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Revisiting Warden's Rings Targeting for Today?



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and subsequent conflicts.

Warden viewed the enemy as a system that was visualised as five concentric rings; each ring representing a centre of gravity of descending priority from the centre outwards; in other words the centre ring was the most important and the outer ring the least – in relative terms. The attached diagram is self-explanatory.

To emphasise his point, Warden conceptualised the system as a body with the head, or brain, at the centre; the removal of which would cause the body to die. None of this was entirely new and can be traced back to a variation of Trenchard, Douhet, and Mitchell. It is a basic tenet of the application of air power to be able to leapfrog over the outer defences to strike the 'heart' of an enemy; whatever that happens to be. During World War Two for instance, the United States 8th Air Force believed it could strike deep into Germany and destroy the means of waging

The most applied air targeting theory of recent times has been Warden's Five Ring System Theory. Colonel John Warden was an air power theorist working for the USAF at the time of the first Gulf War, and he is largely credited with laying the foundations of the successful coalition air campaign during that

war, but reality seldom meets the expectation as will be discussed later.

Warden's rings are neither a strategy, nor a planning process, nor a roadmap for success. It is simply a useful tool for identifying an enemy's centres' of gravity. There are however a number of issues to be considered; first and foremost being that no two conflicts are exactly the same. This leads to the danger of planning for the last war.

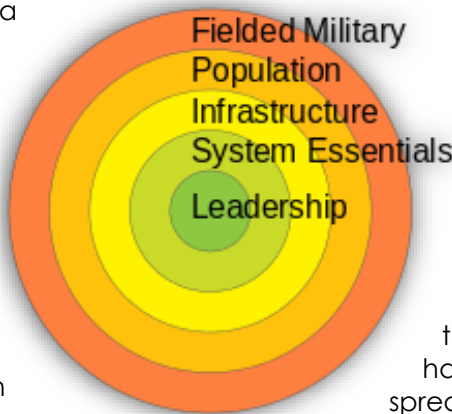
The theory stood up fairly well in the first and second Gulf Wars, with the exception that both conflicts targeted the outer ring first (i.e. the air defence system) in order to create the conditions for attacks against the other rings. In Gulf War One stealth aircraft opened by directly targeting Saddam and government (Leadership),

rapidly followed by concurrent attacks on the electrical grid and petroleum distribution (System Essentials), railroad bridges (Infrastructure), military elites (Population), and military units (Fielded Military).¹

However, the more recent insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria show the limitations of the theory. Insurgencies do not have fixed means of control; they are spread out and dynamic – indeed most modern governments, even dictatorial ones, do the same to some degree. Insurgents generally

do not have permanent infrastructure or system essentials. While airpower has had some major successes, none of them had as a focus the targeting of high value figures of power.

This is not to say that targeting individual figures has not taken place. Since 2001 the US and others have carried out many such strikes, mainly using drones, on individual members of terrorist groups or insurgency movements, though notably without



Warden's Five Ring Targeting Model

causing the collapse of a single organisation.² While these strikes represent only a partial application, it demonstrates the utility of the theory as an identification tool, and also perhaps demonstrates its limitation of context.

As previously stated, no two conflicts are the same; there is no one size fits all air power, or targeting, strategy. The advantages of air power are by no means universal, being entirely contextual or situational. Subsequently, air power's limitations, like its strengths, are relative rather than absolute and need to be understood in that context.

Air power strategy has been somewhat neglected in the last 25 years or so and Warden's Ring theory is perhaps largely responsible, closely followed by an ever increasing preoccupation with cyber security. Most Western armed forces do tactics well and the tactical application of the rings theory seems to have replaced strategy; the expectation being that success at the tactical level automatically translates into strategic victory. This is known as the 'tacticisation of strategy'.³ In a purely military sense, this can work for some military forces, such as those of the United States whose military doctrine has as its foundation, massive and overwhelming firepower.

Another issue with the rings is that it assumes the imposition of will on a more or less passive foe, ignoring the fact that conflict is usually a *duel* between two parties. This was the mistake initially made by the US 8th AF in WW2, and it came as quite a shock when the German Luftwaffe and ground defences together inflicted losses of up to 20% on some missions. The 2000 or so fighters and 50,000 anti-aircraft guns had to be dealt with before the bombing campaign had any chance of success.

Human factors can also be neglected at times. Not all opponents are rational and are unlikely to react in the same way that we might. Also, it relies to some degree at least on the psychological impact on the population to physical destruction and disruption of the leadership function. One just has to look at the conditions in which many people choose to live under in parts of the world which are frequently subjected to air attack, yet they still carry on. The resilience of human beings is beyond logic and science.

A major underlying assumption of the rings theory is that a state with its organic essentials is ponderous, brittle, and is composed of closed socioeconomic systems, when in fact they are generally open,

adaptable, distributed and responsive. This was the case with Germany in WW2, and also during the Vietnam War where the production of the means to wage war was either dispersed across sympathetic borders or went underground, and the will of the leaders and the people never wavered in the face of constant application of overwhelming air power.

Recent conflict has largely been, 'war amongst the people', for which the rings are totally inappropriate. So what of the future? The apparent rekindling of the Cold War has once more highlighted the prospect of superpower confrontation, and ultimately raises the spectre of nuclear war (Russia has around 7000 nuclear warheads which unquestionably makes it a superpower in the military, and diplomatic, context). Nuclear war is of course existential, and targeting theory is virtually meaningless; the object being simply to inflict more damage on an opponent than they inflict on you, and hopefully having something left at the end of it to start again.

In summary, Warden's rings are more a targeting tool than a theory and are largely a remodelling of thought originating with the air power theorists of the 1920s which carried over into WW2. You cannot ignore fielded forces that are intent on opposing you. It assumes air supremacy as a given and takes little account of human factors and warfare other than conventional. It is therefore limited in its application to low to medium capability adversaries with moderate levels of industrialisation, and a fragile government.

Key Points

- Warden's Rings is not a strategy, it is a tool to identify the centres of gravity of an enemy state, which it regards as a system.
- Its utility is limited and has little application in near-peer conflict, insurgencies or nuclear war.
- Air power alone is unlikely to ever bring about victory.

References

1. Warden, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat*.
2. Col. Mike Pietrucha, USAF (retd.), *The Five-Ring Circus: How Air Power Enthusiasts Forgot About Interdiction*.
3. Colin S. Gray, *The Airpower Advantage in Future Warfare: The Need for Strategy*, 2007.