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# Outline of Strategic Aerial Culture

Mickaël Aubout, translated by 1st Lt Casey Evans,
Capt Marie Gaudreault, and Capt Cody Anderson

For three decades, the vast majority of major military engagements, notably those of France, have been marked from their opening hours by the employment of airpower.* From Afghanistan to the Levant, by way of Libya and Mali, aerial intervention characterized the opening moments of these politically motivated military actions so much so that this modus operandi seems to have become the norm. More generally, it seems unfathomable that countries with substantial aerial assets will nowadays intervene in a theater without controlling the airspace, even in a temporary manner. This tendency is even more significant as a strong aversion to risk and loss of life has taken hold. Airpower, with its relatively small footprint on the ground, is the tool of choice for political engagement.

This inclination is reinforced by 20 years of irregular operations against adversaries with little to no capability to challenge this air superiority. And even when the presence of ground forces was proven indispensable, as was the case in Bosnia in the mid-1990s and in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, air forces still constituted an indispensable component and a necessary prerequisite for military engagement.[1]

The advantages of air forces for political decision makers are known. They permit reversibility of action in the sense that an airborne operation can be canceled or delayed at any moment. They offer a phenomenal precision of effects, even from distances of several thousand kilometers. Finally, air forces allow rapid execution within the period of time—occasionally short—between the political decision to launch an operation and its execution.

Due to these characteristics, air forces seem to have become the alpha and omega of every military engagement in the minds of political decision makers. Does this mean, however, that the systematic employment of aerial assets in every military engagement is prescriptive in nature? Are we trending toward a scheme where the ability to apply airpower over a theater of operations influences the decision of whether to launch a military operation?

These questions highlight the existence of a common perception among political and military authorities regarding the use of air forces, and simi-

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larly, the emergence of an aerial strategic culture. This article will outline the key features of this idea.

## Defining Elements

The concept of strategic culture is a topic of much debate, and there is still no commonly accepted definition. Colin Gray noted in 2006 that strategic culture remains "a notoriously opaque and vague concept."[2] In the field of military strategy, the notion of strategic culture is, after all, fairly recent. It was coined in the United States at the end of the 1970s in the context of analyzing Soviet strategic thinking.[3] Although the concept remains relatively new as a research topic, the process of studying the political, economic, or cultural characteristics of nations to explain their national strategies is much older.[4] In fact, the study of particular styles of military strategy among populations was even addressed in the writings of classical authors such as Xenophon, Tacitus, and Machiavelli.

Several definitions of strategic culture have been proposed. Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Bruno Colson hold to the definition offered in 1991 by Yitzhak Klein, who considers strategic culture "the attitudes and beliefs held close within the heart of a military institution regarding the political objective of war and the strategic and operational method most effective at attaining it."[5] This definition echoes another proposed a decade earlier, in 1977, by Jack Snyder. Snyder, a researcher at RAND, is the author of the study that formalized the term. He defined strategic culture as "the sum total of the ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy."[6]

The term "nuclear strategy," relevant as it was to Snyder's subject of study, need not be understood as restrictive. While Klein's notion of strategic culture speaks of the military institution, Snyder expands the notion to include members not belonging to a military establishment by speaking of a "national strategic community." Carnes Lord further considers society as a whole and proposes a slightly less restrictive definition from the point of view of the actors who share this strategic culture. "It is the sum of traditional practices and ways of thinking that, within a society, governs the organization and the use of military force in the service of political objectives."[7]

Three principal elements of strategic culture emerge from these definitions. First, a strategic culture can be understood as a shared set of technical preferences, moral and ethical values, and specific practices. Further-

more, strategic culture directly influences the choices made in military operations through its aim to achieve national political objectives. Third, this strategic culture is shared by a defined group of actors.

The preceding definitions do not completely agree on the composition of this group. On one hand, a limited circle of military authorities can be clearly identified (Klein); on the other hand, a more inclusive body of decision makers, "members of a national strategic community," governs the organization and the use of military force (Snyder and Lord). This article will proceed from the idea that the group of actors who share a strategic culture is, by definition, situated at the level of political and military decision makers. This group is distinguished by the fact that it is responsible for defining national and organizational objectives and for planning and executing the commitment of military forces that are tasked to follow their orders.

A framework emerges from the analysis of these definitions, one that allows for reflection on the notion of an aerial strategic culture.

## Preferences, Values, and Practices

Culture develops over time. Technical preferences, moral values, ethics, and specific practices of decision makers influence the creation of policy and foreign strategy. In the context of this article, aerial strategic culture reflects the role of air forces in national history, in the evolution of a nation's geopolitics, and, more broadly, in the consistency of public attitudes toward the employment of airpower to achieve national goals.

In France, the common refrain among five white papers on defense or strategic review published since 1972 has been that of a defense and security policy which allows France to maintain her autonomous decision making, affirm her sovereignty, defend her areas of interest, and continue to weigh in on the international stage. It speaks to a constant attitude of decision makers—for the most part Gaullist—when it comes to state security policy and defense strategy. Since the 1960s, this has manifested as three primary missions: nuclear dissuasion, protection of national territory, and intervention beyond the national borders.

The initial face of French nuclear dissuasion was presented through the Air Force with the Mirage IV bomber and the C-135F refueling aircraft. After this, the protection of national territory manifested itself as an execution of aerial means of defense, guaranteeing both national sovereignty in the airspace and aerial defense of the land. Finally, show-of-force missions from the aerial domain illustrate the "Intervention" pillar of France's defense policy.

To this point, it makes sense to include here the strategic function "knowledge and anticipation," since the actions of political and military decision-making entities are also informed by intelligence obtained through airborne sensors. From the signals intelligence of the DC-8 SARIGuE and the C-160 Gabriel to the imagery intelligence of the Mirage IV and the new-generation reconnaissance pod on the Rafale, as well as the remotely piloted Reaper, the real-time acquisition of intelligence through aerial means contributes to an optimization of the decision-making process.

Thus, at the heart of each of these primary missions, the air forces take a leading role; it is this input to the primary strategic functions that contributes to decision-maker development. It guides the perception of the decision-making body with respect to the third dimension and its employment potential. Through this process, an aerial strategic culture develops over time according to the contributions of air assets to the primary strategic missions.

## Employment Potential

If strategic culture influences the choices made about the employment of military assets, it appears that, in return, the capabilities of air assets and their possible uses fuel aerial strategic culture.

The ability of aviation to operate quickly and at a distance has considerably disrupted the notions of time and scale of those who make arms-employment decisions. The combination of combat and refueling aircraft enables strikes at several thousand kilometers several hours after the political order to strike has been given. Additionally, weapons precision and communication capabilities should not be overlooked. Technical progress on strike precision and target acquisition has played and continues to play an essential role in the constant expansion of the strategic role of aviation.

One operation in particular illustrates this range of capabilities. Recall the 0930 hours raid by Rafale fighter aircraft in January 2013, which flew almost 6,000 kilometers before striking targets in northern Mali and only 48 hours after the head of the French armed forces had agreed to a request for aid from Mali.[8] The speed of this intervention should also be linked to advancements in information management. We could also recall the strikes in Syria against ISIS few days after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. The acquisition of intelligence, in certain cases real time, and the means of command and control reinforce the authorities' desire to use air assets and contribute to the visibility of airpower.

Consequently, these elements are the motors of an evolution in aerial strategy towards increasingly advanced forms that expand the intervention options for policy decision makers.[9]

In writing policy and foreign strategy, the role of air forces is also understood through the capabilities of aerial transport during emerging crises within countries hosting national citizens. Therefore, whether it be armed confrontations resulting from a civil war (Libya 2011), a natural disaster (Haiti 2010), or an industrial catastrophe (Fukushima 2011), it may be important to be able to protect nationals through rapid action and at some distance.

With regard to the diplomatic and human stakes involved, the decision to evacuate French citizens is often maximally delayed by the political authority, which explains why these types of operations are most often begun and conducted in a state of emergency.[10] It also reemphasizes that air transportation remains one of the ways to conduct a rapid evacuation, the Kabul airlift, being the most recent example.

The decision-making body's understanding of the competencies and capabilities of air forces is both an expression and a result of aerial strategic culture.

With regard to the variety of aerial missions, which may or may not be coercive in nature, it seems that the employment possibilities of airpower are instruments within the framework of international relations under the logic of hard power and soft power.

## A Diplomatic Factor

Naturally, the notion of aerial diplomacy shines through from the moment the topic turns to understanding the use of aerial assets in order to further foreign policy goals. By extending the definition of military diplomacy proposed by Coutau-Bégarie, aerial diplomacy can be understood as the use of air forces in service of foreign policy outside of a traditional war.[11] Aerial diplomacy combines the cooperative and coercive use of aerial assets in international relations every time the resolution to a diplomatic issue is sought via negotiation rather than a confrontation of military forces.[12]

A nation's aerial strategic culture is a reflection of that nation's conception of the role of air forces in foreign policy. Nowadays in France and the West generally, the inclination of political authorities to use aerial assets in managing crises is telling. In 2008, looking back on two decades of aerial operations, France's Secretary General of Defense and National Security, Louis Gautier, estimated that "in managing multiple international crises

after the Cold War, one also notices a particular enthusiasm for airpower as a political tool, a tool to gesticulate, to pressure, and to coerce. From now on, it is at least as much the long-ranged destructive capacity as the flexibility of airpower that interests the political actor."[13]

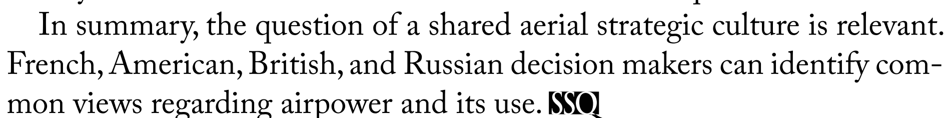
Regarding the surge of crises around the world since this date, this analysis remains relevant. From coercive to humanitarian operations, evacuations to intelligence gathering, aerial asset plasticity, to borrow the expression of Jérôme de Lespinois, was assimilated by decision makers and contributes to the aerial strategic culture. In an interview concerning the situation in Syria, the former president of the French Republic, François Hollande, observed that diplomacy was not possible without military credibility, and he voiced support for the ability of France to conduct aerial strikes at a safe distance.

Hollande also declared that "the threat of strikes, the efficiency of strikes, because they would certainly be pertinent and measured, proportional, and we would not have needed to fly over Syrian territory, that tells you the quality of our army; but the fact that this threat existed facilitated the arrival of a political solution. Therefore, there is no diplomacy possible if there is not also military credibility."[14]

By way of conclusion, it seems important to note that if the aerial strategic culture of the decision-making body favors the use of airpower, limitations on using it—for operational or diplomatic reasons—also influence the political decision whether to lead an intervention. Naturally, notions to deny access and contest airspace happen. If, among the various types of confrontation, the Air Force becomes a weapon of uncertainty and raises uncertainty in the sense that "it introduces political and military hypotheticals even if it cannot necessarily respond to them," what happens when the Air Force cannot act? Does this limitation constitute a red line that could result in a political decision of noninterference?[15]

Furthermore, another idea to take into consideration is the aerial strategic culture of public opinion beyond that of the decision-making circles. The perception that public opinion has of national military aerial assets, and the resulting image of their uses, influences to varying degrees the manner in which these assets can be used in a crisis. Finally, the aerial strategic culture is also influenced by the imagination of public opinion and by the manner in which the media handles such questions.

In summary, the question of a shared aerial strategic culture is relevant. French, American, British, and Russian decision makers can identify common views regarding airpower and its use.



**Mickaël Aubout**
Captain Aubout, French Air Forces, holds a PhD in geography from Sorbonne-Université.

## Notes

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