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Reagan's Coercive Diplomacy: A Case of U.S. Air Strikes against Libya

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Abstract

By early 1986 Libyan leader Gaddafi's open demonstration of hostile attitude toward the United States and covert backing of terrorist activities in Europe and the Middle East intensified. As an initial response, President Reagan issued an executive order banning trade and transactions with Libya. In March the Libyan aircraft engaged U.S. Navy and Air Force units during the exercises in the Mediterranean and in early April Libyan operatives bombed a discotheque in West Berlin frequented by the U.S. servicemen. President Reagan ordered air strikes against this country's terrorist and military targets. State Secretary Shultz was in favor of a "low-intensity warfare" option from the early days of internal discussion on selecting the appropriate and adequate strategy. This use of limited force is a case from the category of "coercive diplomacy" with the aim of forcing policy change rather than *regime* change. President Reagan considered the operation successful but the overall success of operation El Dorado Canyon as a "coercive diplomacy" in reaching its specific objective of curtailing international terrorism activity was evaluated by researchers as limited and short-term.

Keywords: Air strikes, coercive diplomacy, Libya, Operation El Dorado Canyon, Reagan, Shultz

Introduction

In April 1986, the U.S. forces bombed targets linked to terrorist activity in Libya. The operation, codenamed El Dorado Canyon, was ordered by President Reagan in response to a number of terrorist attacks in Western Europe allegedly backed by Libya's strongman Muammar Gaddafi. This operation, military by its essence, is viewed by some foreign policy and international relations researchers as a case from the category of "coercive diplomacy" with limited use of force and leading to forcible policy change rather than regime change, which is more often achieved through large scale military operations. Others, mostly military analysts, have used a different term - "low-intensity warfare campaign" - to describe this military operation. These terms are not mutually exclusive and are equally useful for understanding the nature of this limited use of force by the Reagan Administration.

Terror on the Rise

In 1985-1986 terrorist activity in Europe and the Middle East reached an unprecedented scale. In his article *The Reagan Administration and Coercive Diplomacy: Restraining More Than Remaking Governments* (Jentleson, 1991), Bruce Jentleson notes a 30 percent increase of terrorist incidents in comparison with preceding years, about 80 percent increase of the number of injuries, with the death toll rising almost by 300 percent. American citizens were increasingly becoming the target for terrorist attacks. A U.S. Navy seaman was killed and thrown onto the tarmac of the Beirut airport when a hijacked TWA Boeing made a refueling landing at hijackers demand in June 1985; a senior disabled American was killed and thrown overboard a cruise liner in the Mediterranean in October 1985; five Americans, including an eleven-year-old girl and American diplomat, were among twenty victims killed in two simultaneous terrorist attacks in the Rome and Vienna airports in December 1985; four Americans were killed after a bomb exploded under a seat onboard a TWA flight from Rome to Athens in early April 1986; and two U.S. Army sergeants were killed in a West Berlin discotheque bombing incident on April 5 1986.[1]

Many of these terrorist incidents were intensively covered by the media in the United States and elsewhere with some of the terrifying episodes making a good portion of the breaking news television shows for several days (like in a

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[1] In a detailed study of the Operation El Dorado Canyon U.S. Air Force Major Gregory Trebon, who in the mid-1980s was personally involved in logistical support of American counterterrorist forces, notes that in early 1986, international terrorists and their sponsors were at war with the United States. In 1985, 91 terror attacks involved Americans, in which 54 were killed and 160 wounded. Major Trebon continues: "We were at war. It wasn't fancy war, it wasn't declared, it wasn't conventional, but it was a war. And in 1985, we were losing!"

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TWA flight hijacking episode when the aircraft made a number of landings flying between the Beirut and Algiers airports). Meanwhile, substantiated intelligence reports linked Gaddafi to terrorist attacks. Although he officially denied his involvement in plotting these attacks, Gaddafi went on to publicly hail some of the killings as "heroic" (Shultz, 1993, p. 677). In case of the West Berlin discotheque bombing, intelligence intercepts obtained by the U.S. services eventually provided corroborated evidence that the Libyan government operatives were behind the explosion (Reagan, 2007, p. 403)[1]. The Reagan administration had a "smoking gun" and later cited five other terrorist plots that had been thwarted but also involved Gaddafi. There were other unconfirmed reports of plans by Gaddafi to launch a major terrorist campaign within the United States proper, including a plot to assassinate President Reagan (Jentleson, 1991).

The United States Initial Response

At the meetings with President Reagan and other administration members considering different response options, in early January 1986, Secretary Shultz "pressed for retaliatory action against Libyan military targets, but [Defense Secretary] Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs were opposed" (Shultz, 1993, p. 677). Shultz was strong in his conviction that Libya should be held accountable for attacking American civilians and military even when actual perpetrators were Palestinians. The State Secretary actively sought advice of State Department's Legal Adviser Abraham Sofaer inquiring about the provisions of international law regarding self-defense principles applicability to potential use of force in the instances of terrorist attacks against Americans in foreign countries. Sofaer, however, could only share his frustration with existing legal arrangements, which he also later described in the Foreign Affairs magazine (Sofaer, 1986) pointing at the failure of the law to effectively combat international terrorism and stating that "the world has no international police force or judicial system."

In early January 1986 after "quite a session on Libya's top clown" – in Reagan's words (Reagan, 2007, p. 381), the President opted for a decision to issue an Executive Order "Prohibiting Trade and Certain Transactions Involving Libya", which cited that "the policy and actions of the Government of Libya constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States" (The White House, 1986) and declared a national emergency to deal with this threat. The President's Executive Order prohibited the import and export of any goods or services from and to Libya, any transaction with, transportation from and travel of Americans to Libya.

President Reagan also signed a different paper on the following day, this time with a "confidential" status – National Security Decision Directive #205 on Acting against Libyan Support of International Terrorism – which, in light of the widening scope and accelerated tempo of Libyan-supported terrorist activity against Western targets and indisputable evidence of Gaddafi's support of terrorism, to counter Gaddafi's behavior, in addition to business and trade related restrictions already reflected in the Executive Order, set the following objectives: demonstrate resolve in a manner that reverses the perception of U.S. passivity in the face of mounting terrorist activity; and isolate Libya and reduce the flow of Western economic resources which help finance Libyan support of international terrorism. In the Annex of the NSDD-205, the President directed additional military measures and intelligence actions, including deployment of a second Carrier Battle Group to the Central Mediterranean Sea and conduct of operations in international waters, including the Gulf of Sidra, to demonstrate the U.S. resolve and capability (a part of this partially declassified document remains redacted) (NSC, 1986).[1]

Turbulent History of the United States-Libya Relations in the 1970s and 1980s

The prohibition of trade and transactions with Libya marked the lowest point in the United States relations with this nation. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi had for long been a headache for the United States, Europe, and his neighbor countries. The United States severed diplomatic ties with Libya and put the country on the list of the "States Sponsors of Terrorism" in December 1979 after a mob attacked and set fire to the Embassy in Tripoli. Bob Woodward, associate editor of the Washington Post and Pulitzer Prize co-winner for his coverage of the Watergate scandal, writes in his book that soon upon his appointment as Director of the Central Intelligence in 1981, "[William Casey] received a copy of a twelve-page secret document … entitled "Libya: Aims and Vulnerabilities". Gaddafi was no longer an abstract problem; he was Casey's problem" (Woodward, 1987, p. 28). According to Woodward, this secret document estimated that Gaddafi's aggressive policies would pose a growing challenge to the U.S. and Western interests and the prospect was "more adventurism". Apparently, Gaddafi's removal was not an option to be expected by forces within the country any time soon as "the domestic and exile opposition to his regime is poorly organized and ineffective" (Woodward, 1987, p. 29).

The document also discussed that the Libyan leader was in the Soviet Union's interest for two major reasons as "[1] the Soviet objectives are served by Gaddafi's anti-Western policies … [and 2] the Soviets gain substantial hard currency earnings from massive arms sales to Libya." Although Gaddafi could not be counted as a Soviet puppet, he kept warm relations with the Soviet Union and represented a good source of revenues: one billion dollars a year was the estimate of Soviet earnings from arms trade with Gaddafi. This 1981 intelligence document continued that Gaddafi had "employed political intrigue, diplomatic activism, terrorism, assassination and now, in Chad, military occupation" (Woodward, 1987, p. 32).

[1] Actual trial took place only a decade after the terrorist attack when the unification of Germany allowed access to previously classified GDR's Stasi material, which confirmed the Libyan connection and revealed that the bombing was plotted by a Libyan people's bureau (Libyan term for their diplomatic mission) member who used other operatives to commit this crime.

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The United States intelligence psychologists and psychiatrists analyzed the data and produced Gaddafi's psychological profile. The personality analysis read: "Because of special circumstances in his childhood, Gaddafi absorbed, in exaggerated form, the Bedouin characteristics of naïve idealism, religious fanaticism, intense pride, austerity, xenophobia, and sensitivity to slight. … Gaddafi developed an intense disdain for established elites, a rigid adherence to his Bedouin ways and a strong identification with the downtrodden" (Woodward, 1987, p. 33).

In the meantime, the Libyan leader's confrontation with the United States was not limited to covert support of terrorists hitting American targets. The Gulf of Sidra (or the Gulf of Sirte) - maritime area of 57,000 square kilometers adjacent to the Libyan territory with width of 439 kilometers and maximum depth of 177 kilometers - remained an issue for decades after Gaddafi's October 1973 declaration proclaiming the Gulf of Sidra an integral part of the Libyan territory and its internal waters. Normally international low provisions recognize claims for internal waters to be within a 12 nautical mile territorial sea area and according to a comprehensive study carried out by Francesco Francioni, Professor of International Law at the University of Sienna, Italy, the Libyan claim of sovereign right over the Gulf of Sidra and the closure of the maritime area had no legal justification by geographic "straight baselines" method, "historic" title, or the theory of "vital" bays (Francioni, 1984, pp. 311-326).

The Libyan people's bureau in Washington notified the U.S. State Department of the unilateral decision and a mandatory prior authorization regime was established for foreign vessels navigating through the Gulf area. The United States government replied with a note of protest and rejected the Libyan decision condemning it "as an unlawful interference with freedoms of navigation and over-flight and related high seas freedoms" (Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, 1992, p. 17).

Since 1973, a number of incidents involving American and Libyan military aircraft and vessels occurred in the Gulf of Sidra, mostly following the attempts by United States to challenge the "illegitimate" Libyan claim over this part of the Mediterranean. The most intense incident however took place in March 1986 during the U.S. Naval Freedom of Navigation operation, weeks before the U.S. air strikes against the Libyan targets.

The Role of the State Department and Secretary Shultz

In mid-January 1986 Secretary Shultz delivered a speech at the Law Intensity Warfare Conference held at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, in which he attempted to give legitimacy to military action of adequate and proportional scale against the states harboring and arming terrorists engaging in terrorist activities beyond their host country borders. Shultz claimed that "there should be no confusion about the status of nations that sponsor terrorism against Americans and American property. There is substantial legal authority for the view that a state which supports terrorist or subversive attacks against another state, or which supports and encourages terrorist planning and other activities within its own territory, is responsible for such attacks. Such conduct can amount to an ongoing armed aggression against the other state under international law" (Shultz, 1993, p. 678).

Undoubtedly, when there appeared a gap in leadership, Secretary Shultz saw an opportunity for himself and his cause. Reflecting on what he considered Weinberger's reluctance to adequately engage in search of an Italian cruise ship, the Achile Lauro, hijacked by terrorists in the eastern Mediterranean, with Americans among the passengers onboard, Shultz noted that "no one was taking charge of our response. So I appointed myself" (Shultz, 1993, p. 669).

The State Department's position leaning toward use of limited force against the Libyan leader in early January 1986 following reports confirmed by U.S. intelligence agencies on Gaddafi's role in terror attacks in the Rome and Vienna airports however was not the most radical idea discussed by President Reagan's decision making team. Secretary Weinberger recalled hearty laughter of President Mubarak responding to - what Weinberger called "silly" - suggestions made by National Security Council staff members and National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane on encouraging, promoting, and supporting, with many American infantry divisions, a full-scale Egyptian attack on Libya as a form of dealing with Gaddafi (Weinberger, 1990, p. 201).

Obviously Secretary Shultz and the State Department had a somewhat middle position between the "hawkish" idea voiced by McFarlane and National Security Council staffers on full-scale invasion by a third-nation army supported by American troops and "reluctance" of Secretary Weinberger and the Defense Department before April 1986 to engage in a military campaign of limited scope, probably realizing they would be the ones blamed for any failure or malfunction during the military operation.

Operation El Dorado Canyon

For his part, President Reagan did not rush to order air strikes in January 1986 despite Shultz's strong support of this option. He first chose to side with his military team and impose economic sanctions as a coercive measure against Libya and its leader. However, this option did not produce the desired result and maybe even emboldened the Libyan strongman, who announced on March 27 to foreign ambassadors in Tripoli of a "state of war" existing with the United States and that Libya considered all American installations under the jurisdiction of NATO to be targets (Shultz, 1993, p. 682). Gaddafi chose a path of military and terrorist countermeasures by engaging the American forces maneuvering in the Gulf of Sidra in late March and bombing in early April a West Berlin discotheque frequented by American GI's. Only after the latter incident President Reagan authorized air strikes against Libyan targets carefully pre-selected during the meetings with his senior advisors in earlier months.

In all, according to Secretary Weinberger (Weinberger, 1990), out of a number of options presented to him by the military leadership, President Reagan selected five targets

in Tripoli and Benghazi, four of which had direct connection to terrorist activity: swimmer/commando training school; the barracks with the command, control, and communications center; terrorist logistics "node", the Tripoli International Airfield with Soviet made IL- 76; and the barracks in Benghazi housing Gaddafi's elite guards and others involved in the terrorist activities. The fifth target was not linked to terrorist activity but was chosen to limit the Libyan air force units' ability to confront American warplanes entering the Libyan airspace.

In a night bombing operation of this scale the United States could effectively employ two types of aircraft: the Air Force F-111 and the carrier based Navy A-6E's. The A-6E's were in immediate vicinity of the Libyan coast as a part of the Sixth Fleet, while the U.S. Air Force F-111's were deployed in the United Kingdom and their delivery to the operation site became a matter of high-level diplomatic engagement. After a number of sessions with Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, detailing potential Libyan targets and the forces needed for the operation, President Reagan "sent a long message" (Reagan, 2007, p. 403) to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher requesting her support. In response, the Prime Minister pledged her support, but requested retaliation to be proportionate and limited to targets identified as clearly connected to the terrorist activity. With the permission to fly the F-111's from the United Kingdom air bases, President Reagan and State Department officials addressed the French and Spanish leaders for the over-flight right. Both President Francois Mitterrand[1] and Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez refused over-flight over French and Spanish territories respectively and the American fleet of 57 F-111's and refueling tankers departed from the air bases in Britain for a 15-hour-long flight to the Libyan coast over the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea (Trebon, 1988, p. 26).

Conclusion

During the bombing, Libya's terrorist infrastructure and training facilities were severely damaged. One of the bombs was off target and caused civilian casualties and an F-111 with two airmen was shot down by the Libyan air defense. Gaddafi himself was wounded and for some time after appeared disoriented. President Reagan considered the operation successful. He was particularly pleased with overwhelming domestic support of the military operation (Reagan, 2007, p. 405). Reaction in Europe was mixed ranging from United Kingdom's Prime Minister Thatcher's strong support to extreme criticism of Head of European Community Hans van der Broek of the Netherlands, who believed this military action "would do serious damage to the transatlantic relationship" (Shultz, 1993, p. 687). As expected, the Soviet Union and many Arab states condemned the United States action. Despite the clearly negative position of some European leaders on the U.S. military action, in about a week after the air strikes the European Community issued a resolution and condemned Libya, banned arms sales, pledged to strengthen intelligence sharing, enforcement, and anti-terrorism collaboration (Jentleson, 1991).

Overall success of operation El Dorado Canyon as a "coercive diplomacy" or "low-intensity warfare" campaign in reaching its specific objective of curtailing international terrorism activity can be evaluated as limited and short-term. Trebon notes that "there was no dramatic decline in the total volume of international terrorism after the raid. It is probably safe to say no one expected there would be [as] the raid was not targeted against all international terrorism with its wide ranging participants" (Trebon, 1988, p. 38). But this coercive diplomacy strategy had a greater impact on larger domestic and foreign policy objectives. Secretary Shultz noted that the United States had shown "the will to take military action against a state found to be directly supporting terrorism [and] had achieved an unprecedented sense of unity among the major democracies on cooperative approaches to stopping terrorism" (Shultz, 1993, p. 688).

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[1] Defense Secretary Weinberger recalled with frustration President Mitterrand's "gratuitous advice … in a typical but still infuriating action on how to conduct the raid - "don't inflict a mere pinprick", which meant that despite his refusal to permit flight over the French air space, President Mitterrand was advising Americans to inflict heavy damage to Libya (Weinberger, 1990, p. 192).

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