



No-Fly Zone Effectiveness: From Military–Strategic Tool to Political Shorthand

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No-fly zones have become a popular foreign policy tool over the past two decades, but they are rarely effective. In fact, no-fly zones are generally used for solving political rather than military–strategic problems.

No-fly zones have become the one-size-fits-all solution to a wide range of foreign policy problems and situations over the past two decades. Developed from [combat air patrol operations](#) in northern Iraq to accompany and if necessary protect humanitarian airdrops in 1991, no-fly zones have since been applied in southern Iraq in 1992, in the [Bosnian Civil War in 1992–93](#), and in the [2011 Libya intervention](#). Two other no-fly zones were suggested, for [South Sudan](#) and [Darfur](#), but were [not acted](#) upon as the remote location made enforcement difficult (the closest US airbase was in Djibouti), and Western governments decided the respective situations did not touch upon interests vital enough to merit military involvement.

No-fly zones for Syria were also [proposed](#), to address Bashar Al-Assad’s barrel-bombing campaign and the use of indiscriminate force against civilians in the Syrian Civil War, as well as the increasing Russian presence in the conflict. For the latter reason, it was never likely to be imposed. And still, in the US presidential elections, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton used the no-fly zone [to signal](#) both the resolve to ‘stand up to Russia’ as well as a pragmatic policy of refugee management and humanitarian responsibility. She [told](#) the Democratic party TV debate: ‘I am advocating the no-fly zone both because I think it would help us on the ground to protect Syrians; I’m also advocating it because I think it gives us some leverage in our conversations with Russia’.

Indeed, no-fly zones may in principle fulfil multiple strategic functions effectively, including auxiliary air support, punishing air strikes and longer-term aerial occupation. US commentator Alexander Benard [wrote](#) in 2004 that a no-fly zone simply denotes a certain space or physical area within the sovereign territory of one state defined by distinct demarcations. In this area, another state (or coalition) patrols, usually by means of control flights, to deny an adversary the use of that designated air space and ensure implementation of whatever other rules it has set for the area.

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According to this definition, the no-fly zone is not necessarily limited to the interdiction of flyovers. Control of the designated airspace is simply one necessary condition to enforcement, and may precede other rules within the designated territory that the patrolling state or coalition wants to enforce. By establishing aerial superiority, no-fly zones can allow the enforcing state or coalition to contain, control and compel adversarial powers in a coercive bargaining strategy.

With precision munitions, the ability to destroy larger and/or stationary ground targets, and the intimidation factor inherent to modern airpower, there is an expectation that no-fly zones can fulfil at least some of the functions more forceful tools or even ground troops might be used for – all the while being much less risky for the intervening state or coalition.

In terms of humanitarian reasons, indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets provides the clearest military–strategic rationale for a no-fly zone. The [fight for Aleppo](#) (2012–16) is a case in point. In the battle, Syrian, Hizbullah, Iranian and (at a later stage) Russian forces besieged Kurdish, Syrian and Islamist fighters, used helicopters to drop barrel bombs on insurgent-controlled areas and employed jets to drop regular bombs.

The increasing use of aerial bombardment across Syria stemmed not least from governmental [loss of control](#) on the ground. Indeed, a hypothetical no-fly zone over northern Syria, including Aleppo, would have likely eased the pressure on the rebel groups there, and allowed for easier humanitarian access.

However, much of the Aleppo siege was fought on the ground, and most civilian deaths came from small arms fire and artillery shelling, rather than aerial bombardment, which is estimated to have [constituted](#) around 22% of all civilian deaths in 2013. Helicopters and jets were used as much as a symbol of superiority as an actual weapon of war by the Syrian regime. A no-fly zone may simply – in the spirit of former UK Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd – [level the killing field](#).



A US Air Force F-15 approaches the refueling boom of a tanker aircraft during a routine patrol over northern Iraq in support of Operation *Northern Watch*, January 1999. *Northern Watch* was the enforcement operation of the no-fly-zone over northern Iraq. *Courtesy of US Department of Defense*

Indeed, most experts suggest that the no-fly zone is neither strategically optimal nor indeed even appropriate for an intervention into an intra-state conflict, and that it is unsuitable for the protection of civilians. Its previous uses in Iraq and Bosnia have supported this argument empirically, with the Bosnian no-fly zones usually considered a failure, and the Iraqi no-fly zones ineffective at best, and irrelevant at worst in preventing Saddam Hussein's crackdown against Kurds and Shias or coercing him into cooperation with the international community.

In Libya, employing a no-fly zone for the protection of civilians arguably helped to save Benghazi, but then proved ineffective as soon as it established a shaky status quo, and was subsequently replaced by a much more aggressive air campaign.

A no-fly zone may be outright counterproductive if it signals to affected populations a false sense of security

There are two main reasons why no-fly zones are rarely strategically optimal or appropriate. First, just as with air campaigns in general, a no-fly zone not combined with additional measures on the ground often simply induces a shift in the type of violence committed in the conflict. US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, when asked about a no-fly zone in Syria, cautioned that it 'may also fail to reduce the violence or shift the momentum because the regime relies overwhelmingly on surface fires – mortars, artillery, and missiles'.

Imposing a no-fly zone or proactively destroying Assad's air force may have reduced the conflict's casualty rate in the short-term, but it could have also spread the conflict more widely as rebel forces or terrorists would likely have entered additional regions. A no-fly zone may in fact be outright counterproductive if it signals to affected populations a false sense of security and protection from violence that it cannot deliver.

Second, based on the evidence of the Bosnian no-fly zone, with its

complicated command structure and rigid implementation procedures, it seems that, even if implemented, a no-fly zone might be difficult to adapt to a changing situation on the ground. With regards to Syria, former US President Barack Obama retrospectively commented that 'the notion that we could have – in a clean way that didn't commit US military forces – changed the equation on the ground there was never true'. This line of argument was supported vociferously by numerous observers who cautioned that 'a no-fly zone is unlikely to alleviate the suffering of ordinary Syrians and may potentially be harmful', because it 'cannot effectively counter ground-based lethality'.

This is because intra-state conflict theatres complicate the identification of targets, and make the desired differentiation between civilian populations who are meant to be protected and combatants who are meant to be protected from a difficult task. In addition, no-fly zone enforcement and especially target identification are dependent on weather and geographical conditions.

The problem is exacerbated when dealing with the protection of civilians outside designated zones, both in terms of morality (are civilians just outside the zone not worthy of protection?) as well as tactically – when safe areas are relatively small so that transgressions cannot be punished in time, and when they are so large that constant patrolling is rendered impractical.

Although, in theory, no-fly zones stop short of all-out bombing campaigns or ground invasion, the operational difficulties in protecting civilians on the ground and in punishing or deterring transgression might lead to mission creep. Alternatively, the no-fly zone freezes a status quo on the ground, thereby inviting 'perpetual patrol' scenarios.

Because of these and other difficulties, experts in the field – including Mike Benitez and Mike Pietrucha, Michael Knights and Karl P Mueller – seem to come to a similar conclusion: that past implementation of no-fly zones was

[b]ased upon a flawed and unproven hypothesis ... The ways and means available are insufficient to accomplish

the desired ends. Due to the risk of civilian casualties, environmental factors, and the inherent limitations of airpower, no-fly zones are not capable of protecting civilians from government repression.

Evidently, in the case of Syria, the suggested lack of suitability of no-fly zones for conflict management was exacerbated by a set of geostrategic challenges that made any intervention to protect civilians against aerial bombardment, however desirable, an entirely different proposition than in Libya in 2011. The Syrian conflict became a regional and global great power struggle that meant the imposition of a no-fly zone, even if strictly limited geographically or by rules of engagement, would have entailed a prohibitively high level of risk. The enforcing state or coalition may well have been dragged even more deeply – and with direct military consequences – into a conflict that was increasingly being played out as a struggle for control and influence between not only the Assad regime, Syrian rebels and Kurds, but also Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as well as various terrorist groups and militias.

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Indeed, the imposition of a no-fly zone in Syria would likely have led down a slippery slope, towards large-scale and possibly long-term military commitment and, most importantly, the risk of hostilities with another great power.

So, if no-fly zones are 'based upon a flawed and unproven hypothesis', why are they still considered an attractive foreign policy tool? The reason might be that no-fly zones are attractive to both critics and proponents of intervention because as a tool they are inherently malleable, flexible, and open to interpretation.

No-fly zones capture and occupy a part of the opponent's territory – its air space – as a preventive measure, and they likely result in the destruction of adversarial military assets and infrastructure that may threaten air superiority both inside and at the borders of its demarcation. This established air superiority can then be used to compel different actors, both inside the zone and at its borders. Indeed, no-fly zones can also be used offensively and as a 'precursor to other military actions'. This can be done by weakening the opponent through a continued blockade – 'battlefield preparation' – and by 'locking in' the sender's military commitment.

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However, as I have argued elsewhere before, no-fly zones also employ very limited military force, to the extent that they may signal restraint and passivity. First, unless explicitly stated – and then sometimes labelled a 'no-movement zone' or 'no-drive zone' – there is an expectation that no-fly zones will focus on air-related capabilities by singling out a specific part of adversarial capabilities for suppression. Second, rules are enforced only within the distinct territory of the no-fly zone, implying that elsewhere the adversary may still govern its air space as it pleases. Third, a no-fly zone is rule-bound: included in a no-fly zone declaration is a list of specific violations of its rules which may lead to the use of force. If, however, the opponent complies, the no-fly zone seems (so long as air superiority is not threatened) to be a passive-defensive rather than active-offensive tool of airpower.

In this interpretation, a no-fly zone freezes a status quo on the ground and creates safe areas rather than serving as a 'rebel air force'. Also, as air strikes are dependent on escalating moves of the adversarial conflict party, the no-fly zone might not present an

ongoing international debate with quick *faits accomplis*: once transgressions are effectively discouraged, air strikes should stop.

Fourth, a no-fly zone is, at least in theory, relatively easily removed if the adversary assures compliance. Fifth, no-fly zones are relatively cheap to run compared with other more forceful tools, given the infrastructure to enforce them (out-of-theatre air bases or carriers). They can also be implemented quickly, as little materiel and personnel need to be moved and air components can cover additional distance. Most importantly, as pointed out previously, there is a clear expectation that no-fly zones rarely result in the loss of the enforcer's own materiel or life, making their implementation a supposedly riskless 'zero-casualty' mission.

Proposing a no-fly zone may then be detached in public debates from its actual strategic or military value, and indeed from any sort of detailed planning or long-term strategy. The no-fly zone itself, because it is such a malleable and flexible tool, might solve a political rather than a military-strategic problem. The tool may allow its proponents to simultaneously tap into a wide range of possibly incommensurable tasks (for example, helping to protect civilians while not getting bogged down in complex conflict theatres).

And yet, it remains easy to understand for decision-makers and their audiences, which, as research on human cognition indicates, in turn makes it more likely to be adopted. Perhaps counterintuitively, it has been suggested that the importance of concepts such as the no-fly zone in political deliberations increases as actors become more uncertain about the consequences of different policies.

While such catch-all compromise tools may indeed serve to break through the Gordian Knot of conflicting policy goals and proposals, it is also usually apparent both to outside observers, as well as to the respective proponents themselves, that the tool has considerable disadvantages (along the lines outlined above).

Proponents would suggest, and decision-makers might agree on, a no-fly zone knowing that it is not an optimal

tool to intervene into intra-state conflict, but rather because they interpret it as an acceptable solution that allows them to signal they are 'doing something' to international and domestic audiences wanting action.

The no-fly zone would then be 'the gift that keeps on giving for politicians whose idea of war is informed not by any assessment of ways, ends, risks, and means, but by scoring votes in battleground states'.

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Such 'doing something' decision-making may lead to policy results that are unsatisfactory in terms of conflict management or the protection of civilians. However, proposing a no-fly zone might work well in overcoming, for a time, executive bargaining and bureaucratic politics, legislative deadlock and intra-alliance negotiations.

This may explain why it had not only Hillary Clinton's support, but in fact – and perhaps rare in this era of stark partisanship – cross-party backing at least in the US presidential election.

The no-fly zone, in fact, may be so successful in this dynamic that it has over two decades of practice developed from an actual military-strategic tool to be employed to differing degrees of success in conflicts such as Iraq, Bosnia, and Libya, into rhetoric shorthand to be employed effectively in the domestic political arena.

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