

THE APPEAL AND FORMS OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP ATTACKS

Operations that threaten the person and power of senior enemy decisionmakers have long been considered to have a high payoff potential. They target a key enemy center of gravity and place at risk the individuals considered responsible for initiating and sustaining assaults on U.S. interests. Most important, they are thought to be a promising instrument for shortening wars, effecting other changes in enemy policy and behavior, and degrading enemy war-fighting capability.

Leadership attacks are seen to have significant deterrent and coercive value in that they threaten the things almost any enemy leader should value most: personal power and safety. Such attacks are also thought to send a message to other would-be malefactors about the types of punishment they might expect in the event that they were to harm U.S. interests.

The promise of such benefits has led U.S. civilian and military officials over the years to propose, sanction, and order attacks against senior enemy leaders. Three forms of attack have been used: direct attacks on the leader's person by U.S. forces or agents; coups and rebellions fomented and supported by the United States; and take-down operations conducted by U.S. invasion and occupation forces. Only the last form of attack has produced consistently successful results.

EFFECTS OF PAST LEADERSHIP ATTACKS

An analysis of some 24 cases of leadership attacks from World War II to the present provides insights about the comparative efficacy of different forms of leadership attacks, the potential coercive and deterrent value of such operations for shaping future enemy policy and behavior, and the possible unintended consequences that may result from the ill-considered use of such attacks.

Poor Results with Direct Attacks, Coups, and Rebellions

With the single exception of the shoot-down of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's aircraft in World War II, all U.S. operations to neutralize senior enemy leaders by direct attack have failed. The targets that have escaped elimination by aerial or other direct U.S. attack include Fidel Castro, Muammar al-Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Mohamed Farah Aideed, Osama bin Laden, and Slobodan Milosevic. These leaders proved difficult to neutralize because (1) they were routinely protected by elaborate security measures that denied attackers both access to their person and timely intelligence about their location; (2) they relocated to "safe houses" in civilian residential areas or to hardened facilities when threatened; and (3) self-imposed legal, political, and humanitarian constraints limited the means by which they could be attacked.

The United States has also had minimal success in securing the overthrow of regimes by coup d'état. The only coups explicitly sponsored or sanctioned by the United States that have succeeded have been against weakly entrenched governments: the Mossadeq regime in Iran and the Diem government in South Vietnam. In both instances, the coups were directed at regimes that enjoyed little support from their own military and were conducted by indigenous forces that had a close relationship with the United States. Coup attempts have failed when the targeted governments—such as those in Libya, Panama, and Iraq—have been protected by ubiquitous intelligence and internal security services, large praetorian guard forces, or other loyalist units. These coups either have died aborning—because they were infiltrated by government agents from the outset—or have been rapidly crushed by superior government forces.

America's attempts to oust enemy regimes by fomenting indigenous rebellions also have met with limited success. The one U.S. tri-

umph—the ouster of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala—was accomplished by limited air attacks and ground force demonstrations against a government that was denied backing from its own military forces. All U.S. attempts to foster the overthrow of well-entrenched regimes have failed, either because the indigenous populations lacked the motivation and opportunity to rise up or because the rebels, when they did arise, lacked the military prowess to defeat superior progovernment forces.

Even Successful Attacks Often Have Not Produced Desired Results

The demise or incapacitation of an enemy leader often does not result in a favorable change in enemy policy or behavior. Belligerent states and nonstate organizations are often governed by a collective leadership or possess competent second-echelon leaders who are as strongly motivated to continue a struggle as was the fallen leader. The frequent futility of leadership attacks is borne out by the experience of Israel in its attempts to suppress Palestinian terrorism and Russia in its attempts to pacify Chechnya. Indeed, analyses of the effects of political assassinations from antiquity through modern times document the infrequency with which the killing of a particular leader has produced the results hoped for by the assassin.

Some Attacks Have Risked or Produced Counterproductive Results

Experience also shows that leadership attacks can produce extremely harmful unintended consequences. Had U.S. bombing of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, as was proposed in World War II, killed Emperor Hirohito, Japan's surrender might have been significantly delayed at the cost of many additional American lives. The French hijacking of the Front de Libération Nationale leader Ahmed Ben Bella during the Algerian war proved to be a major blunder as it increased the militancy of both the front and its external-state supporters. The U.S. helicopter gunship attack on Somali National Alliance leaders in Mogadishu on July 12, 1993, also proved to be a major error in that it dramatically increased support for General Aideed and generated such strong anti-American sentiments that Somalis were thereafter motivated to kill U.S. troops.

The Threat of Direct Attacks and Coups Has Had Limited Coercive and Deterrent Effect

The prospect that the United States might mount a direct attack on a leader or attempt to foment and support his overthrow by a coup seems to have had little deterrent or coercive effect on enemy leaders. Castro, Qaddafi, Noriega, Saddam, and bin Laden all continued to pursue policies that were anathema to the United States after being targeted by such U.S. operations. None capitulated to U.S. demands even after what appeared to be narrow escapes from direct U.S. attacks.

Several factors seem to explain this defiant behavior. First, the leaders apparently believed that their security measures would allow them to successfully evade or defeat any future attacks on their person or power. Second, some of the targeted leaders also apparently believed that their acquiescence to the policy and behavior changes demanded by the United States might severely undermine their credibility and authority among the key constituencies that maintained them in power. Finally, some leaders were apparently sufficiently committed to their cause that they were willing to die for it.

Experience also suggests, however, that there may be circumstances in which an enemy leader will find it preferable to accept allied terms for war termination rather than run the risk that continued allied bombing might eventually spark a domestic upheaval sufficient to produce his overthrow. Some enemy leaders may be paranoid about the internal threats to their regime and may overestimate the potential danger caused by U.S. air operations. As a result, air operations might at times provide greater negotiating leverage than they actually merit.

Support for Rebellions Sometimes Produced Coercive Leverage

While not always fruitful, U.S. support for rebellions and resistance movements produced useful coercive leverage in several conflict situations. The covert support provided to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and to the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan helped prompt the withdrawal of external communist military forces from those countries. The covert assistance the

United States rendered to the Contras helped persuade the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua to terminate its arms transfers to the Salvadoran guerrillas and to hold democratic elections.

These successful U.S. operations shared several commonalities. In each instance, the United States (1) backed resistance movements that were able to recruit large numbers of motivated fighters; (2) enjoyed access to proximate base areas from which to mount its support operations; (3) was able to sustain its support over a protracted period; and (4) pursued political-military objectives that fell short of seeking the military overthrow of the incumbent enemy regime. The targeted regimes obviously saw things differently, however, perceiving any U.S. military support to their opponents as ultimately designed to secure their ouster. Finally, the United States augmented the bargaining leverage derived from its support of the resistance movements with broader packages of economic and diplomatic sanctions and incentives aimed at encouraging enemy acquiescence.

External Takedowns Produced More Certain and Lasting Results

The surest way to unseat a hostile regime is to oust it with external military force. Since the takedown of the Axis powers in World War II, the United States has invaded and occupied three states to remove enemy regimes: Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, and Haiti in 1994. In each instance, the United States disestablished the military and security services that had maintained the previous regimes in power and promoted elections to select new governing bodies and national leadership. Thus, the effect of a takedown on a targeted country's policy and behavior is likely to be more fundamental and lasting than is the effect secured by the elimination of a single head of state or by a coup d'état against a particular government.

The Threat of a Takedown Can Have Deterrent and Coercive Effects

For an enemy leader, the threat of overthrow and punishment by external military force may also have a greater deterrent and coercive effect than the threat of death or removal by direct attack or coup.

Whereas a leader may believe that he can evade or defeat these latter threats, the prospects for fending off a U.S. invasion would probably be viewed as quite another matter so long as the enemy leader believed that the United States possessed the political will and freedom of action to actually take down his regime. This seemed to be the case with Saddam during the Gulf War, when the threat of a possible Coalition march on Baghdad apparently prompted the Iraqi leader to instantly accept all Coalition demands at the Safwan ceasefire negotiations and helped deter him from using weapons of mass destruction in that conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN AND CONDUCT OF FUTURE LEADERSHIP ATTACKS

The historical analysis also provides insights about the likely conditions under which future leadership attacks might be sanctioned and the prerequisites of the effective use of air power in direct attacks and in support of coups, rebellions, and takedowns.

Potential Consequences Must Be Carefully Weighed

As with the physician, the decisionmaker's first concern in leadership attack should be to do no harm. Because such attacks can prove counterproductive, U.S. decisionmakers must be confident that the possible short- and long-term benefits of an attack will outweigh its possible costs. To make such assessments, decisionmakers should consult knowledgeable area experts to determine the likely reactions of enemy and other publics to a successful leadership attack, its possible impact on power relationships within the enemy camp, and how it is likely to affect the enemy policy and behavior that the United States wishes to modify. Particular importance should be attached to establishing the identification and probable policy orientation of the targeted leader's likely successor.

Situations Where Direct Attacks Are Likely to Be Sanctioned

The experience to date suggests that U.S. decisionmakers may be willing to sanction direct military attacks against enemy heads of state so long as the attacks can be

- justified under the right of self-defense as protecting important U.S. national interests
- said to be directed against enemy facilities that serve a military or security function, such as command and control
- conducted by uniformed members of the armed services in accordance with the law of armed conflict
- embedded in a larger military campaign in which other targets are being attacked as well.

Decisionmakers will be most willing to sanction leadership attacks when they believe the targeted leader is the key promoter or facilitator of the policy and behavior that the United States desires to change.

However, except in cases of notorious terrorists, such as Osama bin Laden, decisionmakers will continue to be loath to publicly concede that a specific enemy leader is the actual target of a U.S. attack. They will be particularly reluctant to sanction attacks that might appear to violate Executive Order 12333 prohibiting U.S. involvement in assassinations, such as employment of ruses to lure leaders to sites where they will be vulnerable to attack.

Prerequisites of Effective Air Attacks on Enemy Leaders

Because enemy leaders frequently change location to foil assassination plots and other threats, the success of any air attack will depend importantly on the availability of accurate, near-real-time or predictive intelligence about the leader's location and movements. Since U.S. forces must be capable of striking the target within the window provided by this intelligence, predictive intelligence will be essential if significant time is needed to mount an attack.

Special munitions may be required to successfully attack some leadership targets. In the event of another Korean conflict, for example, a large inventory of penetrating weapons would be needed to attack the numerous leadership and command, control, and communications sites that are located deep underground throughout North Korea. In situations where enemy leaders seek refuge from attack by relocating to civilian residential areas, accurate low-yield munitions

will be required to attack such sites without causing unacceptable civilian casualties.

Air Support to Coups and Rebellions

On its own, U.S. air intervention can neither negate many of the strengths that maintain a regime in power nor compensate for the fundamental deficiencies of the groups seeking its ouster. Under the right conditions, however, U.S. air power could enhance the prospects of a coup or rebellion. American air strikes conducted prior to the outbreak of active opposition could help stimulate a coup or rebellion and, if the attacks on the regime's security apparatus were sufficiently accurate, sustained, and intense, might even significantly weaken the regime's defenses against overthrow.

However, it is direct U.S. air support that holds the greatest potential for increasing the ultimate military success of coup and rebel forces. The very prospect of U.S. air support might embolden otherwise quiescent elements to move against the government, and the appearance of such support during an actual coup or rebellion might encourage some otherwise proregime forces to remain neutral or even to take up arms against the government. Along with such psychological effects, U.S. air intervention could also decisively tip the battlefield balance of power between opposition and regime forces.

Prerequisites of Effective Air Support to Coups. The key tasks that U.S. air power might perform in support of a coup include denying air support to regime forces; degrading regime command, control, and communications; interdicting regime armored and artillery forces; and providing close air support to embattled coup forces. Such U.S. air support is unlikely to be sanctioned or prove effective unless U.S. forces were (1) permitted to act overtly, which would constitute a major departure from past U.S. practice; (2) capable of establishing immediate communication with coup leaders to coordinate operations and avert fratricide; and (3) postured and prepared to intervene promptly.

Because the outcome of most coups is likely to be decided within hours rather than days, U.S. air units must be ready and able to respond on short notice. This will require prior agreement—both within the U.S. government and with the host nations from whose

territory U.S. operations would be mounted—about the actions U.S. forces might take in the event of a decision to support a coup. In the likely event that the United States had no forewarning of a coup, U.S. decisionmakers must be prepared to render a rapid judgment about whether the coup appeared to have sufficient military and political prospect to merit a U.S. involvement.

Prerequisites of Effective Air Support to Rebellions. Historically, rebellions have involved a wide spectrum of dissident activity ranging from the spontaneous and sudden popular uprisings that sometimes engulf discredited regimes to the protracted insurrections that are often conducted by alienated ethnic, religious, and political groups. To seize power, rebellions of all stripes must achieve a common end state: They must accumulate sufficient popular support and military force to defeat or subvert the military and security elements that maintain the regime's rule.

To oust a regime protected by numerous well-armed loyalist units, insurgents must be able to expand their forces and progressively move to higher levels of warfare. The transition from guerrilla and small-unit operations to mobile warfare typically requires extensive external arms, training, and logistical support. External air intervention could further facilitate and accelerate this transition by helping protect rebel forces when they are most vulnerable during the early defensive phase of their operations and by providing them with potent firepower when they later go on to the offensive. The specific tasks that might be performed by U.S. air elements in support of a rebellion include the full panoply of support operations typically provided U.S. ground forces.

For U.S. air support to help propel a rebel movement to victory, the following conditions would likely be required. First and foremost, the rebellion must possess sufficient cohesion, discipline, and popular appeal to eventually generate the troop strengths needed to effectively challenge government forces. Second, the terrain in which the rebels will initially operate must provide sufficient cover for small-unit operations. Third, proximate bases must be available for the equipping, training, and resupply of rebel forces and for the conduct of U.S. air operations. Fourth, U.S. forces must be willing to operate overtly. Fifth, since it may take years for an opposition group to gather sufficient strength to mount a successful overthrow, there

must be sufficient popular support—both within the United States and within the host nations providing bases—to sustain a protracted U.S. involvement. Finally, the United States must be prepared to escalate its military involvement in the event that its rebel clients or host-nation allies come under severe attack.

Air Support to Takedowns

Decisionmakers will be reluctant to sanction the invasion and occupation of an enemy state because of the potential political, financial, and human costs that might be incurred by such action. They will be particularly cautious about signing on to takedown operations that might entail significant U.S. casualties and protracted U.S. combat involvements. It is worth noting that all of America's post-World War II takedowns were targeted against governments that possessed extremely weak military forces that could be overwhelmed rapidly with little U.S. loss of life. Even so, the takedowns in Panama and Haiti were operations of last resort that were undertaken after other options for removing the regimes in those countries had been tried and had failed.

Prerequisites of Air Support to Takedowns. One can conceive of future circumstances in which U.S. decisionmakers might find it necessary to threaten or order the takedown of an enemy state possessing even sizable, well-equipped military forces. The precipitating events that might provoke such action would include situations where a hostile regime (1) caused or threatened to cause large numbers of U.S. military or civilian casualties by employing weapons of mass destruction; (2) sponsored or abetted repeated terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens and facilities; and (3) repeated a major act of aggression that the United States had previously helped repulse.

Since the minimization of U.S. casualties may be essential for sustaining public support for such takedowns, U.S. air elements will require the capability to gain air supremacy and prepare the battlefield so that any organized opposition to the invasion and occupation will be limited and short lived. This will require that U.S. forces have access to proximate bases or robust long-range strike capabilities and possess sufficient aircraft, missiles, and munitions to progressively degrade both the enemy's physical combat capability and his will to fight. In addition, U.S. forces will require the capability to

provide necessary airlift, interdiction, and close support to attacking ground troops. Because they may require robust forces, potential takedowns should be included among the major contingencies that size U.S. force postures.