

The Utility of Non-Lethal Force

By Robert Kozloski **

The pre-industrial-age view of military force is captured succinctly in a recent quote by defense scholar Dr. Richard Betts. According to Betts, military force is, “killing people and destroying things for some political purpose”. Unfortunately his simplistic view is shared by many in the Pentagon.

This dated view does not take into consideration many emerging military fields, such as information operations, non-lethal weapons, and directed energy weapons, all of which have the potential to achieve military effects without crossing the lethal threshold. These emerging capabilities should force defense scholars to revisit their view of how a modern military can achieve political outcomes.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has attained mixed results using the traditional instruments of national power to achieve policy goals. Because of changes in the geopolitical environment and America’s domestic problems, their application may be even less effective in the future. Innovative thinkers within the defense community must recognize that historic military approaches to exerting national power may not be well suited for the future.

In a recent speech at the Directed Energy Summit, Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, hinted at new vision of military force:

“Directed energy can go beyond its envisioned role as an offensive and defensive tactical tool, and it can become a truly global deterrent. If we do this right, our fleet will employ 300- to 500-kilowatt lasers against over-the-horizon threats. We’ll use railguns. We’ll be able to strike at targets more than 100 miles away. And we will defend our people and our platforms with nonlethal things like high-powered radio frequency systems in every domain.”

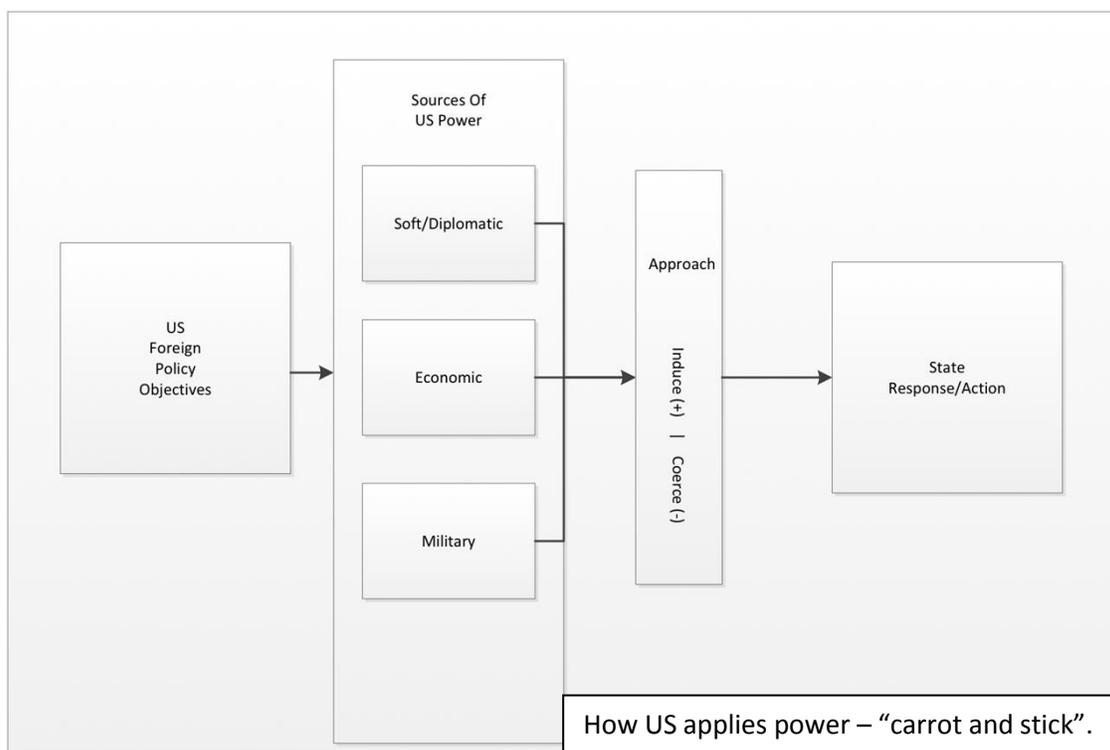
This concept of using non-lethal force to accomplish political goals is central to understanding the battle space of the future, where high-casualty rates may be deemed unacceptable in the global court of public opinion. The growing aversion to casualties during interstate conflicts must be a consideration for our defense planners.

During World War II hardly any Americans objected to the incineration of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians, and throughout the Cold War few objected to the principle of killing on a wider scale in retaliation for a Soviet attack. Today, post-Cold War norms and Pentagon lawyers have put those ideas out of bounds and that type of thinking is no longer deemed legitimate.

By the end of the Cold War, most realized the power derived from nuclear weapons had proved so awesome and destructive that their actual application became muscle-bound. Increased lethality and proliferation of technology may result in a similar dilemma for conventional weapons. In the future, the total cost of full-scale war among great power states may be so destructive that conventional military force will become taboo as well. State-level confrontations will have to be resolved through other means.

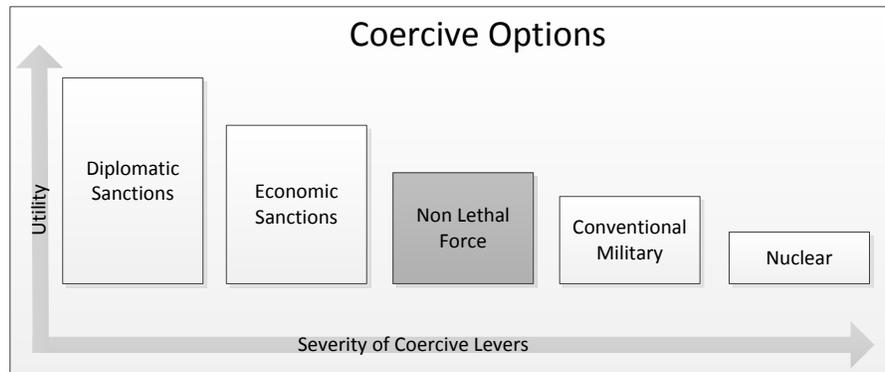
In the geopolitical environment state-level competition over the control of limited resources will not go away. Therefore nations will have to develop new ways to resolve international conflicts. This concept doesn't appear to be lost on other nations such as, Russia and China, both of whom have advanced modern military concepts designed to avoid military-to-military confrontation. But such thinking is slow to gain support within the United States Military. As renowned military strategist Colin S. Gray remarked, during irregular conflicts in the future the U.S. armed forces "will need to curb their traditional, indeed cultural, love affair with firepower."

To understand how nonlethal force could be used on the future battlefield, one must first recognize how the US uses power and influence to achieve political objectives. Briefly, it is done through a traditional carrot and stick model to either induce (carrot) or coerce (stick) a state to take a desired action that produces an outcome favorable to US political interests.



Traditionally, the US military has played an important role in achieving political objectives. However, some experts suggest the United States must rethink its traditional approaches to how it pursues its foreign policy objectives. As Schmidt and Cohen note, "Democratic governments will most likely be tempted to further their national interests through the same combination of defense, diplomacy, and development on which they relied during the Cold War and the decades

after. But these traditional tools will not be enough: although it remains uncertain exactly how the spread of technology will change governance, it is clear that old solutions will not work in this new era. The application of non-lethal force will provide new and broader options in the future.



Non-lethal force could be used in a variety of coercion scenarios to deny critical information and resources, to disrupt markets and exchanges, and to disable critical infrastructure. In the future, non-lethal force will provide national leaders other options when coercive action is needed. Options under the lethal threshold will be important to prevent escalation into a full-blown kinetic war.

It is important to consider the full potential of weapon systems of the future and not the current state of technology. As scientists have noted, there is a great deal of trade space between our current engineering practices and the limits of physical laws. The following examples describe how non-lethal force could be applied as a coercive instrument in the future maritime environment.

Electromagnetic blockade. In April 2007, a series of cyber-attacks were conducted against Estonian government websites, media websites, and online banking services. The attacks came the day after a Soviet-era war memorial was removed from the Estonian capital, Tallinn. The attacks continued intermittently for ten days and primarily focused on the financial industry. Ninety-four percent of all financial transactions in Estonia occur online and were crippled during these attacks. The national economy virtually came to a standstill. Similarly, in April 2010, Internet traffic from U.S. federal agencies was unknowingly rerouted to servers in China. Information from the U.S. Senate, all four military services, the Secretary of Defense, and other federal agencies was affected. It can be assumed the United States has similar capabilities to deny communications as well; how and when to apply this form of non-lethal force must be fully considered in national policy debates.

Offshore control enforcement. One strategy currently being discussed for the unwelcome scenario of a military conflict with China is offshore control. At the heart of this strategy is the ability to intercept and divert the supertankers and post-Panamax containers essential to China's economy. Disrupting navigation systems, disabling computers or control systems, or even incapacitating the ship's crew could provide viable options below the use of conventional military force.

Conflict termination. If military tension at sea escalates, the United States may be faced with intervening in small-scale naval skirmishes in support of critical allies. Ship-mounted non-lethal capabilities could be used to terminate or suppress an incident by disabling weapons or communications systems of one or both belligerents. In future state-level conflicts, maintaining regional stability may replace the traditional notion of winning. By reducing casualties by whatever means possible, adversaries may be more acceptable to terms of termination of conflict while minimizing resistance and animosity that destabilizes the situation.

Wide-area denial. Several small sparsely populated islands in the Pacific could be the impetus for military conflict in the future. Most notably the Spratly Island chain and Senkakus are of primary concern. Should these become the object of military occupation, non-lethal force could be used to temporarily prevent occupation or incapacitate the occupiers of the disputed territory.

Despite being a dominant power for the past several decades, the United States has achieved mixed results in attaining political goals through the use of national power. In the future, the traditional instruments of power may prove even less effective for a variety of internal and external factors. The growing aversion to human casualties and the increased lethality of conventional weapon systems may result in strategic paralysis and limit military options available to U.S. policy makers. Emerging non-lethal capabilities in the form of information operations, non-lethal weapons, and directed-energy weapons offer great potential. Non-lethal force will fill a critical gap between sanctions and conventional military force when U.S. political goals require coercive action.

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** =The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author(s), and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of the Navy, Department of Defense or the United States government.