What Is Air Diplomacy?

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In his *Mémoires de guerre* (*War Memoirs*), Gen Charles de Gaulle synthesizes the connections between diplomacy and the use of armed forces, noting that foreign policy is governed by three levers: "Diplomacy expresses it, armed forces support it, and the police cover it."[1] Air diplomacy can thus be defined as the use of air assets to support foreign policy. This extremely vast field is chronologically limited by the advent of aviation in 1903 or of military aviation in 1911 (for France), but it can also include civil aviation.

A diplomat first used the term *air diplomacy*. On 23 August 1927, in an interview with the *New York Times* before boarding to take up his appointment as the French ambassador in Washington, Paul Claudel mentioned air diplomacy in reference to Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight of 21 May 1927: "My task will be facilitated by the air and popular diplomacy admirably initiated by the American airmen, who haven't even realized their apostolate."[2] But Lindbergh had no official assignment. As a passionate and experienced aviator, he was driven only by the desire to take up a technical and human challenge—and perhaps by the $25,000 promised to the first aviator who crossed the North Atlantic. After the tragic loss of Charles Nungesser and François Coli's *White Bird* a few days earlier, Lindbergh's achievement seems to mark the decline of French aviation, compared to America's very dynamic civil aviation.

In terms of aeronautics, commercial aviation underwent quite a boom, and important airlines opened during the 1920s—the years of Jean Mermoz

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and the Aéropostale aviation company's accomplishments. It thus seems logical for Claudel to highlight the political dimension of Lindbergh's flight because the opening of regular airlines serves as a means of influence for all the major aeronautical nations. The French organizations—the French-Romanian Company for Air Transport (*Compagnie franco-roumaine de navigation aérienne* [CFRNA]), created in April 1920, which in 1925 became the International Air Navigation Company (*Compagnie internationale de navigation aérienne* [CIDNA])—shape their network based on French diplomatic alliances in Central and Eastern Europe, serving the capitals of the Little Entente countries: Prague (April 1921), Bucharest (October 1921), and Belgrade (April 1923) (or Warsaw, Poland, in April 1921).[3] In his book dedicated to Sabena, the Belgian national company, Guy Vanthemsche uses the term *air diplomacy* in reference to the opening of the airlines connecting Belgium to several foreign capitals.[4]

Second, in her dissertation, published in 1971, Jacqueline de La Rochère also uses *air diplomacy* to describe US policy related to civil aviation and to show how, due to its technical and economic supremacy, the United States managed to impose its view of public international law on civil aviation. This occurred during important international conferences, such as the one held in Chicago in 1944, and through bilateral agreements like the one concluded with Great Britain in Bermuda—again illustrating how air assets can support foreign policy.[5]

The third example comes from the policy of Pierre Cot, when he became air minister of the Popular Front. From 1936 to 1938, he established cooperative relations in the aviation sector with the Central and Eastern European countries, described by Thierry Vivier as the expression of a genuine air diplomacy.[6]

In August 1938, in the midst of the Sudeten crisis, Gen Joseph Vuillemin, general chief of staff of the air force, went to Germany at the invitation of Hermann Göring. His impressions following visits to Luftwaffe units and aircraft factories played an important role in France's position while its Czechoslovakian ally was threatened by Nazi Germany. Already aware of the French Air Force's inferiority, he described in his end-of-mission report "the truly impressive power of German aviation." On 26 September, the eve of the Munich conference, which would determine peace or war in Europe, the general chief of staff of the air force wrote that

there was "a highly significant disproportion of force in favor of Germany."[7] Facing Hitler's ambitions, as well as the absence of support from British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, and warned by the military chiefs about the inadequacy of the French armed forces, Edouard Daladier, France's representative at the conference, agreed to abandon Czechoslovakia. After his visits to the Reich's aircraft factories in July 1936 as well as October of 1937 and 1938, when he could see the technical, industrial, and military advances of German aviation, Lindbergh embarked on a crusade supporting the neutrality and nonintervention position of the United States in the impending war. In both cases, the Luftwaffe and German aircraft companies played a political role as tools of propaganda and intimidation.[8]

More recently, states have abundantly used transport aviation and airlift to support their foreign policy. Examples include the Berlin airlift in 1948–49, during which aircraft transported 2 million tons of supplies; Operation Nickel Grass, conducted by the United States during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which transported 23,000 tons of material; on a smaller scale, Operation Verveine in April 1977, during which the 61st Airlift Squadron moved 36 tons of freight and 130 vehicles needed for the engagement of Moroccan forces in Zaire during the first invasion of Shaba; and the Sarajevo airlift, the longest in history (June 1992 to January 1996), which provided 160,000 tons of freight, mainly food.

These instances not only show the important influence of military aviation on history or international relations but also indicate that General de Gaulle offered only a limited description of the concept of military diplomacy or air diplomacy as applied to air forces. Besides military aviation, the support provided to foreign policy includes civil aviation and the aeronautical industry as well as air bases and airmen themselves. These are the five main elements of airpower, defined by analogy with the components of maritime power as established by Adm Alfred Thayer Mahan in the nineteenth century.

The term *airpower diplomacy* would most appropriately define the contribution of the air weapon in a state's foreign policy, where *diplomacy* denotes the relations that one state has with another. Regarding this expansive field, this article aims only to examine the use of the air weapon in overseas operations and its contribution to France's foreign policy, limiting the dis-

cussion to classical air forces. (The maneuver of nuclear forces plays an inherently political role, but it is very specific.)

The article first defines the conceptual framework of the use of air forces on the international stage so as to place air operations overseas within the scope of airpower diplomacy. It then provides a first, quantitative insight into this aspect of air diplomacy. Finally, the article offers a case study to describe more precisely the political use of airpower.

Contribution of Air Operations Overseas to Foreign Policy

Defining "Diplomatic" Air Operations Overseas

Use of the air weapon outside national territory has a de facto political dimension. Like diplomacy in general, its use can be cooperative or coercive. However, one should distinguish between the coercive use of military force within a diplomatic action and war, which concerns only pure military strategy, described by Michael Howard as "organized coercion."[9]

The difference between war, which is related to strategy and thus to a logic of might, and coercion, which is related to diplomacy and therefore to a logic of influence, lies in the way one uses the force.[10] Unlike war, coercion involves a narrow application of force, whether in terms of goals or means. In *Gunboat Diplomacy*, James Cable seems to give priority to bounded means, which he depicts as "the use or the threat to use a limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to gain advantage or avoid losing it, whether it is within an international conflict or against the nationals of another State within its territory or jurisdiction."[11]

Yet, the most important aspect of coercion is the limited military goal. In war the intended military effect is the destruction of forces or strategic paralysis. Coercion aims at a much more restricted military effect, a distinction made by Gen André Beaufre, who differentiates between "indirect" and "direct" strategy. In "Vue d'ensemble de la stratégie" (An Overview of Strategy), he observes that indirect strategy generates "all forms of conflict that do not seek the decision directly through confrontation between military forces, but rather through less direct practices, whether in the political or economical field, or even in the military one (revolutionary war), using successive actions and negotiations (Hitler's strategy from 1936 to 1939)."[12]

Drawing upon Beaufre's definition of indirect strategy, which seems to bring together strategy and diplomacy, one could argue that air diplomacy includes both cooperative use of air means in interstate relations and coercive use of military means every time a state seeks resolution, not in a confrontation between military forces but in the negotiation of a diplomatic solution. This definition moves away from the *diplomatie de défense* (defense diplomacy) as defined by French and British doctrinal corpora, none of which includes the use of military assets within operations.[13] Americans have not conceptualized the notion of military diplomacy or air diplomacy as we have defined it, instead including it in what they call "military operations other than war," which "encompass a wide range of activities where the military instrument of national power is used for purposes other than the large-scale combat operations usually associated with war."[14]

Characteristics of "Diplomatic" Military Operations Overseas

The only study dedicated to the new concept of airpower diplomacy is James O. Poss's 33-page dissertation, evocatively titled "Air Power: New Gunboat Diplomacy," defended in 1994 at the Naval War College.[15] The author, an Airman, is surprised that the US Air Force has not developed a counterpart to gunboat diplomacy, as he identifies several advantages of air diplomacy compared to naval diplomacy: speed, range, the low logistical needs of land-based airpower (other than an air base) compared to the logistical flow required to move and operate a combat fleet, the small number of individuals necessary for the implementation of airpower compared to the thousands of people needed to arm a combat fleet, the lethal nature of airpower, its ability to destroy practically all objectives due to its precise weapons and stealthy means of delivery, the low human risk since it involves no ground troops, and the capability of dropping munitions from a distance.

Unfortunately, Poss, who draws largely on Cable's *Gunboat Diplomacy* by borrowing its conceptual framework and adapting it to airpower, doesn't ground his study on substantial sources. The only example he develops to support his argument is the bombardment of Libya during Operation El Dorado Canyon in April 1986, highlighting the continuum between diplomacy and the political use of airpower in a coercive mode.

The Study of "Diplomatic" Air Operations Overseas

Cable analyzed over 200 maritime operations conducted between 1919 and 1979 to show that gunboat diplomacy is not restricted to the nineteenth century. A similar study published in 1978 by two researchers at the Brookings Institution, Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, examines the outcomes of 215 operations conducted between 1 January 1946 and 31 December 1975 to demonstrate the political use not only of America's naval forces but of all its armed forces. According to the authors, "A political use of the armed forces occurs when physical actions are taken by one or more components of the uniformed military services as part of a deliberate attempt by the national authorities to influence, or to be prepared to influence, specific behavior of individuals in another nation without engaging in a continuing contest of violence."[16] They use five criteria to identify the political use of armed force:

1. A physical change in the disposition [of the armed forces] (location, activity, and/or readiness). . . .

2. [The seeking of a political effect through this physical change of the armed forces.]

3. When used as a political instrument, the objective is to influence the behavior of another actor—that is, to cause an actor to do something that he would not otherwise do . . . [when] the activity of the military units themselves does not attain the objective. . . .

4. Decisionmakers must have sought to avoid a significant contest of violence. . . .

5. [The use of armed forces had to be connected to a desire to change some specific behavior of the actors.][17]

When no new overseas base is established, expanded, reduced, or closed up, Blechman and Kaplan exclude from their corpus the role of the forces stationed abroad. They also ignore exercises and maneuvers, humanitarian operations related to disasters or natural catastrophes, and the evacuation of nationals when armed forces do not participate in the confrontations. Their findings show that the use of land-based combat aviation represents the most effective military means of producing a political effect:

> The type of force proportionally most often associated with positive outcomes was land-based aircraft. Especially significant was the fact that such aircraft were used most typically in incidents in which at least one major force component was used. Positive outcomes were

> less frequent when ground and naval forces were used. However, the greater frequency of positive outcomes when land-based combat aircraft were used as compared with naval or ground forces was more apparent in the short term than in the longer term.[18]

These American and British works highlight the value of a rigorous study dedicated to military diplomacy or to airpower diplomacy. Nevertheless, they currently suffer from two main weaknesses. First, conceptually, they depend upon a realistic and very American view of international relations, analyzing the use of military force as a political tool only as a means by which states can increase their power. This view derives primarily from a realistic approach to international relations as conceptualized by Hans Morgenthau in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948). However, as Raymond Aron showed, the balance of power between states is not the exclusive domain of international relations.[19] In his book *Peace and War (Paix et guerre entre les nations)*, Aron identifies three motives of foreign policy, noting that "Clemenceau sought the *security*, Napoleon the *power*, and Louis XIV the *glory*" (emphasis in original).[20] Therefore, the study of the political use of airpower must take into account both the increased power supplied by the intervention of the air weapon and its contribution to security policy (e.g., by participating in United Nations [UN], NATO, or European Union operations) as well as its reflection of French values (e.g., by participating in humanitarian operations).

Second, the above-mentioned works date back to the Cold War—a time when, in terms of international relations, the hard or coercive power of states was indicative of their strength. During the 1990s, Joseph Nye's *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) highlighted the ability of states or international organizations to influence other actors through noncoercive means or soft power.[21] However, the world has evolved, and if during the Cold War, Aron could paraphrase Max Weber, noting that international society is characterized by the absence of an authority having a monopoly on legitimate violence, today in this uncoordinated international system of sovereign states, the UN maintains a principle of order in the same way as regional alliances like NATO, reflected by the use of UN/NATO air forces in Bosnia or under the sole auspices of NATO in Kosovo.[22]

French Air Diplomacy: Quantitative Aspects

To study airpower as a political tool, as did Cable, Blechman, and Kaplan, we should first create a database of overseas air operations. By way of limiting the coercive aspect and considering the air weapon's contribution both to soft and hard power, the corpus should include all air operations. Most of this inventory work has already been done by Lt Col Jean-Louis Grattepanche and a student group of the CID (French War College, *École de guerre*, formerly *Collège Interarmées de Défense*) led by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, whose efforts identified 415 overseas operations from 1945 to 2004.

If we choose 1962—the end of the decolonization process—as a starting point, we find another 403 operations before 2004, 243 of them conducted with the participation of the air force (109 solely by the air force and 134 jointly with one or several other services). The chronological occurrence of those operations suggests three periods:

1. The first break, in 1974, is related to an evolution of the geopolitical context with détente, to a political change in France with the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the end of Gaullism at the highest level of government, and to the implementation by the air force of modern assets enabling it to intervene overseas: the "1/7" squadron received its Jaguars in 1973 (the DC-8 had been introduced in 1966 and the Transall in 1968). From 1962 to 1974, the armed forces had little involvement outside.

2. The second break, in 1989, is related to the end of the Cold War, which led to a major geopolitical upheaval. Between 1975 and 1989, the Cold War regained strength. Soviet influence spread to Asia and mostly to Africa, but after a period of US withdrawal, President Ronald Reagan decided to reinforce pressure on the "Evil Empire." The number of overseas operations increased significantly, up to an average of 10 a year.

3. From 1990 to 2004, under the influence of the thaw in international relations and of Russia's political weakening, crises became more frequent, leading to a new increase in the number of operations, up to an average of 14.5 each year.

If we study more specifically the operations of the air force, whether alone or in cooperation with another service, we note that they account for nearly 60 percent of interventions overseas. We can classify these operations roughly as humanitarian, evacuation of nationals, peacekeeping, and coercive (i.e., using or threatening to use force). The relative proportion of the various missions evolves by a decrease in humanitarian operations and a significant increase in those to evacuate nationals and keep the peace.

The Political Use of Airpower: A Case Study

Such an initial statistical approach needs refinement. For coercive operations, we should seek their political outcomes in order to classify them, as did Blechman and Kaplan, by their success or failure. Further, the level of the use of force is important. A Jaguar patrol flying over Lome in September 1986 during an attempted coup d'état against President Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo does not belong in the same category of coercive violence as a Mirage F-1 armed with one 30 mm cannon destroying Chadian rebel vehicles during fighting with government troops over the city of Birao in the Central African Republic during March 2007. The number of people evacuated and their nationalities are also significant, quantifiable pieces of information. Moreover, quantification of transported humanitarian aid and the political ties that an intervention contributed to, maintained, or forged may help measure the role of armed forces in general or the air force in particular in enhancing soft power. Specifically, when an earthquake devastated Peru in May 1970, more than 10,000 kilometers away, France dispatched four Transalls, one medical component for rapid interventions, and three Alouettes. It intervened alongside the United States, Canada, and the USSR, the only four nonneighboring countries to send aid. We can explain this significant French assistance, second only to that of the United States, by pointing to the strong historic links between France and Peru, dating back to Adm Dupetit Thouars's intervention during the War of the Pacific in 1880, which saved Lima from destruction by Chilean troops. Due to these relations, which have continued (Peru was the first Latin American country to recognize the Free French government in 1943), France sold 16 Mirage V aircraft to Peru in 1968, eight more in 1973, and 26 Mirage 2000s in 1982. Clearly then, a humanitarian intervention such as the one conducted in 1970 in Peru contributes to French soft power.

"Social" conditions accompanying the use of the air weapon as a political tool have evolved greatly since the 1970s. As Michel Fortmann notes, "international security demilitarizes and needs more multilateral approaches; therefore, the concept of power, in its traditional military sense, is increasingly irrelevant in today's international environment."[23] Given the significant decrease in the level of interstate violence, the air weapon used coercively would represent a harsh political use of armed forces. Today, however, rather than an instrument of coercive policy, the military tool reinforces an influence strategy within international organizations (e.g., the contribution of the air force in the creation of a Europe for defense or the reintegration in NATO military structures) to help increase or maintain soft power, as was the case during the intervention in Haiti.

Notes

1. Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, vol. 3 (Paris: Plon, 1960), 627.

2. Paul Claudel, *Œuvres diplomatiques: ambassadeur aux États-Unis, 1927–1933*, vol. 1, ed. Lucile Garbagnati (Paris: L'Âge d'homme, 1994), 103.

3. Sometimes the pilots are former military flying aces like Albert Deullin, using old SEA-4 fighter and reconnaissance planes dating back to 1918, transformed into the Potez 7 and 9. No academic study has examined CFRNA or CIDNA. However, Frédéric Lambard authored an excellent master's thesis on the "Ligne Paris-Saigon, 1926–1954" (University of Nantes), which addresses the role of aviation in French influence abroad.

4. Guy Vanthemsche, *La Sabena: l'aviation commerciale belge 1923–2001; Des origines au crash* (Brussels, Belgium: De Boeck Université, 2002).

5. Jacqueline Dutheil de La Rochère, *La politique des États-Unis en matière d'aviation civile internationale* (Paris: LGDJ, 1971).

6. Thierry Vivier, *La politique aéronautique militaire de la France Janvier 1933–Septembre 1939* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1997).

7. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La décadence* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979), 341, 448. For the Vuillemin report, see Patrick Facon, "La visite du général Vuillemin en Allemagne (16–21 août 1938)," *Revue historique des armées*, no. 147 (June 1982): 110–21.

8. See H. J. A. Wilson, "The Luftwaffe as a Political Instrument," in Eugene M. Emme, *The Impact of Air Power: National Security and World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: D. van Nostrand, 1959), 58–63.

9. Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, "Strategic Studies and the Problem of Power," in *War, Strategy, and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard*, ed. Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes, and Robert O'Neill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 282.

10. According to Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, "Strategy argues in terms of power and diplomacy in terms of influence." *Traité de Stratégie*, 6th ed. (Paris: ISC-Economica, 2006), 93–94. General Forget uses the term *retaliatory operation* rather than *coercion* when a military action "aims at giving a strong warning to a troublemaker. It assumes that, behind the action taken, other more violent and decisive actions are ready to be engaged. It is a way to express the will of not yielding to pressure from the adversary. Retaliation involves an element of surprise, speed, precision and effectiveness against perfectly 'targeted' objectives, the destruction of which

helps create a direct link with the beginning of the crisis." Michel Forget, *Puissance aérienne et stratégies* (Paris: Economica, 2001), 282.

11. James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919–1979: Political Applications of Limited Naval Force* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1981), 39. Definition also quoted by James O. Poss.

12. Gen André Beaufre, "Vue d'ensemble de la stratégie," *Politique étrangère* 27, no. 5 (1962): 440.

13. According to the Defense Staff, defense diplomacy consists of military cooperation, arms control, associated confidence-building measures, strategic monitoring, military prevention, and participation in international prevention and security architectures. *Doctrine Interarmées sur la Prévention*, INS 1100, EMA/Emploi, July 2002, 44.

14. Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, 9 September 1993, V-1.

15. James O. Poss, "Air Power: New Gunboat Diplomacy" (PhD diss., Naval War College, Newport, RI, 1994).

16. Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1978), 12.

17. Ibid., 12–13.

18. Ibid., 107–8.

19. Raymond Aron, "De l'analyse des constellations diplomatiques," *Revue française de science politique* 4, no. 2 (1954): 251.

20. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 73–74.

21. Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

22. See Aron, *Peace and War*, 6, 7.

23. Michel Fortmann, *Les cycles de Mars: Révolutions militaires et édification étatique de la renaissance à nos jours* (Paris: Economica, 2010), 541.