
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

REMOVING ENEMY LEADERS WILL BE NEITHER EASY NOR ALWAYS BENEFICIAL

Because enemy leaders devote priority attention and large resources to the protection of their person and power, they have proved hard to kill and overthrow. Moreover, history shows that the demise of a targeted leader may not necessarily produce the change in enemy policy and behavior that the attacker desires. Even worse, an ill-considered leadership attack can produce unintended consequences that are seriously detrimental to the attacker's interests.

Over the past 50 years, the United States has had no success in removing enemy heads of state by direct attack and only very limited success in promoting the overthrow of hostile regimes by coup or rebellion. The only consistently successful way the United States has been able to remove hostile governments during the post-World War II era has been by invasion and occupation—and such takedowns have been attempted only against weakly armed opponents.

WHEN LEADERSHIP ATTACKS ARE MOST LIKELY TO BE SANCTIONED

This experience suggests that it may be unrealistic for U.S. decision-makers to rely on direct attacks or support to coups and rebellions to dissolve enemy regimes. Even so, U.S. decisionmakers are likely to continue to turn to these instruments in future conflicts and crises given the absence of other low-cost options for removing enemy leaders and the promising benefits that might accrue should such removal operations prove successful.

Decisionmakers will be most willing to sanction operations to remove an enemy leader when (1) important U.S. interests are harmed or threatened by an enemy's policy and behavior, (2) the leader targeted for attack is considered to be the key promoter or facilitator of this harmful policy and behavior, (3) the proposed U.S. operations would not violate the U.S. prohibition against assassination or the law of armed conflict, and (4) the operation holds some promise of success and can be accomplished without unacceptable human or political cost to the United States.

Direct attacks against leaders will most likely be sanctioned when they can be said to be directed against enemy facilities that serve a military or security function and when they can be embedded in a larger military campaign in which other targets are being attacked as well. Because takedowns involve the use of large military forces, risk significant U.S. casualties, and require protracted occupations, U.S. decisionmakers will resort to overthrow by U.S. forces only when they perceive other response options to be ineffective and vital U.S. interests to be at stake.

PREREQUISITES OF THE EFFECTIVE USE OF AIR POWER IN DIRECT ATTACKS, COUPS, REBELLIONS, AND TAKEDOWNS

Because leadership attacks can be extremely counterproductive, the decisionmaker must strive to determine that the likely benefits of a proposed operation will outweigh its probable costs. Past experience with unintended consequences shows that particular attention must be paid to ensuring that the potential downside consequences of the operation are adequately explored with knowledgeable area experts.

Fixed-wing aircraft and cruise missiles have become the instruments of choice for direct attacks on enemy leaders. Since such leaders tend to move frequently to foil attacks, the success of an air strike will depend importantly on the availability of accurate, near-real-time intelligence about the leader's location or predictive intelligence on his planned movements. Special penetrating weapons will be required to effectively attack command bunkers located deep underground; accurate, low-yield munitions will be needed to strike leaders who relocate to civilian residential areas.

If circumstances permit, the intervention of U.S. air power could enhance the prospects of a coup or rebellion that might otherwise

fail because antiregime forces lacked the firepower and other combat capabilities necessary to prevail on the battlefield. Aiding a coup would likely prove difficult operationally, given that the outcomes of most coups are decided within hours rather than days. Washington decisionmakers would have to be prepared to commit forces promptly, and U.S. air elements would need to be poised for immediate action. Communications would have to be rapidly established with the coup leaders to coordinate operations and avoid fratricide.

Providing combat support to a rebellion, while operationally less taxing, could prove difficult to sustain politically, given that it may take years for an opposition group to gather sufficient strength to overthrow an entrenched government. Political support would have to be sufficiently steadfast—both within the United States and among the host nations providing the U.S. with bases—to permit a protracted U.S. combat involvement. Furthermore, any extensive U.S. combat involvement would have to be overt, which would constitute a major departure from past U.S. practices and might make it difficult to secure the proximate bases needed to support U.S. air operations.

Since the minimization of U.S. casualties will be an important objective in takedowns, U.S. air elements would have to be sufficiently robust to gain air supremacy and prepare the battlefield so that any organized opposition will be limited and short lived. In addition, U.S. air elements would require the capability to provide necessary airlift, interdiction, and close support to attacking ground troops.

THE DETERRENT AND COERCIVE EFFECTS OF THREATS TO REMOVE LEADERS

The prospect that the United States might attack a leader directly or attempt to foment his overthrow by a coup d'état seems to have had little deterrent or coercive effect on enemy leaders. The leaders targeted by such U.S. operations over the years proved willing to continue to pursue policies that were anathema to the United States, no doubt partly because they believed they could successfully evade or defeat such attacks. However, there have been circumstances in which enemy leaders have found it preferable to accept allied peace terms rather than run the risk that continued allied bombing would eventually prompt popular uprisings that would topple their regimes.

While not always fruitful, U.S. arms and logistical support to rebel and resistance movements has produced useful coercive leverage for the United States in several Cold War conflict situations. In each instance, the United States sought political-military objectives that fell short of seeking the overthrow of an incumbent regime and augmented the bargaining leverage derived from its support of the resistance movements with economic and diplomatic sanctions and incentives.

For leaders of enemy states, the threat of overthrow and punishment by external military force may have a greater deterrent and coercive effect than the threat of death or removal by other means. The United States may have to increasingly rely on the threat of takedowns in confrontations with enemy regimes possessing WMD. To persuade enemies that it has the political will and military capability to conduct takedowns, the United States will need to maintain robust air, ground, and naval forces. Indeed, the potential need for such takedowns should be included among the major contingencies that size U.S. forces