

IN DEPTH

From massive bombing to surgical strikes

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The emergence of aviation as a weapon during World War I marked a decisive transformation in military confrontations. At that time, aviation was practically limited to air combats although, in 1917, German planes conducted aerial bombardments of several cities in British territory. The doctrine of strategic bombing was initially developed in the interwar period and it immediately led to the design and construction of aircraft that could operate over long distances. The Spanish Civil War was a testing ground for massive bombardments of civilian populations; the bombing of Guernica is a perfect example.

Italian Giulio Douhet was the driving force behind the massive use of aircraft in the bombardment of cities. Douhet believed that bombing cities would totally paralyze industry and the power centers of society, and would decisively undermine the morale of civilians, who would stop supporting their leaders and force them to accept their enemy's conditions. However, during World War II, this theory was proven wrong. Despite the intensity and destructiveness of the Allied bombing of Germany and Japan, neither the governments nor the civilian populations were vanquished. Something similar happened years later during the American bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. Here again, strategic bombardments failed to achieve their goal.

Smart weapons

Guided weapons began to be employed during World War II although the technology available at the time did not allow for the precise destruction of targets. It was during the Vietnam War when so-called smart weapons were introduced with the employment of bombs guided by laser, television, infrared sensors and electromagnetic waves.

The intent of these weapons is to protect flight crews since bombs and missiles can be launched from heights and distances great enough to avoid enemy air defense systems. In addition, in terms of public opinion, the use of precision weapons offers the great advantage of avoiding civilian victims due to these weapons' great accuracy in reaching their intended targets. At the same time, bombers capable of avoiding enemy radar began to be developed. They were the so-called stealth aircraft, which were first used in bombing raids during the first Gulf War. The latest generation, in this constant improvement in the perfection of bombardments, consists of unmanned aerial vehicles known as drones. Operated by remote control, they can be used in all kind of missions, including bombing raids, without any risk to the flight crew and with the savings resulting from employing unmanned aircraft.

Revolution in Military Affairs

The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)¹ is based on the critical importance of technology in the planning and development of war. RMA is mainly concerned with the use of air power, and its strongest proponents defend the theory that aerial weapons are decisive in achieving military victory in any situation.

RMA is based on the use of military means in very precise operations against enemy centers of gravity: infrastructure, and command, control and logistics centers. The idea is to concentrate firepower on targets that can permanently damage the enemy's ability to survive. Airpower plays a major role in these operations. RMA replaces the strategy of mass destruction with that of surgical precision. It focuses on preventive strikes, whether a threat is real or suspected.

“ “It is essential to have intelligence that is able to define precise objectives to carry out bombing in accordance with respect on human rights” ”

In theory, RMA reduces the risk of casualties on both sides and tries to avoid collateral damage among the civilian population. During “Operation Desert Storm” in Iraq (1991), 147 soldiers of the US-led coalition lost their lives, and about 30,000 Iraqi soldiers and at least 2,000 civilians were killed. In NATO operations during the Bosnian War (1995) and the Kosovo War (1999), while there were no casualties among the troops of the Atlantic Alliance, a number of Serb soldiers were killed, as well as roughly 500 civilians. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continued along these same lines, with a disparity between the casualties among US-led forces and their Afghan and Iraqi enemies.

The debate on the effectiveness of aerial bombardment to win a war is still prevalent among war theorists. Aviation purists argue that it is possible to win from the air. However, while the critical importance of air power cannot be denied, the history of war and recent events indicate that the destruction caused by bombing in infrastructure and in the military and civilian ranks of the enemy is not enough to break their will. In fact, in many cases it produces the opposite effect and encourages those who are being bombed to fight. Besides, current public opinion considers the bombing of civilians to be unacceptable, including the bombing of military targets that causes innocent victims (euphemistically referred to as “collateral damage”). Absolute precision is required in line with propaganda that insinuates that smart weapons never fail and that they are clean and therapeutic.

Indiscriminate bombing

However, not all sides in a war have access to those modern and precise military resources and they still engage in bombing. In Syria, for example, the army that supports the Assad regime is using crude barrel bombs to destroy enemy targets. These bombs are barrels full of explosive fuel and shrapnel that wreak havoc on buildings and

cause numerous civilian casualties. This type of bombing does not take into consideration, either in its planning or its execution, the most elementary rules of war and constitutes a total disregard for human rights.

These indiscriminate bombings aim to produce terror among the civilian population to dissuade them from supporting the insurgents. It is also a way to retaliate for and avenge the damage caused by the enemy on one's own side. These actions are typical of dictatorial regimes, in which public opinion and human rights have been suppressed.

One must also pay close attention to the bombings of armed forces that do have sufficient technological means to plan operations without causing collateral damage even though, under the guise of targeted bombing, they do not take civilian casualties into consideration. This is the case of the Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip, which has caused innocent victims and massive destruction of civilian buildings. Again, the idea is to terrorize civilians with indiscriminate retaliation or revenge.

Conclusion

The bombing operations during World War II were planned with huge quantities of aircraft that launched their bombs with very limited precision. The result was that large cities were destroyed and thousands of civilians were killed or injured. Today public opinion in democratic countries would not accept this type of bombing. For this reason, and in respect of human rights, preventing civilian casualties should be taken into account when planning such operations.

“ “The failure or lack of preventive diplomacy has given way yet again to the surgical facility of aerial bombing, which only intensifies the conflict and causes innocent victims” ”

It is essential and indispensable to have intelligence that is able to define precise objectives, have adequate aerial resources and appropriate smart weapons to carry out

bombing in accordance with current requirements, because of public opinion's rejection of mass bombing and also in respect of human rights and international law.

The latest generation of smart weapons relies less and less on human control. To operate them requires anything from satellites to sophisticated computers. Their evolution is as fast as is required by new military operations. Public opinion has been led to believe that smart weapons are clean and that they only execute evildoers, which is far from the truth as evidenced by recent bombings in Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya.

To claim humanitarian reasons to carry out bombings under a UN resolution, which includes a no-fly zone and the use of any means to protect the civilian population, is to ignore the effectiveness and morality of this kind of warfare. In "Operation Allied Force," in the spring of 1999, 78 consecutive days of bombing raids on Serbia were needed, under the pretext of humanitarian protection of the Kosovar population, to break the will of the Serbian leader Milosevic. NATO caused more than four hundred civilian casualties in the bombing raids on Serbian territory. Smart weapons were not so smart. In "Operation Enduring Freedom," which was carried out to invade Afghanistan in October 2001, over a thousand civilians were killed by the bombing raids of the invading coalition. The bombing of Iraq by American and British aviation in March 2003 resulted in thousands of civilians being killed in the bombing raids prior to the ground invasion. The pretext was also humanitarian and the intelligence of the weapons was also called into question.²

The failure or lack of preventive diplomacy has given way yet again to the surgical facility of aerial bombing, which only intensifies the conflict and causes innocent victims. The humanitarian excuse cannot contemplate military action involving the risk of killing innocent civilians. Legality for humanitarian action is a necessary condition, but is not sufficient. In every war there are always collateral victims and victims of friendly fire. Those who start them should always take that into account. Smart weapons are not that smart, and neither are those who authorize, plan and execute some "humanitarian operations."

1. COLOM, G., *Entre Ares y Atenea*, Madrid, IUGM, 2008

2. CHARLES-PHILIPPE, D., *La guerra y la paz*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2008

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