
Ruxandra BOSILCA*1,2, Elena BUNOARĂ2, Cristina ROSU2, Denisa SAVA2

*Corresponding author

1INCAS – National Institute for Aerospace Research “Elie Carafoli”
B-dul Iuliu Maniu 220, Bucharest 061126, Romania
ruxandrab@incas.ro

2SNSPA – The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration SECURITY AND DIPLOMACYa,
Str. Poverni 6, Bucharest 010643, Romania

DOI: 10.13111/2066-8201.2013.5.2.8

Abstract: This paper intends to analyze whether airpower is decisive and irreplaceable in putting an end to violent conflict nowadays, evaluating airpower as an instrument in contemporary warfare and its role in peace operations. The research will seek to confirm or invalidate the hypothesis according to which airpower can successfully take the lead in the Western Allies’ contemporary stabilization operations given that it reduces costs in terms of human lives and resources. Moving forward, the research will focus on airpower characteristics in the Libyan case, with an analysis of NATO’s Operation Unified Protector.

Key Words: air power, coercive air strategies, air interdiction, smart defense concept, ISR (Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance), peace enforcement, peacemaking, humanitarian intervention

INTRODUCTION

Airpower is a vital element of the military, with a major evolution of its use in the last century. Given its rapid development, triggered by technological advancement, and its contemporary flexibility, in comparison with ground and naval powers, it has been argued that airpower will be the sufficient condition in waging and winning wars. This argument tends to be supported by the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, where the airpower was the main military capability used in the stabilization process. Symbolically less intrusive and perceived as less offensive than a ground intervention, and having the advantage of speed and fluidity, it is apparent that airpower is the key for contemporary peace operations.

Considering these factors, this paper intends to analyze whether airpower is decisive and irreplaceable in putting an end to violent conflict nowadays and, more specifically to investigate if airpower was the main asset in NATO’s mission in Libya. Finding an answer to these questions will be indicative of the tactical role played by air military capabilities in wars, while Libya’s case will be most revealing given the fact that the intervention was mostly based on airpower. Hence, the main focus will consist in the evaluation of airpower as an instrument in contemporary warfare and its role in peace operations. The research will seek to confirm or invalidate the hypothesis according to which airpower can successfully

a 2nd Year MA

INCAS BULLETIN, Volume 5, Issue 2/2013, pp. 75 – 90 ISSN 2066 – 8201
take the lead in the Western Allies’ contemporary stabilization operations given that it reduces costs in terms of human lives and resources. From this statement, another point finds its pertinence: airpower is an effective coercion instrument that can deliver results in a quick and precise manner with few casualties and collateral damage, capable of compelling any enemy to concede. Last but not least, a third hypothesis is linked to the importance of airpower in conflict solution: the air power structures involved in military interventions have, more than the mandate of use of force, a dimension of peacemaking.

Having stated the goal of this research, the paper’s first section consists in providing a general perspective on airpower, and outlines its relevant functions for this present work. A second step would be that of identifying the influence that airpower has in compelling the enemy, as well as the role it plays in peace enforcement operations. Moving forward, the research will focus on airpower characteristics in the Libyan case, with an analysis of NATO’s Operation Unified Protector. Also, linked to the study case, another dimension will be that of analyzing the impact of airpower not only in the peace enforcement process, but in the complete peace support operation, including peacemaking efforts. Finally, a critical perspective will discuss weaknesses highlighted by the use of airpower, especially in the Libyan intervention, such as disproportion in the allies’ contributions to the mission.

As for the methods used in developing the analysis, this research is mainly analytical (as opposed to descriptive), applied, qualitative and finally, conceptual, as it relates to existing theory on air power. This paper’s research efforts are based on official documents and declarations of the UN, NATO, League of Arab States, and also on literature reviewing more extensively air power theory relevant for the present purposes and literature concerned specifically with Operation Unified Protector.

The key concepts employed in order to verify the hypotheses and to review the impact of airpower capabilities in contemporary conflict solution revolve around the main aspects composing the paper’s research question. Concepts such as: air power, coercion, air coercion, air interdiction, air superiority, peace enforcement, peacemaking, responsibility to protect and humanitarian intervention are useful in the effort of discovering the role of airpower in conflict solution in Libya.

PART 1: KEY CONCEPTS. A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE ON AIR POWER

Firstly, it is necessary to establish the definitions that this paper operates with in order to reach its established goals.

For the purpose of this paper, air power is defined in the terms of the most recent British Air and Space Power Doctrine as the “ability to project power from the air and space to influence the behavior of people or the course of event”[1]; this definition was selected for its conceptual clarity, its reliable source and most importantly, for its comprehensive approach which reflects significant changes in the contemporary security environment and which aims “to achieve militarily and politically favorable outcomes in complex crisis by using all available levers of power in a cross-governmental and inter-agency approach”. [2] Nonetheless, one should not be deceived in believing that air power theory is entirely exposed in a clear and systematic way; on the contrary, many efforts to shed light into the matter begin by bluntly admitting that “airpower is not widely understood and [...] the basic concepts which define and govern airpower remain obscure to many people, even to professional military officers”[3] Recently, more than a decade later this problem does not seem to have been addressed; an “unsound structure of theory and an unduly contested historical record”[4] persist. Although early flyers had already grasped the extraordinary
opportunities of a new environment characterized by universality, speed and the ability to
move in three dimensions which ensured a greater degree of invulnerability, it was the
contribution of famous practitioners, such as Generals Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, Billy
Mitchell or Major Alexandre Seversky - which had laid the foundations of air power theory.
Although airmen were more passionate air power advocates than impartial observers, their
point of view should not be completely dismissed on grounds of subjectivity: similar to any
other group, they perceive reality through their own institutional and bureaucratic filters, but
taken together, they could provide a relatively accurate picture of the events.

Early attempts to define and explain air power (often uncritically) relied on concepts of
sea power – mostly of Alfred Mahan`s and Sir Julian Corbett`s – as departing points. Although
connections can be observed between sea and air power – such as the 20th century
strive to achieve superiority or command in a new, uncontrollable environment or the
support provided to land power – major differences among the two concepts cannot be
overlooked. Firstly, sea power was regarded as a given for a very long time and although
there had been remarkable leaders in sea warfare, until Mahan no one had completely
revealed its importance. Oppositely, air power advocates had to vividly and persistently push
their enthusiastic ideas to get to be listened and taken seriously. Secondly, developments in
the early days of naval were discussed virtually exclusively in professional circles, bearing
little or no effects on the public opinion. To cite but one example, Mahan`s work, perhaps
the world`s greatest naval historian and theoretician, remained influential within the national
services and governments, but failed to become known and appreciated by the general public
for a long time. In contrast, airpower benefited from the advantages of the newly-created
mass-media (mass newspaper coverage, film, radio and television) which enabled air power
advocates to reach and win a much wider public.

Moreover, it can be argued the influence of sea power has been perceived directly and
immediately only by the crews engaged in sea battles – and only in rarer situations by coastal
populations during raids or gunboat diplomacy actions; in opposition, the effects of air
power on the population were regarded as direct and imminent, beginning with the intended
bombing of Venice in 1849, the aerial bombardments of London, Paris and German frontier
cities in World War I, and continuing with the large-scale bombing raids of World War II up
to the more recent 9/11 terrorist attack. Thirdly, technological advancements emerged at a
much slower pace in the sea power field compared to the air power one; for instance, during
the 123-year period of naval warfare discussed by Mahan, the ships largely remained
wooden and wind-driven while tactics did not change dramatically. In contrast, “starting
from very humble beginnings, airpower took off like a rocket”[5] and was marked by
continuous and striking technological developments during a shorter period of time. Thus, it
is only reasonably to understand why air power theory lagged far behind war realities for a
long time.

Despite some early enthusiasts’ naïve beliefs that airpower would render other military
forces impotent, neither armies nor navies have disappeared or drastically declined in
importance; yet, it can be argued that both have become over time increasingly dependent on
air power`s support. It is true that airpower possesses certain unique strengths – such as the
capacity to directly assault physical centers of gravity regardless their location; to globally
and rapidly project force; to swiftly and globally transport people, supplies or light
equipment; or to insert and support small isolated expeditions, raids and garrisons. To a
satisfactory degree, it can also protect friendly land and sea forces and other assets from
enemy airpower; constitute the decisive strategic agent in high - and mid-level regular and
conventional conflicts; compensate for deficiencies in friendly land and sea forces; and deny
enemy access to determined land and sea areas. However, air power has a poor record in “occupying” to control territory from the air alone (distinctively, armies are more likely to occupy enemy territory, pacify and hold it); sending clear diplomatic messages; applying decisive pressure for intended strategic effect in irregular conflicts; or, clearly discriminating between friend and foe. What is more, airpower is completely helpless when it comes to transport heavy and bulky loads on long distances at reasonable costs (which in contrast, sea power can successfully accomplish); seize and hold disputed territorial objectives or effectively manage an enemy’s surrender. Consequently, it is only reasonable to argue that both the presence of boots on the ground and the command of the sea have managed to preserve their important role in modern military operations.

Regarding the functions of airpower in peace operations, in general, these include: airlift, logistics, resupply, medical evacuation, aerial refueling, search and rescue, air traffic control support, combat air patrol, airspace control, early warning of hostile actions, communications and others. Nevertheless, the intervention in Libya illustrates other essential air power functions, such as ground air strikes, air interdiction, and ISR (Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance). Air interdiction is defined as “air operations conducted to divert, disrupt, delay, degrade or destroy an enemy’s military potential before it can be brought to bear effectively and at such distance that detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and the maneuver of friendly forces is not required”.[6] ISR is described as “an activity that synchronizes and integrates the planning and operation of sensors, assets, and processing, exploitation, and dissemination systems in direct support of current and future operations”[7].

Next, the use of air power for coercion and peace enforcement need to be discussed. In “Bombing to win: airpower and coercion in war”, Robert A. Pape claims that, in spite of its growing importance as a statecraft instrument, coercion is seen as “morally repugnant” because it usually involves hurting civilians and is viewed as the “dark side” of international relations theory.

Generally, when speaking about coercion, one thinks about the way in which states use force to compel other states to do their bidding. Pape argues that coercion “involves persuading an opponent to stop an ongoing action or to start a new course of action by changing its calculations of costs and benefits”[8] and that coercion “seeks to force the opponents to alter their behavior”[9]. Pape continues by claiming that coercion is defined by the nature of the decision that the adversary is faced with and not by its intentions and behavior, “coercion occurs whenever a state must choose between making concession or suffering the consequences of continuing its present course of action. […] The universe of coercion includes nearly all attempts by states to force others to accept a change in the status quo”.

Respectively, military coercion is the use of military instruments to change an adversary’s behavior. Thus, air coercion can be defined as the use of air power to pressure an opponent to behave in a different manner than normally, in the presence of air attacks.

Pape sustains that air power is “the most important instrument of modern military coercion”[10] and identifies four coercive air strategies: punishment, risk, denial and decapitation.

The first strategy, punishment, targets the civilian population, infrastructure and economy, and refers to inflicting pain on enemy civilians so that it forces the opponent to concede or the population to revolt against the government.[11] This strategy is no longer realistic. The second strategy, risk, also directed towards civilian population and economic targets by gradually increasing the intensity and geographical extent of attacks thus
compelling the opponent to concede to avoid further costs. The third strategy, denial, refers to attacking the adversary’s military strategy by defeating enemy military forces and targeting arms manufacturing, stopping supplies, disrupting movement and communication on the theater of operations. The fourth strategy - decapitation refers to strikes against leadership (political or military) and their ability to lead, either by targeting command and control or by attacking communication facilities.

For Pape, air superiority is a phase in the pursuit of the above mentioned coercive air strategies, not a separate air strategy. Command of the air is needed to avoid encountering strong opposition and has to cover the attack targets and the air corridors to them, not the whole of the enemy territory.

The next paragraphs will refer to the relation air power - peace enforcement and the role airpower plays in peace operations. Firstly, one finds it necessary to make the distinction between peace enforcement operations and peacekeeping operations. According to US Army Field Manual 100-5, “peace enforcement operations are military interventions in support of diplomatic efforts to restore peace or to establish the conditions for a peace force between hostile factions. [...] Implies the use of force or its threat to coerce hostile factions to cease and desist from violent actions”. Peace enforcement units can “apply elements of combat power to restore order, to separate warring factions, and to return the environment to conditions more conducive to civil order and discipline”.[12]

While peacekeeping operations are mainly diplomatic and take place during an agreed ceasefire or monitor and facilitate implementation of a peace agreement, peace enforcement operations require an armed force as they often revolve around the use of military force to coerce compliance with resolutions or sanctions. Peace enforcement units are allowed to use lethal force in a hostile environment and do not require cooperation from members in the conflict.

According to the UN, peace enforcement involves the application of coercive measures including the use of military force, with the authorization of the Security Council, in order to restore international peace and security.

In “Beyond gunboat diplomacy: forceful application of airpower in peace enforcement operations”, Major James O. Tubbs defines peace enforcement as “a military intervention in an ongoing conflict that uses military force to coerce one or more belligerents to comply with mandated restrictions” with the goal to create the conditions for other peace efforts (e.g. humanitarian relief, diplomatic peacemaking) to help solve the conflict.

James S. Corum, in “Airpower and peace enforcement”, argues that peace enforcement is not war, although “it still involves military combat operations and falls into the traditional American category of low-intensity conflict (LIC)”. He also claims “that peace enforcement may not have the consent of all parties, the intervening forces are not likely to be neutral, and are authorized to use force in situations other than self-defense”.

Furthermore, Corum states that air power plays a major role in the success of peace enforcement operations, having essential contributions such as: humanitarian operations support (providing humanitarian relief), troops/equipment airlift, airfield security, force protection, psychological operations (psyops have a decisive role in maintaining general calm and cooperation from resident population), intelligence gathering (a difficult process considering that threats stem from small factions/militias strongly integrated in indigenous population), providing reconnaissance and surveillance. Comparing peace enforcement operations with conventional wars, Corum also argues that peace enforcement operations are much more complex, that they do not seek to destroy, overthrow or subdue en enemy, but their mission “to impose peace” is rather vague and targeting opposing forces is difficult.
when the adversary is unknown. The paper uses the definitions concerning peace support operations as they are present in NATO’s Glossary of Terms and Definitions. In this respect, it is important to make the clear distinction between different types of conflict solution approaches. According to NATO, Libya is considered as a peace support operation with a strong component of peace enforcement given the fact that such mission includes an “operation conducted to maintain a ceasefire or peace agreement where the level of consent and compliance is uncertain and the threat of disruption is high. The peace support force must be capable of applying credible coercive force and must apply the provisions of the ceasefire or peace agreement impartially”.[13]

Peace enforcement is just a part of the peace support operation which also implies a mandate from the United Nations Security Council to restore or maintain peace.[14] Except these aspects, the paper intents to investigate whether NATO’s mission in Libya contained a dimension of peacemaking, understood as involving, more than the use of military power in conflict settlement, a diplomatic action supported by military action when necessary.

Also valid in Libya’s case is defining the mission as a humanitarian operation, aimed at alleviating human suffering when the government fails to do so. However, this definition does not mention the type of measures which can be taken, be them civilian or military. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the military intervention in Libya, with its peace support operations, has taken place under the specter of the principle of the responsibility to protect, granting the capacity of the international community to intervene in a state’s affairs when it has evidence that the respective state has broken the obligation of protecting its own citizens.

PART 2: NATO’S MISSION IN LIBYA: OPERATION UNIFIED PROTECTOR

2.1. A General Overview of Operation Unified Protector

After Libyan air defenses were crippled and the Qaddafi regime’s advances on the rebel city of Benghazi were halted by a U.S.-led coalition of 13 nations, as of March 31 NATO assumed command and coalition military operations in Libya under the UNSCR 1970 and 1973. The mission ended on 31 October 2011 becoming NATO’s most intense air campaign since Operation Allied Force during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. OUP was commanded by Canadian Air Force Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard (headquartered at the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, Italy), who reported to Joint Force Commander U.S. General Sam Locklear, who, in turn reported to NATO Supreme Allied Commander U.S. Admiral James Stavridis.

Although officials remained aware of the perils of engaging in the rapidly unfolding Arab Spring events, the case of Libya was characterized by several features which facilitated – both politically and militarily - NATO’s intervention: the UN mandate; the regional support for the granted by regional organizations such as the Arab League; a broad recognition of NATO intervention’s added value addressing an impending humanitarian crisis; and a short timeframe for action.

OUP consisted of three elements: a UN-mandated arms embargo; a no-fly-zone over Libyan territory; and actions to protect civilians from attack or the threat of attack by military forces from the Qaddafi regime. As of March 8, NATO had conducted 24-hour air surveillance of Libyan territory and the Central Mediterranean for which they used AWACS[15] aircraft deployed for NATO’s counterterrorism and maritime security operation in the Mediterranean Sea, Operation Active Endeavor. Starting March 23, NATO
launched a maritime operation in order to enforce the arms embargo against the Libyan regime; during this operation, the participating vessels and aircraft monitored the Central Mediterranean off the Libyan coast and interdicted any vessels suspected of violating the arms embargo by carrying illegal arms or mercenaries. Three days later, on March 27 the no-fly zone enforcement started under NATO’s command. On the same day, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen announced the expansion of the mission’s scope under the command of the Alliance in order to cover the implementation of all military aspects of UNSCR 1973—namely the protection of civilian and civilian areas through air strikes on Gaddafi’s ground forces.

From a legal perspective, the 2011 NATO action in Libya illustrates the cosmopolitan action which refers to a range of uses for military forces by the international community aiming at the protection of individual rights by establishing stable and just societies. In this case, the international community waged an international armed conflict against Libya in order to prevent serious humanitarian abuses which had been undertaken in a separate, non-international conflict between the Libyan governmental forces and armed opposition groups. However, NATO’s assumption of operations over Libya much coincided with Gaddafi regime forces’ shift from traditional to irregular warfare. In this case, air powers’ flexibility proved an extremely valuable asset for the Allies.

It has been widely argued that OUP was a great success and that it shaped up a model of strategy for the Alliance in the 21st century—for example, NATO Secretary General argued the lessons learned from Libya were mainly positive and that they only highlighted the Alliance’s flexibility, openness in its cooperation with its Middle East partners and strength; in contrast, other views have strongly claimed that the Libyan air campaign reflected NATO’s limitations rather than its strengths such as the lack of a coherent strategy, participation issues, capability gaps or legality of the operation.

In the Secretary General’s Annual Report 2011, Mr. Rasmussen described OUP as “one of the most remarkable in NATO’s history” and stated that NATO “proved itself as a force for good and the ultimate force multiplier”. He further said that is was also “an exemplary mission of cooperation and consultations with other organizations, including UN, the League of Arab States and the EU”.[16] It is important to underline that OUP involved a coalition of NATO allies and 5 non-NATO countries: Sweden and 4 other countries in the region. The participation in the coalition of Jordan, Morocco, Qatar and United Arab Emirates thus emphasized the strong regional support for NATO’s operation. When NATO took control and command over all military operations in Libya, it did so under the UN mandate and after consultations with UN, EU and the League of Arab States and international partners. Furthermore it is significant to highlight that only after extended regional support was clearly manifested, from the Arab League member states and from the Libyan National Transition Council that requested an intervention, did NATO act.

As previously stated, NATO called upon regional organization (the European Union, the Arab League, African Union) to get involved and this military intervention benefited from strong international and regional support. In accordance with UNSCR 1970 (2011), the European Union adopted a set of sanctions to interrupt the flow of money and weapons to the Gaddafi regime, provided 80.5 million euro in humanitarian assistance and participated in international discussion with partners to end the conflict. EU ground presence came in the form of EU delegations opening offices in Benghazi and Tripoli. The undergoing 30 million euro EU assistance program in Libya focuses on: reconciliation, elections and respect for human rights; public administrative capacity; media and civil society and promoting the involvement of women in public life; migration; health and education.
The only state neither a member of NATO or the Arab League to participated in the no-fly zone was Sweden. The Swedish committed several aircrafts, among which eight Swedish-built fighter jets, a transport plane and a reconnaissance plane to Libya, but underlined the fact that Swedish force will not be involved in ground strikes.[17] Members of the Arab League were actively implicated in OUP; Jordan provided six fighter jets for logistic and escort support, while UAE sent several fighter jets to join the mission and Qatar contributed with six fighter jets, strategic support aircrafts to the no-fly zone operation and delivering of humanitarian assistance. By contrast, the African Union was slow to react and its response was not consistent. Before the Security Council vote it rejected any form of military intervention, but Gabon, Nigeria and South Africa, as members of the Security Council, voted approving the resolution.

2.2. The Role of Airpower in NATO’s Peace Operation in Libya

This section seeks to analyze the importance of airpower in putting an end to the violent Libyan civil war by investigating the characteristics of NATO’s mission in terms of conflict settlement. As previously stated NATO’s peace operation was based on a political mission, internationally legal and legitimate through the UN Security Council resolution 1973. Thus, one should keep in mind that the military was just a means in achieving the goal stated in the UN declaration, that of protecting civilians from the attacks of Gaddafi’s regime. The UN resolution was adopted in accordance with the responsibility to protect principle. In this context, airpower was one of the main means in the efforts of acting according to the resolution. Given that the airpower represented the means for accomplishing the political purpose of protecting civilians, the analysis will focus on the role played by the joint allied air forces during the peace operations. So as to answer to the main question of this research, that of the decisiveness and imperative necessity of airpower in peace settlement, it is important to see if the airpower was the key of success in Libya.

Speaking about the capacity of compellence of the military power, Schelling describes the ability, more than that of seizing and holding, to hurt and to exploit this diplomatically. Referring specifically to airpower, Warden affirms that “provided that the blow be sufficiently swift and powerful, there is no reason why, within a few hours, or at the most days from the commencement of hostilities, the nerve system of the country should not be paralyzed”. [18] These scholars underline the advantages that the military power in general and airpower in particular bring in conflict solving. However, the mission in Libya was longer than a few days, although NATO and its partners invested their resources with the purpose of ending the conflict and retreating from Libya as soon as possible. In order to find the answer to this inconsistency, one has to look first at how does the airpower help tactically in conflict settlement. The main question which has to be answered at this point is how to use force in order to coerce the enemy. Airpower has proved, since its use in wars, to have a big impact in paralyzing the adversary, however, it has not always led to the expected outcomes, as history shows us. A solution for that would be to target specific points that brought together compel the opposite army. A US Air Force Major in the Yugoslavian wars explains that “force can target the armed forces physical ability to fight; the government's ability to maintain order among the people and command and control of its armed forces, and the people's willingness to support the government and the armed forces”. [19] In the Libyan case, the last proposition does not stand, as the intervention occurred in a state of civil war where the majority of the population was not siding with the government. Thus, concrete measures applied by the air forces were physically destruction of Gaddafi’s armed forces and stopping the government from having control over its population.
It is to be noted that the definition of peace enforcement as given previously does not fully apply here; in the sense that OUP did not come in support of diplomatic efforts nor did it create a window for negotiations between the regime and rebels, and Qaddafi’s removal from power was seen as the only solution to the conflict.

If one applies Pape’s reasoning regarding airpower strategies to this military intervention, the observation is that the military intervention implemented decapitation strategies against the command and control structures combined with denial strategies by reducing the regime’s capability to respond and attack civilians. Air superiority, essential for these strategies was achieved rather swiftly by imposing the no-fly zone.

Airpower was used in the peace enforcement operation in Libya also by identifying units of troops loyal to the regime from the army (like Brigade 32, which was identified as the main unit attacking civilians) and not mere conscripts, by identifying governmental command and control nodes and attacking them (such as Misrata), by reducing civilian casualties so as to gain trust of the population, by reducing the regime’s capability of attacking civilians. Thus, the Libyan intervention included counter-air operations, interdiction (by the installment of the no-fly zone), but also surveillance and reconnaissance. One can affirm that the airpower in Libya accomplished all roles attributed classically for air forces: aerospace control, force application (through strategic attacks and interdiction), force enhancement (through special operations, electronic combat and intelligence operations).

In Libya, air operations ranged from defensive counter air to offensive counter air missions. Approximately 8,000 troops, over 260 air assets (fighter aircraft, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, air-to-air refuelers, unmanned aerial vehicles and attack helicopters) and 21 naval assets (supply ships, frigates, destroyers, submarines, amphibious assault ships and aircraft carriers) were employed. During the air mission, over 26,500 sorties destroyed more than 5,900 military targets including over 400 artillery or rocket launchers and over 600 tanks or armored vehicles; the arms embargo covered a maritime surveillance area of approximately 61,000 nautical square miles and resulted in over 3,100 vessels being hailed, around 300 vessels being boarded and 11 ships having been denied transit to or from Libyan ports for being susceptible of posing a risk to the civilian population; while when it comes to humanitarian assistance, over 2,500 air, ground and maritime movements into Libya have been de-conflicted by NATO. Also, it is important to note that over 600 migrants in distress at sea were rescued directly by NATO maritime assets during this operation.

Airpower was thus used for operations aimed at destroying nodes of communications, the enemy’s military assets, but also for boosting the population’s morale: because it did not have troops on ground, it was hard for the coalition to give an impulse to the population to fight against the regime; however, NATO attacked locations symbolic for the regime’s power (for example, the state security headquarters in Tripoli) or dropped leaflets. Air interdiction was a great success during the Libyan campaign due to the achievement of air superiority (which allows a clearer identification and attack of enemy forces while exposing its own aircraft to reduced risks); quality intelligence gathering on enemy movements, stockpiles and intentions; persistence (the Allies’ prompt intervention did not leave the enemy proper conditions to resupply); and the important relation between air and surface forces.

An essential role in obtaining success was undoubtedly the ability to rapidly target and re-target, which became even more important after the shift from regular to irregular warfare. As a result, the 72-hours targeting cycle was shortened and the targeting planning cycle was drawn closer to execution in order so that the Prioritized Target List would keep up with the swift developments on the battlefield.
As there were no boots on the ground (at least directly), highly advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets proved crucial, especially in the case of urban area targets. And when it comes to ground air strikes, it is important to mention that this air campaign was based on the principle of achieving maximum effect with minimum force, meaning that the use of precision-guided munitions used against targets in populated areas enabled the Allies to achieve their targets while reducing to a minimum any civilian casualties. Whenever during targeting the level of collateral damage exceeded the CD authority levels delegated to the aircrew, the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) – which benefited from additional intelligence such as live feeds from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) - took over the decision to strike for further consideration.

Although this operation was launched under the responsibility to protect and important targeting restrictions were imposed on NATO – which led many airpower enthusiasts to believe OUP represented the promise of a free-of-casualties future warfare - the high number of casualties on the side of rebel forces and civilians should not be dismissed. A Human Rights Watch report indicated that NATO has failed to acknowledge 72 civilian deaths (including 20 women and 24 children) resulting from eight NATO air strikes and has not investigated potentially unlawful attacks.

All these above mentioned elements are indicative of the important role the airpower played in the peace enforcement process. However, it still has to be discussed whether airpower was the key player that insured the success of the mission, and if it had a role in peacemaking.

The success of the NATO mission in Libya has encouraged enthusiasts of the airpower to affirm that it will become the only military force needed to win wars in the near future. Its flexibility, precision and efficiency determined some voices to minimize the role of ground and naval powers in wars to come.

However, one has to remind the fact that the success in Libya was assured not only by the airpower, but by the naval one as well. Thus, the no-fly zone was preceded by an embargo directed by NATO naval command center in Naples. Without the embargo, the arms, material and mercenaries’ traffic could not have been prevented, nor could persons in distress at sea while trying to reach the European shore would have been saved. Hence, it cannot be stated that the intervention owes its success fully to the air forces; moreover other capabilities played a vital role in insuring the achievement of the mission’s goal.

Furthermore, although it cannot be considered as the equivalent of ground troops and given that it was a state-by-state endeavor and not a coalition’s decision, a series of European states and the United States sent some 100-200 foreign operatives on the ground, which had the mission to train and militarily coordinate the rebels. There were French arms drops, some Gulf States such as Qatar sent arms supply as well, while British operatives helped rebels targeting command and control nodes. Also, the US helped with intelligence collection. These actions were part of the so called Operation Dawn Mermaid to seize Tripoli, which will eventually be successful and will prove to be the cornerstone for winning the war.[21] Thus, this leads us to the conclusion that air power is most effectively while being integrated with land and sea forces.

Finally, while it is clear that airpower played a major role in the peace enforcement process, it is interesting to see whether the same can be argued for the peacemaking process. As stated at the beginning of this paper, peacemaking involves combining military power to diplomatic actions in order to obtain a ceasefire. Peacemaking, in comparison to peacekeeping or peace-building, has to be a short-term process in order to be effective. In this process, the military capabilities can be used so as to force the sides to initiate...
diplomatic talks. Thus, military power in peacemaking can be considered just a treatment of symptoms and not a cure for the disease.

It is from this point of view that the airpower can be considered to be more effective for peace enforcement, being able to apply the necessary amount of coercive forces. In both peace enforcement and peacemaking the belligerents’ agreement over the implication of the third party is not necessary; hence these actions have come to be considered as synonyms of military intervention. In Libya’s particular case, the reason invoked by the Security Council for mandating an intervention was that of protecting the civilians, allowing thus the possibility to name the mission as a humanitarian operation as well. However, NATO’s vision on this kind of operation does not mention if it involves civilian or military, or both, dimensions.

Referring to Libya, the mission did not have as main target creating space for negotiations between the regime and the rebels; moreover after the beginning of the operations in March 2011, world leaders saw no other solution than the departure of Qaddafi from the country’s leadership. The only moment when the coalition sought a way for talks was in June 2011 when there was a stalemate in the advancement of the war. The mission lacked another key aspect of a peacemaking operation, that of impartiality of the intervenent, for it was clear that the NATO-led intervention aimed at removing Qaddafi and his regime from power. In this equation, airpower appears to have been used as the main coercer but with no clear intention of leading to the creation of a space for dialogue between the sides. Having analyzed the role of the aerial component in the 2011 intervention in Libya, one must say that indeed the airpower was a major factor in achieving the campaign’s goals; however one cannot draw the conclusion that it was the only action needed for the conflict settlement. As it has been shown, while airpower was decisive in winning the war, by insuring force application, force enhancement and finally coercion of the enemy, it would not have succeeded in the absence of the naval power which helped insuring the arms embargo or without the operatives who trained rebels in seizing strategic points such as the capital.

PART III: MAIN CRITIQUES TO THE INTERVENTION IN LIBYA

The OUP of NATO in Libya has been the wake-up call for the Alliance and for security and defense spenders in countries all over the world. Either a success or a failure, it does not represent the ultimate test for NATO’s upcoming transformation or its lack thereof. The opinions of both participants and observers with regards to the relevance of the operation have diverged, yet most of them tackled the same levels of analysis: the political dimension, the military level, the legal aspects, the organizational terms and the humanitarian twist. Most importantly, in order to present in a new light the hypothesis initially presented in the paper the air power relevance and limits will be analyzed throughout the aforementioned points of scrutiny.

From a political point of view, the relevance of the intervention is quite sizeable. Even though it reflected longstanding disagreements and foreseeable stalemates in the command and control structures, it pointed out new drawbacks that the alliance is bound to encounter in the near future either in/out of specific operations. First of all, the difficulty in achieving consensus for a military intervention in Libya is relevant; moreover the divided opinions of the NATO allies to assume the leadership of the intervention in Libya from USAFRICOM is even more telling. The US had led the initial intervention in Libya under Resolution 1970 and after the adoption of Resolution 1973 NATO had to take charge of the operation. The
EU proved unprepared, weak and unwilling to acquire such a task, once again proving NATO’s first choice statute in the field of international security and defense.

These difficulties resided in each of the Allies’ national interest and in the wider, more general context of the financial crisis and reduced defense budget spending. For the United States, the Afghanistan syndrome, the relatively disputable success of the Operation Iraqi Freedom and the unwillingness of the American taxpayer to support further out-of-area operations have contributed to a decreased interest in the pursuit of ensuring either the participation in the OUP or the decision to initiate it in the first place. The idea of the US getting entangled in another Middle East conflict was not promising at all. Still, the decision to be a crucial part of the OUP was reached due to the rising calls for action of the Arab League. On the other hand, the European counterparts exhibited their internal turmoil and their traditional reluctance to engage in such operations while some refreshed their position within the Alliance in promising ways. For the bulk of the European allies, the participation in the political decision making behind the operation was nil. For Germany, Turkey and Greece for instance the opposition to such an endeavor marked a recurrent gap in European so sought for consensus, each bringing a series of reasons onto the table. Germany showed its well-known rejection of military involvement whatsoever and showed its discontent with the idea of military intervention. The internal political context is relevant to the case. Turkey and Greece observed a shift from total rejection to the actual participation in the operation, as little as they could. [22] Still, the great surprise of the Operation was the wonderful reset of relations between the UK and France. They collaborated in what came to be later known as the Entente Frugale and the coordination of the two, with France assuming the leadership of the operation and UK backing it completely marked the revival of French presence within NATO that had been dormant for almost more than half a century. Most of all, the operation reflected a “low turnout and a growth in caveat countries”. [23]

From the air power triad of interest it is important to take into consideration the fact that even though the OUP engaged in all of the three Resolution-based actions: “a UN-mandated arms embargo; a no-fly-zone over Libyan territory; and actions to protect civilians from attack or the threat of attack by military forces from the Qaddafi regime”. [24], the consensus was easier reached in the case of the no-fly zone. It seems less intrusive and more justifiable in the light of the humanitarian character of the intervention. Still, the decision to start and support air strikes on the airfield were more the prerogative of the British, French and US force with partial Polish, Portuguese and Danish and Dutch backing. The peace enforcement dimension of the operation was more important and effective in the attempt to stop the Libyan regime from openly attacking its population than the later coming part of peacekeeping activities. All of the actors, especially the directly involved ones supported surgical attacks and an intervention to last at least as possible. The peace keeping dimension was short-lived and proceeded by a massive intrusion and regime change intervention: the operation was finalized with the dismissal of the Gaddafi regime and the support of the Transitional Council.

From a humanitarian dimension, the number of victims was increasingly reduced due to the technological advancement of air power, as mentioned earlier in the paper. The problems posed by the operation appeared when the shift in the fighting strategy of the state army. Intermingling with the civilians posed a serious problem in terms of ISR for the operation and increasingly affected the comprehensive approach intended to alleviate such expected outcomes. Moreover, the lack of organization of the armed rebel forces posed an increasing risk to the humanitarian success of the intervention since sometimes air strikes would mistakenly target rebels instead of army troops.
From a legal point of view, some detractors consider that the prerogatives mentioned in the 1972 UNSC Resolution were bent. The existing collateral damage registered (that due to air power advances were supposed to be minimal if not inexistent) and the close to- boots on the ground approach of the allied air forces of US, UK and France mainly point to that. The second component is relevant taking into consideration that there were testifiable accounts of arms being air dropped to rebels, helicopter use and the dispatching of Special Forces to military advise the Transitional Council. The crisis management operation model that Libya was supposed to entail, effectively fulfilled its features, however it sometimes exceeded its limits. The regime removal and the peacemaking quick actions pointed to a new way of extending the humanitarian assistance and evacuation vs. the air superiority dimension promoted by the NATO European counterparts. Nonetheless, the general opinion agrees that the new system for “deconfliction” worked as a charm in its sea, land and air power facets.

From a military dimension, the Operation Unified Protector mirrored a political impasse that had severe repercussions on all levels of action. The capabilities gap encountered within the Alliance was exposed during all the phases of the operation with countries that “conduct offensive air operations, those that relegate their actions to air policing, effectively a non-combat role and those which fail to appear at all”. At the initial contact point, the transfer of logistics and intelligence-gathering personnel as well the assembly and deployment of specific air fighters proved a cumbersome task. The command and control structure suffered a lot from the lack of cooperation of some European Allies (most notably Italy and Germany) and caused serious delays in performing the initial air strikes against vital nodes of communication, infrastructure and IADS (Integrated Air Defense System).

The targeting expertise was almost absent during OUP and as a general pattern that can be observed repeatedly, the US supplied the necessary missing personnel. This difficulty in turn entailed severe communication strains between the INTEL centers of the Allies and US intervention once again saved the day.

There was a divergence in the later phases of the operation, with the US pursuing a secondary degree of interest and involvement in the operations requiring air superiority. The US focused on the humanitarian dimension and its actions were consistent with that until the end. The political factors earlier analyzed had a groundbreaking impact on this perspective.

On another level, the US support was incremental tactically and strategically speaking. Even if it wanted to keep a lower profile, the US involvement and contribution to the operation was crucial. After several months of bomb air strikes et.al, the ammunition stocks of the European Allies were depleted and they had to be restacked with US assistance and internal production. Their importance lay in the PGMs most of the jets used that minimized collateral damage. This situation pointed to the inability and lack of preparedness of Europe to support a long-term operation with basic supplies. Similarly, the US support was paramount in the air-to-air refueling operations, a facility the European Allies completely lacked.

The two-tiered Alliance was obvious also in the subsequent undermining of the interoperability of the mission and the pooling and sharing conceptual misinterpretation. There were several deadlocks during the operation especially with regards to the types of weapons to be employed and to the coordination of the personnel in manned air vehicles. Also, the idea of pooling and sharing prompted a problem since some of the poolers were not sharers. Germany was reluctant to share its “ISR, theatre ballistic missile defense or deep strike by indigenous air-launched cruise missiles”, whereas Poland was under significant political turmoil and could not provide the necessary fighters for the operation. The same situation occurred in the case of Portugal and its air bases. With others (i.e. Belgium,
Denmark, Canada and Norway) the contribution was significant, even if there are not strong Allies or major contributors. The advantage posed by the operation and that boosted their support was that of short timeframe. In case the operation would have lasted longer than a few months, the costs would have not been bearable for the small states even with their stable GDPs.

The operation was not only air based but also sea- and land- based. The amphibious weapons of the US and the UK assisted in air-strikes with effective results in the initial phases of the operation and not only. The siege of Misrata is well-known to have been successfully lifted with the help of British and French vessels. However, there are analysts that consider that the OUP could have been undertaken without sea-based support given the geographical proximity of Libya to Europe. This is not the case for future, more distanced out-of-area operations. The air power supremacy in this context was not ensured and this is also reflected in the ground operations that were taking place (although at a lower level) in the theatres of operations in Libya. The difficulty of the synchronization of the operations is also another factor that proves that experience in amphibious operations and complex maneuvers is essential for a quick victory.

Nonetheless, examples of air power operational and technological prolixity could have been observed. The adaptability of the operation was presented via the use of British Apache and Tigre and Gazelle French Helicopters for major interdiction strikes engaging both ground and maritime targets near Misrata with very few collateral victims. The parts of air interdiction and close air support were ensured by the French and the British mainly[29].

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As shown, air power theory continues to lag far behind practice; the lack of a comprehensive, coherent and most of all objective theoretical body is certainly a reality which hampers further research in the field. As previously indicated, the NATO-led air operations had certainly a paramount role within all parts of the OUP; this mission proved that air assets form a critical component of modern military operations which can significantly contribute to its success. Nevertheless, the role of sea power and also, to a certain extent and more indirectly, of land power to the mission should not be overlooked in a temptation to overestimate air power qualities while ignoring it is obvious limitations. To conclude, air power is indeed effective but it delivers its best results while being integrated with land and sea forces.

All in all, the OUP showed the strong points of the use of air power (more legitimacy, increased precision, less collateral damage and decreased number of victims), yet it also enabled a clear view of its shortcomings. The success of the peace enforcement operation was not followed by the same zeal regarding the peacemaking section of the operation, with important allies opting for a short humanitarian intervention, with no troops intervening in the conflict. The stringent problems within NATO were presented with an emphasis on the air power dimensions and some facts could be stated. The operation was too expensive for its dimensions; the European Allies could have not supported it in the case of a protracted conflict of normal dimensions. The US is still either willingly or not the main NATO Ally and its reshaping of strategic interests could gravely affect the capability of the Alliance to pursue such operations on other occasions with the same degree of success. Nevertheless, the development of some national industries, the specialization of the member countries and the cogent implementation of the smart defense concept could gradually ensure a more balanced burden-sharing within NATO.
For a first time test, the success is ensured. From the air powers theorists’ points of view, the air power advantages overcame initial political turmoil, ensured the stabilization of the area and the close support of the civilian population. The complete legality of the actions and the one-power character of the operation are disputable.

Having extensively analyzed the use of airpower in military operations, with a study case based on the 2011 Libyan intervention, one is able of assessing the degree of validity of the hypotheses highlighted at the beginning of this research paper. Thus, this study intended to see the role of the airpower in contemporary stabilization missions. The findings show that indeed the function of coercion of airpower proves its value for the Libya operation. Derived from that, airpower can be considered to be a decisive factor in waging and winning in contemporary warfare; it has shown to be an effective coercion instrument that offers the necessary coercive measures to restore peace and security. However, one should keep in mind that while it was necessary, airpower was not the only military component used by the forces intervening in Libya, as it was successfully combined with naval assets. As for the peace support dimension, airpower was part of the effort of enforcing peace given that, being a military means, it was instrumental in achieving the stated political goal: that of securing civilians and putting an end to a violent civil war.

REFERENCES

[9] Robert A. Pape also makes a distinction between coercion and deterrence. He argues that, although both are intended to influence the opponent’s decision making calculus, deterrence discourages the adversary from changing its behavior and maintains the status quo, while coercion alters its behavior.
[18] Ibidem.


[25] The availability of SEAD fire jets on behalf of Italy could have ensured a greater success. See Christian F. Anrig, cited work., 93.

[26] 75% of the Intel is said to have been provided by the US with French high support - Ivo H.Daalder and James D. Stavridis, “NATO’s Victory in Libya: The Right Way to Run an Intervention”, Foreign Affairs (March/April 2012): 6.

[27] 15 of 28 NATO Allies contributed to the mission: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and the U.S in Gareth Chappell, cited work, 69.

[28] Christian F. Anrig, cited work, 94.