

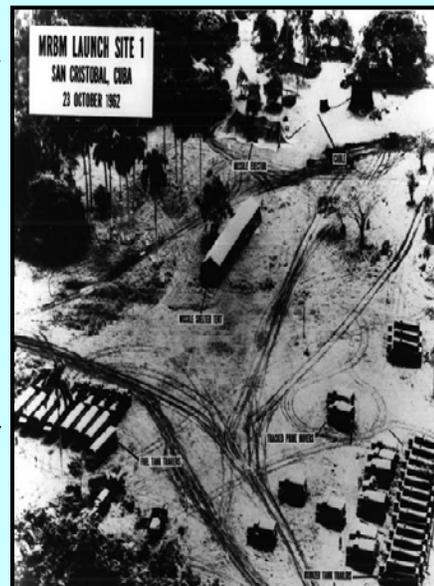


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STRATEGIC ATTACK

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE EMPLOYMENT

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During the Cuban Missile Crisis [and] the Korean War...the possibility of nuclear use—by one side—contributed to successful coercive diplomacy. As the confrontation over Cuba unfolded, US intelligence informed the Kennedy administration that Soviet nuclear forces were in a poor state of preparedness and that the United States could, if necessary, launch a devastating first strike with a low probability of a robust Soviet response. This dominance allowed Kennedy to stake out a demanding public profile; he knew that the costs of escalation would weigh more heavily on Moscow. In the Korean War, the North agreed to accept talks leading to the continued partition of the country in part because of the election of President Eisenhower, who threatened the use of nuclear weapons to end the conflict.



—Daniel Byman, Matthew Waxman, and Eric Larson,
Air Power as a Coercive Instrument

Parallel versus Sequential

Strategic attack (SA) is normally most effective when employed using parallel operations. Strikes on centers of gravity (COG) are almost always necessary, but a parallel approach—simultaneously striking a wide array of targets chosen to cause maximum shock effects across an enemy system—limits an adversary’s ability to adapt and react and thus places the most stress on the system as a whole. This may offer the best opportunity to trigger system-wide shock, thus inducing paralysis or collapse. The object is to effectively control the opponent’s strategic activity through rapid decisive operations. Even when this is not fully realized, parallel attack should work synergistically with other actions to cause favorable changes in enemy behavior.

Examples of successful parallel attack at the operational level abound. Coalition forces effectively destroyed Iraqi ground resistance using this approach during Operation DESERT STORM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). The Israelis used similar methods to achieve similar results against Arab armies in the 1956 and 1967 wars, and the Egyptians achieved it at the tactical level against the Israeli Bar-Lev defensive line in 1973. While the theoretical ideal of complete paralysis was not achieved in any of these instances, enemy forces were still prevented from functioning as coherent systems due to the effects of parallel attack. SA aims at similar effects upon an enemy system as a whole. During World War II, the Allies sought such effects against Germany, enjoying success during the last ten months of the war in Europe, when near-parallel and unrelenting attack on Germany's transportation network became feasible on a large scale. Coalition bombing during Operation DESERT STORM also approached this result, but the effect was fleeting and did not prevent the Iraqis from taking action such as launching the SCUD campaign against Israel. While not foolproof, a parallel

The successful prosecution of parallel war requires more than compressing sequential attacks into one simultaneous attack. Parallel war exploits three dimensions—time, space, and levels of war. In the opening hours of the Gulf War, all three dimensions were exploited:

- *Time—within the first 90 minutes over 50 separate targets were on the master attack plan. Within the first 24 hours, over 150 separate targets were designated for attack.*
- *Space—the entire breadth and depth of Iraq was subjected to attack. No system critical to the enemy escaped targeting because of distance.*
- *Levels of war—national leadership facilities (strategic level), Iraqi air defense and Army operation centers (operational level), and Iraqi deployed fighting units—air, land, and sea (tactical level)—came under attack simultaneously.*



—Maj Gen David A. Deptula,

Effects-based Operations: Change in the Nature of Warfare

approach may hold the best prospect of causing cascading changes throughout an enemy system.

In some circumstances, parallel operations may not be possible or desirable. Typically, political or resource constraints are what preclude the use of parallel operations. In these cases, attacks should be conducted so that the resulting effects attain the [objectives](#) in priority order. When employed this way, much of the mass and shock effects of airpower may be compromised.

One of the highest-priority enabling objectives for air commanders will always be to gain the degree of [control of the air](#) needed to make other operations possible. Advances in air defense technology may necessitate devoting a substantial weight of effort to obtaining air superiority. This should be done in concert with (and sometimes before) SA operations are commenced if there is a significant risk of losing the assets employed. The US found this was necessary during WW II, having lost thousands of bombers in attacks against the heart of Europe before switching focus to defeat of the Luftwaffe in early 1944. The effectiveness of Allied bombing improved remarkably after this was accomplished. The Israelis also found it necessary to neutralize the Egyptian ground-based air defense system before their air force could operate effectively against deeper targets during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

It is possible to combine parallel and sequential attack [strategies](#). Such a combination recognizes those cases where constraints and restraints may limit the ability to carry out simultaneous attacks, but incorporates as many of the advantages of parallel attack as possible. In combined parallel and sequential operations, high priority objectives are the focus of airpower's initial effort. At [phase](#) points, the campaign can be expanded to incorporate additional objectives, while continuing to ensure the previous requirements are met. For example, the first air component objectives might be to isolate national leadership; destroy [chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear](#) (CBRN) and the means of delivery; achieve air, space, and cyberspace superiority; and destroy certain [command and control](#) (C2) capabilities. Once these objectives have been met, air component operations could then expand to incorporate additional objectives, such as disruption of national fuel stocks, electric power, and transportation systems, or dislocation of enemy fielded forces. In effect, this was the approach adopted in Operation DESERT STORM, although the first "phases" were completed much faster than originally planned. The commander, Air Force forces, acting as the [joint force air component commander](#) can tailor an operation in this manner to a level that maximizes intensity but maintains focus and enhances control. A phased strategy, with varying operational intensity, may also be forced on commanders by external constraints, as occurred in Operation ALLIED FORCE (OAF), where North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces first struck opposing Serbian fielded forces operating in Kosovo, with negligible effect, and then turn to SA against legal leadership and dual-use targets in Serbia itself, which, combined with diplomatic initiatives, brought the Serbian regime to the negotiating table.

Coercion

[Coercion](#) is a concerted effort to modify an adversary's behavior by manipulating the actual or perceived costs and benefits of continuing or refusing to pursue a certain [course of action](#). A coercive strategy may involve one or more of several potentially overlapping mechanisms to include denial, leadership attack, power base erosion, unrest and weakening.

The mechanism by which SA can most effectively coerce the enemy is through denial, whereby it threatens the enemy with outright defeat or otherwise prevents them from achieving their military objectives. In this way, denial seeks to change enemy behavior by hindering or destroying their capability to fight. Denial can be implemented in two

ways; counterforce or counter-strategy. Counterforce reduces the enemy's capability to carry out its intended actions by affecting their ability to fight while counter-strategy seeks to convince the enemy that their actions will not succeed, instilling a sense of hopelessness. Denial convinces the enemy that defeat is inevitable and that it would be more prudent to capitulate sooner rather than later. In other cases, denial induces strategic paralysis within entire enemy [systems](#), thus rendering effective resistance impossible, i.e., denying the enemy the ability to act, at least temporarily. The Allied bombing campaigns that targeted German and Japanese industrial resources and the coalition strategic air effort against the Iraqi regime during Operation DESERT STORM and OIF are examples of this kind of denial.

Leadership attack (known sometimes colloquially as “decapitation”) threatens the enemy's military and national leadership. Attacking the military chain of command via counter-control attack supports denial by rendering enemy C2 ineffective. Attacking national leadership via counter-regime attack supports power base erosion by putting at risk the regime's ability to maintain power. Enemy regimes either comply with the coercer's demands or risk removal from power. SA has been used extensively for both types of leadership attack. The “opening shot” of OIF was a counter-regime attempt to kill Saddam Hussein with a bomb. Although unsuccessful in its intended direct effect, it still sent a message to Hussein and other Iraqi leaders that their regime was at risk. The extensive campaign against terrorist leaders since 2001 using unmanned aircraft systems is to some extent counter-“regime,” but is primarily counter-control, in order to prevent future acts of terrorism around the world.

Power base erosion is tied to leadership attack and involves threatening a regime's relationship with its key supporters. SA can accomplish this by using air strikes to turn elites against a regime or foster concern among key decision-makers. This mechanism can backfire. For example, in Operation EL DORADO CANYON, US air strikes on Muammar Gaddafi's command centers, a naval special operations training school, a military portion of the Tripoli airport, and barracks of elite troops did not have one of their intended effects—provoking the Libyan military to overthrow his regime. Instead, the raids appeared to strengthen Gaddafi vis-à-vis his rivals. More recently, however, NATO SA strikes and direct support for rebel troops did succeed in toppling Gaddafi, giving a successful example of SA used for power base erosion and showing the value of counterforce attacks and SA working in synergy to help topple a regime.

Finally, SA of valid military objectives can have the coercive effect of creating unrest among an enemy's population and/or weakening of the enemy's infrastructure. These mechanisms are aimed at impacting the enemy's popular will or perception. In the past, these mechanisms have involved directly targeting civilian populations to increase disaffection and pressure the adversary leadership to accept the demands of the coercer. Today, however, the law of war, which is legally binding on the US, prohibits making civilians and civilian objects the object of attack. The US remains committed to the principles that support these laws. Additionally, historical evidence suggests that strategies directed against an enemy's civilian population seldom succeed.

Early attempts to coerce the enemy through SA had a mixed record of success. In the Korean War, the “strategic” air effort against the North's resources was unsuccessful,

however, North Korean concerns that we would escalate by using nuclear weapons helped bring about a permanent cease-fire. Initial SA efforts in Vietnam also failed due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and motivation of the enemy. Nevertheless, LINEBACKER II did aid in persuading the North Vietnamese to accept a limited settlement that permitted US withdrawal from the war. Now, however, with the advent of precision weaponry, the US is capable of carefully managing the destructive effects of SA, thereby significantly reducing collateral damage, especially against non-CBRN targets. This capability enables the US to use these coercive mechanisms in a way that better complies with the international law of war (see the [Department of Defense \(DOD\) Law of War Manual](#) for more information) and enables a more discriminate use of airpower, improving SA's coercive ability. In fact, coercive use of SA proved indispensable to success in Operation DELIBERATE FORCE (ODF) and Operation ALLIED FORCE (OAF).

Past operations have shown that successful coercion with airpower is a product of one or more of the following factors:

- ✦ **Escalation Dominance.** Escalation dominance is the ability to increase the enemy's costs of defiance while denying them the opportunity to neutralize those costs or counter-escalate. Nuclear response remains the ultimate form of escalation dominance and its threat is still valuable in deterring an adversary's use of CBRN, but many non-nuclear applications of SA offer options as well. The credible threat of a major increase in the tempo or destructiveness of bombing may be effective, as may a change in intended effects: switching from attacks on purely military targets to attacks on dual-use infrastructure (civilian infrastructure supporting military functions). Both of these proved effective against the Milosevic regime during OAF. Escalation dominance should be planned through the full spectrum of actions and counter-actions in the conflict. Effective use requires a clear understanding of the desired friendly political and military end state.
- ✦ **Defeating the Enemy's Strategy.** SA can accomplish this in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious, deterring or denying use of CBRN may be accomplished through threat of nuclear response or by limited or threatened conventional attacks on production and delivery systems. Direct strikes against enemy leadership (as in OEF) or its connectivity to instruments of national power (such as control links to fielded forces, as in Operation DESERT STORM), can remove strategic options, (but note that strikes on political leaders who play no part in operational command or control of armed forces are generally prohibited (see the [DOD Law of War Manual](#), paragraph 5.8.4, for further guidance). Effects of the sort discussed above may be difficult to achieve with SA alone.
- ✦ **Magnifying Threats from Third Parties.** In many cases, threats to a hostile regime from third-party sources, such as internal dissidents or a nation external to the conflict, can wield significant coercive power. SA can contribute to such coercive efforts by reducing the ability of an adversary to defend against a hostile third power or by weakening internal control mechanisms, thus highlighting the fragility of the regime. Efforts of the latter sort played a part in Saddam Hussein's decision to begin

his troops' withdrawal from Kuwait during Operation DESERT STORM, and in Slobodan Milosevic's decision to come to terms with NATO during OAF. Strikes against dual-use assets like electrical power, in addition to having system-wide denial effects, may prove effective in coercing regimes in which popular unrest is an issue, but collateral humanitarian concerns should also be considered.

- ★ **Credible Threat or Use of Force.** The use of SA, or the threat of its use, should be credible in an adversary's mind if coercion is to be successful. Through words and actions, we must be able to convey to the enemy that we can and will deliver on our promises. Success hinges on the integration of physical attacks with the right informational, diplomatic or economic activities to demonstrate that we have both the will and the capability to endanger what they value. The restricted and graduated nature of US SA efforts in Operation ROLLING THUNDER failed to convey to the North Vietnamese leadership that we intended to inflict damage meaningful enough to warrant even a temporary halt to their military action in South Vietnam. In LINEBACKER II, by contrast, the US was able to deliver a threat of retaliation with sufficient scope and intensity to coerce a limited settlement from North Vietnam.

There is a danger here: while successful threats or use of force can enhance credibility, unsuccessful use can just as easily destroy credibility. The "mystique" of certain forms of airpower (such as the B-52 bomber) helped convey the seriousness of US intent during the LINEBACKER operations. On the other hand, some have argued that airpower "failed" in Vietnam, hurting America's overall military credibility. While US failure in Vietnam was a failure of overall political and military policy, not of airpower alone, the perception of the "failure of airpower" in some circles led many to discount its capabilities as a coercive tool for a number of years. This may have contributed to Saddam Hussein's decision calculus when planning for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Hussein's pre-war statements concerning US airpower lend credence to this idea) and contributed to the failure of American efforts to coerce Iraqi withdrawal from that country during Operation DESERT SHIELD.

- ★ **Enemy Vulnerability and Susceptibility to Coercion.** Not all enemies can be coerced and an enemy who was successfully coerced in the past may not be coercible in the future. For coercion to succeed, the enemy must not be so desperate or so devoted to their course of action that they are unwilling to change their behavior for anything short of complete subjugation. Traditionally, parties to ethnic, religious, civil, or national liberation wars have been difficult to coerce. Coercion may still be possible in such conflicts, but it may be more difficult, take more time, and require more force to affect. In general, the coercive "track record" of SA in Vietnam was very poor, due mainly to the implacability of enemy leadership. A dramatic escalation in the level of force used, however, did wrest moderate concessions from the North Vietnamese during LINEBACKER II, albeit at a substantial political cost back in the US.

- ★ **Detailed Understanding of Enemy Leaders' Thinking and Motivations.** This is necessary for most aspects of planning and executing SA, but is particularly vital for successful coercion. US failure to understand North Vietnamese leadership led to

coercion's poor performance in that war. Much more sophisticated appreciation of the enemy (for example, strike and information operations against dual-use commercial assets controlled by the Serbian ruling elite) enabled successful coercion of Slobodan Milosevic during OAF.

Complementary Operations and Synergy. While SA offers commanders independent, potentially decisive options, it is usually most effective when employed in conjunction with surface forces and other instruments of national power. SA contributes to and benefits from the synergistic effects of other operations. [Counterspace operations](#) and [information operations](#) (IO) separate an adversary from indigenous or third party support, preventing enemy space or information systems from interfering with SA. Surface maneuver benefits from and supports SA by creating a dynamic environment that the enemy must confront with degraded capabilities. Land offensives create high demands upon both enemy infrastructure and fielded forces by speeding consumption of vital war materiel, thus potentially creating enemy critical vulnerabilities.

SA may have immediate effects that enhance other operations. For example, during Operation DESERT STORM, one objective was to sever Iraqi leadership's communication links to its fielded forces. The critical vulnerabilities within these links were the fiber optic lines that ran across the Tigris River bridges in Baghdad. Coalition aircraft destroyed these bridges, crippling the Iraqi national C2 network, which greatly contributed to accomplishment of theater objectives against Iraqi forces in addition to weakening Iraqi leadership.

Complementary operations can enhance delayed strategic effects. Many times, counterforce operations can work hand-in-hand with SA to place maximum pressure on an enemy system. Similarly, SA can be used to force crucial elements of enemy fielded forces into a conflict, where they can be destroyed by complementary counterforce action.
