unsuccessful campaigns only hit what they could find.

Specific targeting pitfalls from the past three decades provide some pointers for today's planners and politicians as they consider strike options against Syria. In particular, politicians need to invest more time to understand why targets are being nominated, in part so that they can explain this rationale to the media and public. During Desert Fox in 1998, the desire to punish Saddam for rebuffing UN inspections led Washington to seek targets related to weapons of mass destruction. None could be found, however, so U.S. forces instead hit the apparent concealment mechanism: Saddam's intelligence services.

Desert Fox produced two interesting findings. First, U.S. politicians never really understood how targets got nominated or why, so they could not adequately explain away what looked like a deliberate effort to remove the regime. Second, the strikes unintentionally shook Saddam's regime by striking at its real center of gravity -- the inner circle of security elites. This suggests that targeting the Syrian regime's inner circle might be an appropriate way of punishing and deterring Damascus, but that Washington must be ready to clearly explain its thinking.

Asymmetric targeting is another key issue pertinent to Syria. In some cases, past retaliatory and punitive operations have displayed a strong focus on symmetry, employing levels of force that were directly proportional to the U.S. interests at stake or that matched the initial offending action. This was evident in the Iraq no-fly zones, where the U.S. military established a formula that mechanistically set the provocation-to-response ratio. Symmetry reached an almost ridiculous level in one-off retaliatory operations, as seen in the June 1993 cruise missile attack that targeted the single intelligence office believed to have ordered the assassination attempt on President Bush. In other words, an unsuccessful attempt on the president's life was met with a nighttime strike deliberately calibrated to minimize casualties. Such excessive regard for proportionality simply reassures opponents that they can measure Washington up and manipulate its redlines.

In contrast, some of the most effective U.S. air operations -- actual and threatened -- have involved asymmetrical targeting. For example, during a decade of no-fly zone policing over Iraq, Saddam's air defenses were entirely suppressed only once: in the northern zone in 1998, when very aggressive rules of engagement and response ratios were used. Major deterrent strikes were also prepared in 1997-1998 in case Iraq fired on U.S. reconnaissance aircraft seconded to the UN -- these "Sword of Damocles" threats were clearly communicated to Baghdad, deterring the regime from taking easy shots at the slow-moving U-2 aircraft for over two years. The key to asymmetrical targeting is to establish credibility with a successful strike, threaten a repeat performance, and explain the logic of escalation dominance clearly to the public.

Finally, many U.S. operations in the 1990s included "bonus" strikes on air defense targets that were not connected to the operation's stated aim, but constituted good preparatory work if future operations became necessary. Thus, if Washington orders an operation against the Assad regime, it should not hold back from breaking a few eggs on the way into Syria to ensure easier access in the future. This approach would send a credible and menacing message to the regime to amend its behavior or face further strikes.

MANNED OR UNMANNED?

Past campaigns also offer useful lessons about strike package composition. For example, although cruise missiles have become more advanced than ever, and adversaries and the U.S. public alike have become increasingly accustomed to unmanned drone warfare, an entirely unmanned strike force still sends a clear (and unintentional) message that vital U.S. interests are not at stake. Manned aircraft are therefore an important addition even apart from the tactical advantages they offer.

In Syria, many key regime targets are located in the accessible western part of the country, so non-stealth U.S. manned aircraft could take part from international airspace at the outer extent of Syria's air defense coverage, using long-range standoff munitions that can more effectively destroy hardened targets. The U.S. military could minimize risks while still bringing a full-spectrum air operation to bear, including unmanned, stealth, and non-stealth manned aircraft, cyberattacks, and psychological operations. Using all available U.S. assets to strike disproportionately at high-value regime targets (e.g., air forces, missiles, airports, and the internal security apparatus) is the best way to ensure the success of any U.S. air operation in Syria.

COMMUNICATING THE MISSION

Finally, to avoid confusion over how an air operation is planned and perceived, it is important that Washington clearly explain the mission's political goals to military planners and, in due course, to the public. If the United States intends the strike to serve as retaliation against last week's chemical attack and deterrence against further use of such weapons, it should declare that goal up front. If the aim is broader, and asymmetrical targeting is used to severely punish the regime and open the way for future strikes, Washington could also justify that course of action. In either case, clarity is the key. The details and objectives behind airstrikes can be an arcane foreign language to the media, the public, and even the enemy; by actively interpreting them, Washington can help prevent misunderstandings.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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