Explaining Space Power's Strength

On the birth of magazine cover art – or, better, on the birth of a magazine focusing on the theme of making U.S. Army space efforts better: I like power. And, the saber represents the strength that produces that power – strength coming to our nation through our military and commercial space-based capabilities. This translates to the actual effects or results that our space capabilities provide our military forces and it is largely up to the space community to deliver those effects. Sharpening that craft – making more power or strength that comes from space – is the point. The work in progress on the magazine cover created some puzzlement, judging from the curious looks on the faces of visitors entering my office to find my saber dangling from the ceiling. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Art is supposed to say many things to many people. So we'll let the readers the judge the final product on whether or not we successfully conveyed our intent.

As for my article Rendezvous in Space: Looking in on Military Space, the genesis goes to many discussions ongoing in the military space community regarding the priority – or recognition of its value – given to space in the military context. Mostly, these discussions center on the perceived need to create a centralized military service, branch or corps for space similar to how the Air Force evolved and ultimately obtained independence from the Army in 1947. The Rumsfeld Space Commission gave the idea its push start in 2001 by predicting a Pearl Harbor type event in space that would exploit vulnerabilities. This side of the argument is further framed by the Allard Commission's finding in 2008 and Congressional testimony from the Government Accountability Office this year which both highlighted potential consequences. Essentially, all the reports over the span of years present a familiar message that dispersed organization and management for space limits its overall contribution.

It is an exciting idea but, frankly, one without much depth in the discussion about it. Interestingly, the vulnerabilities about space revealed by outside studies are contrasted by another key element in the discussion having to do with an internal view of the value of space to military operations. The commanding general of U.S. Air Force Space Command, General Robert Kehler, articulates it best when he says space is in the "fabric" of military operations. Further, he says space capabilities give the military its "ability to see with clarity, communicate with certainty, navigate with accuracy, strike with precision, and operate with assurance." Others have asserted that space has changed the nature of war – it has not, but more accurately it has definitely impacted the conduct of war, but not war's violent nature. A final point on this aspect is that the general military population does not fully understand, realize, or appreciate how much it relies upon space to fight as we do.

Interestingly, this brings us back to the comparison of the space power today and air power yesterday situations. The contrast in the two sides of the space organization argument is significant, raising some serious considerations about both. Folks on the re-organization side indicate that growing dependence upon space as technology speeds forward compounds the problem. Folks on the other side indicate that this growing integration of space into military operations, despite concerns about the organization, demonstrates the resilience in the military space community in overcoming obstacles in order to deliver what is needed. This is somewhat similar to the air power debate prior to WWII – both sides essentially said the same points with a major difference. Air power enthusiasts – BG Billy Mitchell being the most recognized – seemed to oversell what air power could do. His overall thesis hinged on the idea that giving air power equal footing with land and sea power would result in somehow lessening war's impact – giving the military the ability to end war quicker.

While this level of dogma is not part of today's discussion with space power – thankfully – it does raise an interesting parallel. Too often we in the military space community see the value we bring to the nation in terms of the independent capabilities delivered. We routinely talk about early missile warning, satellite communications, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance, precision-navigation-timing and environmental monitoring. Rarely do we as a community articulate the collective value of space in the terms of a theory for what space provides to the nation – an explanation for how space aids military operations on the levels of air, land and sea powers. Reviewing Mitchell's assumptions about air power prior to WWII shows that his assertions about air power's abilities were largely overstatements and, perhaps, too much marketing.

While it is good that the space community is not overselling the abilities derived in space power, we are absent a clearly stated theory for space power. Author Jim Oberg says space power is a "coercive and persuasive ability … to politically influence the actions of other states and other kinds of players, or to otherwise achieve national goals through space activity." Further, Oberg explains that a space power theory must show "how and

michael.howard@smdc-cs.army.mil

why space resources work with other factors to contribute to implementation of policy and achieve defined goals." A George C. Marshall Institute Fellow, Dr. John Sheldon, lays out a blueprint for establishing a space power theory in his book on the topic to be published later this year. He places space power in simple, equal terms to the other domains: The "ability in peace, crisis, and war to exert prompt and sustained influence in and from land/air/sea/space."

Another critical point about the need to define space power in theoretical terms comes from Sheldon's manuscript. He quotes Colin Gray: "A theory of space power should provide a common framework from which all can refer and a conceptual means by which space power is exploited to its full potential." The absence of this framework in our discussion about the value of space is notable. A reason for this may well be to avoid the overpromise that air power theorists made, yet the void and need for it remains apparent. A basis for this theory appears to be along the lines of whether or not space is or should be more than a critical enabler. A significant finding is that air power prior to WWII was seen only as an enabler despite the assurances of theorists that it had the potential to deliver significant contributions to war's victory.

Space power lacks this clarity in both theory and fact. It was only after WWII that air power theory was ultimately proven, resulting in the creation of an independent service for air. Of course space has not proven itself to the same degree as what air power has done. The space power context may provide some explanation for the limited vision, though, in the current discussion. The destructive capability of military missiles and warheads in space was very clear from the very beginning of space power development in the United States and Soviet Union. Equally, there seems to be a lingering viewpoint that space is a sanctuary for military purposes as President Dwight Eisenhower established it in 1957. A previous commanding general of U.S. Air Force Space Command, Gen. (ret.) Lance Lord, put it best: "Space is a (global) commons" and a nation has "the inherent right of self defense to operate in the medium just like it would at sea or in (the) air."

So, that explains at least my perspective of the cover art for this edition of the ASJ. In the end, comparing early day air power and space power models in my article reveals several key points to consider in determining the space role in the military power equation. The idea for this comparison – and, ultimately, for my Army War College paper on the topic – came from discussions at the 2009 U.S. Army Space Cadre Symposium. The hope is that these points and those found in the other articles in this publication can be used to stimulate further, deeper discussion within the military space community. Special thanks to mentors retired U.S. Army Colonels Frank Blakely and Todd Day for their help with my article.

Blog

//// Discussing Everything Space

File | Edit | Post | Comment

Links //// Get Space Here

Join the Discussion
Find Got S_pace on Facebook

Follow the Editor
http://twitter.com/theASJeditor

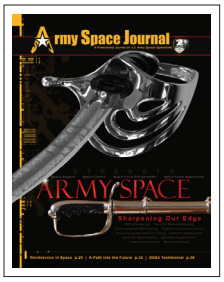
Submit an Article
space.journal@us.army.mil

Find us online
www.smdc-armyforces.army.mil\ASJ

Facebook Notes

Mike Howard on Facebook

Mike Howard Here's the cover I like so far ... any thoughts?



ASJ

14 hours ago · Comment · Like

Suzanne Spitzfaden Nage Not making the connection between a saber and space, but I'm sure if you like it, it has to make sense.
12 hours ago · Comment · Like

Jim Noble Sorry Mike I was thinking the same thing.
11 hours ago · Comment · Like

Mike Howard Saber ... military might or power or strength. Maybe too loose a connection. Do I need to identify what the symbol means?
11 hours ago · Comment · Like

Jim Noble Yes and something that ties in space.
8 hours ago · Comment · Like

Diane Gerig How about a sabar cutting through a star or the moon or a space ship or something that makes sense with the title?
7 hours ago · Comment · Like

Sandi Howard Lillard I connected the saber with the "sharpening our edge" comment...
6 hours ago · Comment · Like

Write a comment ...