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THE AIR POLICING – ONE NOTION, TWO APPROACHES

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to compare two different approaches regarding Air Policing missions. This comparison is necessary to understand which approach is most appropriate according to 21st century concerns and realities. Because of asymmetric and irregular threats since 9/11, the question of Air Policing continues to be a preoccupation of the military and politicians.

The first theory is a historical one and represents the British Royal Air Force way of employing airpower between WW I and WW II in British colonies. The RAF used all types of air assets against various targets, to include ground targets, during peacetime and war in order to gain or regain the necessary social order. The British, historically, have used Air Policing as a way to prosecute irregular threats.

On the other hand, the NATO modern approach describes Air Policing as a specific DCA (Defensive Counter Air) fighter mission, OPCA/TACON (Operational Control/Tactical Control) to an Air Operation Center during peacetime in order to maintain 24/7 control over an assigned AOR. This is the normal procedure to conduct Air Policing for airspace control in all European NATO countries and was also adopted by the USAF for homeland defense after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The British historical approach is closer to the concept of using airpower in Counter Insurgency (COIN) Operations and Counter Terrorism (CT) where situations change rapidly from warfighting to policing and back, while the NATO/USAF way to accomplish Air Policing is as a DCA mission (warfighting) with applicability during peace (or during crisis situations in worst case) with very specific TTPs (Tactics, Techniques and Procedures).

Key words: Air Policing, History, RAF (Royal Air Force), NATO.

1.Introduction

“Nothing is true in tactics.”
Commander Randy “Duke” Cunningham

The concept of using airpower as Air Policing to achieve and maintain civil order was developed by the Royal Air Force during the interwar period (1919-1939). After WW I, Great Britain used airpower to replace or to sustain ground power because of its effectiveness and reduced costs [1]. Major Michael Longoria’s Thesis from the School of Advanced Airpower Study inspired my thoughts on this subject, and his use of several valuable sources such as *Air Power and Colonial Control* by David Omissi as well as *British Air Power in Peripheral Conflict, 1919-1976* by Bruce Hoffman added to my body of knowledge. These works, combined with regional historiographies, provide an excellent foundation for analysis [1].

According to David Omissi, there are three concepts which need to be defined in order to create the “picture” of what British call Air Policing. Those terms are: air policing,

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air control, and air substitution [2]. Air Policing represents the use of airpower to keep the internal security of the state, similar to any police-type force. This status requires a mandate, given by a legal authority, such as a national sovereign government, or a legitimate international organism. Air Control defined as the command responsibility and is not an equivalent of what we today call “control”, the meaning of the air traffic control activities. Air Substitution was the term for the use of airpower instead of other military forces for colonial protection.

In order to understand the substitution theory (use of aircraft instead the ground troops) to police the territory, Omissi describes the British linkage between Air Policing and the level of the missions (Strategic, Operational, Tactical) to support the internal security of the state and the responsibilities for these levels. The British considered the strategic level of analysis as the proper decision level under the authority of the Ministry of War, usually the Prime Minister. At the operational level, the British gave the Air Control responsibility to a regional Air Operational Commander. Meanwhile, at the tactical level, the responsibility for social order and stability was given to an assigned tactical unit commander.

In order to have a big picture of the British interwar perspective over Air Policing, it is also necessary to describe the policing environment during this period. According to Sir Charles W. Gwynn [3], the British define this policing environment in direct connection with the status of civilian control in the social field. Following this, Charles Gwynn summarizes three social status categories: lack of civil control (possibly a small war situation), the process of restoring of civil control, and maintaining civil control [3]. Essentially, after WW I, the British requirement to reduce military spending in order to take on further responsibilities in the Middle East and Africa, as well as Lord Trenchard’s search for an RAF peacetime mission led to the idea of using air power as a policing force. This idea caused opposition and disagreement at the strategic level regarding the effectiveness of using air power as an exclusive solution to obtain social control and stability. Doctrinally speaking, the British used airpower as Air Policing under several tenets: Air Policing depends upon a legal mandate (Authority), a benign operational environment (Situation), the objective of civil order (Objective), able to produce political versus physical effects (Political targeting), and maximizing the political effect with the minimum military cost (Leverage) [1]. These tenets describe the British doctrinal and execution view over Air Policing at all levels: Strategic, Operational and Tactical.

2.NATO/USAF modern approach regarding Air Policing

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few!”
Winston Churchill

Looking for a proper and official definition of Air Policing in a modern approach, with all components, tailored to respond effectively to the various threats, we can use the AAP-6/2006 (NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions) definition for air policing: “the use of interceptor aircraft in peacetime for the purpose of preserving the integrity of a specified airspace”. Actually, the roots of the modern Air Policing concept were first seen in Battle of Britain, together with the integration of an Air Defense System. The British didn’t realize due to their preoccupation on the battle, but they had just developed the first Integrated Air Defense System using fighter aircraft from a Ground Alert posture with Radar stations as an early warning system in order to combat the German intruders in their

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airspace. The only difference between this example and modern Air Policing was made only by the political situation because this occurred during wartime. The modern concept of Air Policing was developed after WW II simultaneously with the evolution of radar and missile weapons systems and is applicable only during peacetime or crisis.

With regard to regular and asymmetric risks associated with the security of the NATO countries, modern Air Policing must be coupled with an Integrated Air Defense System. This mechanism was created in order to protect a designated air space (AOR) of a country or an alliance against any aggression from the air. Threats suitable for Air Policing action to counter include enemy ISR missions launched to evaluate military capabilities, countering a show of force by an adversary, countering an unauthorized use of AOR airspace, ensuring the compliance of ICAO/FAA rules concerning airspace use. Also, the Air Policing missions can be conducted for countering unauthorized intrusions by civil or military aircraft, defending against offensive operations against air or ground forces in the AOR, denying regular air traffic if appropriate, and finally, diverting or blocking an aircraft from conducting a terrorist attack or other illegal activities.

In order to fight against these threats, both, regular and asymmetric, the IADS (Integrated Air Defense System) is designed to have a fast reaction time, using a coordinated response of all components. IADS is composed of several elements. One is Air Surveillance and Control Systems, which contain the ground and airborne radars, communication systems, and all necessary systems for the search, track, interrogation, identification, intercept control, and engagement of the targets in designed AOR. The second one is the Air Defense Command and Control Systems, which coordinate the actions of Air Defense aircraft (fighters), Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) and Short Range Air Defense (SHORAD) systems.

3. Conclusion

“If everybody’s thinking alike, somebody isn’t thinking...”

George S. Patton

Looking at these two ways to define, to understand and to conduct Air Policing missions we could conclude that both perspectives have historical roots, and both could be applied today, but they are different. The fundamental is “Does Air Policing means policing the air or policing from the air?”

First of all, evaluating the British historical approach from today’s battlefield threats perspective, we will find as appropriate the use of airpower in COIN (Counter Insurgency), CT (Counter Terrorism) and in the fight against drug operations. This is highly necessary because the technological evolution enables the ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Recce) assets and PGMs to be very useful in these areas. But in spite of the priority of the initial British definition and the irregular threats generated by the modern battlefield, the use of the airpower during peacetime and wartime against ground targets in order to maintain the social order, or to prosecute specific threats is conducted today, just in support of COIN, CT or CDO (Counter Drug Operations).

On the other hand, the modern approach to the Air Policing term is in accord with NATO/USAF doctrine and ways to plan and to conduct Air Defense missions during peacetime by an Integrated Air Defense Systems. This approach is suitable for all threats addressed from the air. It also covers a part of the CT operations if we consider the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the threats possible to be prosecuted by an efficient IADS.

Finally, looking at these approaches, we could say that, all types of air operations (from Defensive Counter Air to Strategic Strike) are actual, suitable, and could be planed

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and conducted at strategic, operational, or tactical levels, to impact and prosecute all kind of threats and targets, even though they have an different sense or background in the history. The modern concerns are related with a possible confusion because the use of the same term for two quite different types of air operations. This could generate confusion in the real world of warfare, and produce undesired incidents. Nevertheless, using today the airpower during the peacetime in support to COIN, CT, and CDO, is a return in history to the roots of the Air Policing development concept.

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