



The Airpower Strategy Dilemma: The Case for Denial in Modern Warfare.

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that denial is the most effective airpower strategy for achieving military and strategic objectives in modern warfare. It contrasts denial, which focusses on degrading the adversary's core military capabilities, with the three other airpower strategies: punishment, risk, and decapitation. It demonstrates through historical evidence, ethical and pragmatic considerations that denial remains the most viable option for winning any modern conflict in strategic terms. While denial has delivered tangible results on the ground by weakening the military capabilities of the adversary and increasing their vulnerability, the other three strategies have often relied on unverified conjectures about the expected behaviors of the adversary's population and leadership. The paper also proves that denial has consistently been the most instrumental airpower strategy in achieving victory through coercion while offering long term strategic advantages such as the undermining of the military apparatus of the adversary without compromising the stabilization process and the political sustainability of "the day after." These findings are further corroborated, in the paper, by the outcomes of the latest Israeli wars in Gaza and Lebanon 2023-2025).

Keywords: Denial, Punishment, Decapitation, Risk, Airpower, Strategy, Warfare, Coercion.

Introduction

It is the political objective of any war (e.g., peace enforcement, humanitarian protection ...) which primarily dictates which airpower strategy is the most appropriate. Conversely, the effectiveness of any airpower strategy depends on how well it aligns with the political objectives of the war in question. Airpower strategy is so essential to any military campaign that its failure may force a shift in overall war strategy, requiring massive ground forces or alternative forms of warfare. Moreover, airpower strategies require significant resources, the prioritization of which may strain other aspects of the war effort. Hence, an airpower strategy is not only a tool for executing military objectives but also a fundamental component that shapes the overall strategy of a war. Its effectiveness and appropriateness depend on the specific context of each conflict, requiring political and military leaders to continuously assess and adapt their approaches based on real-time developments and outcomes.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, airpower has acquired an increasingly significant role in modern warfare. Hence, the premium put, since the 1980s, on the principles of Air-Land Battle, in terms of the integration of air and ground forces. This reflects the transformative role of airpower in modern warfare through its ability to shape the battlefield, support ground operations, and achieve strategic objectives. Different airpower strategies have therefore been devised and used in major conflicts and 'small wars' alike. Theorists have classified these strategies into four categories: denial, punishment, decapitation and risk. Since war, according to Clausewitz, is an act of force to compel our enemy to do 'our' will, it is legitimate to ask which of these four strategies is most effective in coercing¹ the adversary and thus winning the war. This paper argues that denial, which consists of degrading the adversary's core military capabilities (e.g., logistics, command structures, operational bases) to compel them to concede, remains invariably the most optimal airpower strategy for waging modern war.

This contention will be substantiated hereinafter by an empirical comparison between denial strategy and each of the other three strategies. The comparison will be corroborated by pertinent historical evidence and other relevant aspects of modern warfare such as the growing impact of social/media and Information Operations on modern warfare, as well as specific cultural factors. The lessons learned from the most recent conflicts, namely Israel's war in Gaza and Lebanon (2023-2025) will be drawn on to cast more light on the validity of this article's main assertion.

Denial Vs. Punishment

In contrast with punishment, denial has proven historically and ethically to be more effective in winning modern wars. The history of airpower in modern conflicts shows indeed that the outcome of war has always been determined more through denial than through punishment. During World War II, for

¹ Coercion is defined as "efforts to change the behaviour of a state by manipulating costs and benefits". Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 4.

instance, the advocates of punishment were initially seeking to effect coercion. Their chief concern was actually to achieve strategic denial through the destruction of the industrial centres that provided armament and ordinance to enemy combating forces. However, since the technology of the time did not permit good bomber penetration, navigation and precision, they chose to shift to the otherwise less complicated “terror bombing” campaigns (Biddle 2002, 256). They therefore had to rationalize punishment as “aerial attempts to inflict enough pain on enemy civilians to overwhelm their territorial interests in the dispute and to cause either the government to concede or the population to revolt against the government” (Pape 1996, 59).

In addition, the tenability of punishment, as opposed to denial, is called into question in view of the effects it is supposed to yield during a war. To date, no single conflict has been abridged through conventional punishment alone. As Pape argues in his book *Bombing to Win* (1996), coercive success requires either destroying the enemy's military capacity to contest the territory or extending the threat of punishment to nuclear levels. As evidenced by WWII, punishment raids did not fulfil their objectives in Germany and Japan (Pape 1996, 135). Likewise, during the Korean War both China and North Korea were willing to “countenance great civilian costs and risks to achieve their goals which for both countries were driven by nationalism” (Pape 1996, 151). Thus, as long as the enemy's government had the means (military capabilities) to pursue its objectives, it was willing to accept heavy civilian casualties. Therefore, military denial to destroy and neutralize these capabilities remains a more effective airpower strategy in terms of coercion.

More importantly, compared to denial, punishment is by far less sustainable given its ethical implications. In the age of real time coverage by mass media and social media, punishment strategy is more likely to yield counterproductive results. It is indeed becoming increasingly difficult to conduct punishment strikes without being ripped by the media and public opinion. If the bombing of population centres was not immoral to those with World War I fresh in their minds (May 2005, 2), it has become nowadays more difficult and even unthinkable to publicly justify the deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of population centres in the name of the logic of war. In addition to the dilemma posed by what Michael Waltzer (1977) calls the “Moral reality of war” (15), punishment strategy involves a disproportionate use of force and “sacrifices much of the moral authority the coalition brings to a conflict” (Wrage 2003, 13).

More to the point, unlike denial, punishment attacks also readily play into the hands of the adversary who is eager to capitalize on the dramatic images of the bombings to conduct successful information operations that mobilize rather than alienate the local populations. The adversary is thereby provided with opportunities to globally leverage media and social media counter-narratives against their opponents. Extreme outrage in public opinion to civilian casualties, both locally and globally, has made punishment strategy's reliance on inflicting civilian suffering to become untenable. Recent developments in Gaza convincingly illustrate this point. The Israeli campaign has demonstrated that targeted airstrikes aimed at neutralizing military infrastructure can be more effective than broader punitive measures that risk civilian casualties and provoke international backlash. The Israeli campaign has faced a particularly harsh scrutiny for its impact on civilians. Accusations of genocide and international arrest warrants were even issued against key political leaders, thereby further reinforcing the argument that the denial strategy is more sustainable and ethically defensible than the punishment strategy.

In short, denial is not only more effective than punishment in terms of military coercion but it also aligns with ethical sustainability and offers significant strategic advantages. So much so that Punishment strategies are often marred by limitations and adverse consequences, making denial a more viable option for achieving strategic objectives while minimizing harm and suffering to civilian populations.

Denial Vs. Risk Strategy

As far as the risk airpower strategy is concerned, it is by far less effective in comparison to denial, in achieving military and strategic objectives. Risk strategy, often defined as incremental punishment, involves much of the above-mentioned shortcomings of the punishment strategy. It consists of escalating punishment incrementally to compel the opponent to concede in order to avoid suffering future costs (Pape 1996, 66). However, if the actual bombing of civilians never yielded the desired results, as shown above, how could the threat to do so be more effective

Historical evidence again confirms that the risk strategy had not been of great use in coercing the enemy. For instance, even the use of the ultimate threat -nuclear bombing- against China and North Korea did not work in the Korean War, but denial did. Having failed, in May 1951, to persuade the Chinese, through the movement of nuclear-armed B-29s, to call off the communists' largest offensive of the war, the US resorted to massive air interdiction (Pape, 144). The US military then realized that “undermining the communist forces' ability to maintain their positions” was the “best way to ensure that an armistice would be signed quickly” (Ibid.).

Additionally, all denial campaigns involve elements of risk for the opponent. The risk elements are the prospect of more air strikes to come and the threat of probable military failure. Such prospect when used properly within effective information operations campaigns and judicious diplomatic moves can largely fulfill the effects of the risk strategy. It is particularly the case with what General O.P. Weyland called, during the Korean War, “periods of calm” that can represent “Thresholds of Decision” to hold enemy hostage or increase coercive pressure (Chandler 2015, 78). Even in terms of economy of force, denial strategy, like risk campaigns, is mindful of inducing cost effectiveness calculations by the enemy. The difference is that it relies in its calculations more on empirical results on the ground than on conjectures about the opponent's behavior. Denial strategies indeed “seek to thwart the enemy's military strategy for taking or holding its territorial objectives, compelling concessions to avoid futile expenditure of further resources” (Pape 1996, 69).

More to the point, risk strategy does not withstand the test of cultural factors such as the “martyrdom spirit.” This cultural driver in particular has significantly demonstrated the limitations of the risk-based approach in the war on Gaza and South Lebanon. When adversaries, such as Hamas and Hizballah, frame their struggle in terms of martyrdom, they cultivate a strong ideological commitment among their fighters and supporters, making them less likely to concede under threat. This culturally instilled sense of purpose has led to increased resistance against Israeli military pressure, as individual

fighters view their sacrifices as noble and necessary for the cause they hold on to, especially with the powerful motivation of the ultimate reward of paradise in the afterlife. Consequently, rather than compelling Hamas or Hizballah to yield through escalating threats, the risk strategy has backfired, leading to greater entrenchment and mobilization among adversary ranks. The emotional and ideological dimensions of martyrdom have also created a powerful narrative of resistance that has galvanized support from the local population and beyond, making it difficult for Israel to achieve its objectives through the threat of annihilation alone.

Another aspect that has long been ignored by the proponents of the risk strategy is the significant impact the sunk cost fallacy. Indeed, this fallacy may most likely drive adversaries to become more resolved when they perceive that they have already made substantial investments and sacrifices in resisting bombing pressure. Their psychological commitment can result in increased reluctance to negotiate, as they come to believe that conceding would render their past efforts and losses futile. Moreover, adversary's leaders who declined compromise at earlier stages of the confrontation, may fear for their own political survival and popular legacy if they concede somewhat belatedly and would choose to double down on their adamance. Furthermore, if an enemy views escalating threats as a sign of desperation rather than strength, they may feel emboldened to resist further. Such a dynamic may create a dangerous escalation spiral, where both sides hold firm to their positions, thus prolonging the conflict and making resolution more complex and challenging. Historical precedents largely illustrate how reliance on sunk cost logic can yield counterproductive outcomes. During the Vietnam War, for instance, U.S. leaders often escalated their involvement based on prior commitments and investments, despite mounting evidence that victory was unlikely (Gravel 1971, 250-275). These precedents align with the "commitment trap" or "escalation of commitment" theories, which suggest that decision-makers within State and non-State actors, are likely to continue a failing course of action due to the heavy resources already invested (Brockner 1992, 39-61).

All in all, risk strategy, as incremental punishment, is generally more bound to fail than denial strategy. This assertion gains even more traction when risk is considered under the light of the sunk cost fallacy and specific cultural drivers that may further reinforce an adversary's resolve rather than compel them to concede. Much of these concerns apply also to decapitation strategy.

Denial Strategy Vs. Decapitation Strategy

Denial strategy is more pragmatic and sustainable than decapitation strategy. Decapitation strategy is, in fact, predicated on the premise that the bombing of a small number of political and economic targets can sever the ties between the adversary's leadership and its political and military control leading eventually to strategic paralysis (Pape 1996, 212). Such an assumption has not yet been corroborated in any modern conflict where airpower had a say. Although many decapitation attempts have been made in modern conflicts through airpower, very few of them succeeded, thanks to the latest improvements in ISR and AI capabilities. For instance, the attempted decapitations in Desert Storm (Instant thunder) and OIF (the Dora Farms) failed to meet their objectives to kill, overthrow or isolate Saddam's regime (Ibid.). On the contrary, it was denial operations that coerced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait (Ibid.). Likewise, the operation in Panama in 1989 showed that it is difficult to find the enemy's leadership, even with troops on the ground (Ibid. 19) let alone with planes in the air.

Furthermore, decapitation has legal and ethical implications that should be seriously taken into consideration. Decapitation may indeed be construed as an overt assassination attempt against the government of a state that is a member of the United Nations, and whose leaders may be democratically elected as it was the case with Milosevich during Operation Allied Force. Additionally, even in the off-chance decapitation succeeds, the consequences for the rest of the campaign are unknown. The chaos that occurred after the regime changes in Iraq and Libya is indicative of the dangers associated with the sudden collapse of strong and well entrenched governments. In the same vein, the capture or the killing of the commander in chief does not guarantee that the fighting will stop. Successful decapitation may well generate anarchy and political chaos that are likely to complicate the stability and reconstruction phases later. Neither the capture and subsequent execution of Saddam nor the killing of Al Zarqoui quelled the violence and havoc wrecked respectively by Baathist insurgents and Al Qaeda/Daesh operatives in the post OIF Iraq. Conversely, in the case of Japan, coercion succeeded because the Emperor was left in place (Pape 1996, 82). Likewise, it was a democratic movement spurred by military defeat that led to the downfall of Milosevich (Wrage 2003, 13) after the end of Operation Allied Force, not decapitation.

In contrast, denial significantly increases the vulnerability of the adversary's military strategy and compels their leaders to concede to the other party's conditions thus permitting a smooth transition to the termination of the war. Denial also has the advantage, in addition to being coercive, of contributing to the achievement of other strategic goals such as the destruction of an adversary's military capabilities so that it no longer represents a threat to their neighbours, as it was the case with Iraq during Desert Storm (Pape 1996, 245).

In the context of Gaza and Lebanon, the assassination of Hamas' top leaders (Haniyeh, Sinwar) and Hizballah's Nasrallah did not lead to crucial disruptions. Instead, both organizations managed quickly to replace their leaders with individuals who were equally committed to their objectives. This continuity highlights a fundamental flaw in the decapitation strategy: it assumes that removing a leader will incapacitate the organization, which is often not the case in well-structured, well-motivated groups that have pre-established succession plans. Moreover, the ideological/religious commitment of Hamas and Hizballah members to their cause often outweighs the impact of losing individual leaders. The organizations' strong ideological frameworks foster loyalty among their ranks, allowing them to absorb leadership losses without diminishing their operational capabilities and resolve. This was evident in the aftermath of their leaders' assassinations, as Hamas and Hizballah continued their military activities and informational efforts, rallying support from their bases.

More to the point, the targeted killings of prominent leaders can inadvertently bolster the adversary's narrative. In Gaza, for instance, the killings of Haniyeh and Sinwar were framed as martyrdom by Hamas, which galvanized popular support and sympathy for their cause. This phenomenon illustrates how decapitation strategies can backfire, as they may enhance the resolve of the enemy rather than weaken it. Following the assassinations, both

organizations hailed the “ultimate sacrifices” of their “diehard” leaders, while adapting their operational strategies to mitigate the impact of leadership losses. They decentralized their decision-making processes, allowing for more flexibility in response to Israeli actions. This adaptability demonstrates a key limitation of decapitation strategies: it often fails to account for an adversary's ability to evolve in response to external pressures

In sum, denial appears to be a more pragmatic and sustainable approach than decapitation, leading eventually, through the calculated degradation of enemy's capabilities, to a more controlled resolution. In comparison, the elimination of enemy leadership remains an ineffective and risky strategy, often failing to achieve its objectives and potentially causing unintended consequences like increased instability and radicalization.

Conclusion

In summary, decision makers are expected to opt for the most adequate airpower strategy in order to ensure the success of the overall strategy of a war. However, historical evidence, as argued in this paper, have shown that, invariably, the denial strategy has proven to be the most effective one in virtually most of past campaigns. The application of the three other strategies in modern conflicts (punishment, risk or decapitation) has not yielded the results anticipated by airpower theorists. In terms of coercion, as demonstrated above, denial strategies offer more leverage than punishment, risk or decapitation. While denial delivers tangible results on the ground by weakening the military apparatus of the adversary and increasing their vulnerability, the other three strategies rely on conjectures about the expected behaviors of the adversary's population and leadership. In addition to this, all of the three strategies raise legal and ethical considerations. Such considerations may undermine an army's “high moral ground” and play into the hands of the adversary at the age of real-time media/social media coverage and intensive use of Information Operations. More to the point, the fact that denial primarily targets military objectives, while sparing political, social and economic fabrics, makes it particularly valuable in conflicts where long-term stabilization and post-war political sustainability—often referred to as “the day after”—are key concerns. Indeed, denial undermines the opponent's fighting capabilities without necessarily dismantling their state institutions. In so doing, it does not breed insurgencies, long-term resentment or radicalization, thus facilitating reconciliation and reconstruction.

However, even if denial has emerged as the most effective airpower strategy in modern warfare, the advent of elusive warfighting paradigms such as hybrid operations is posing new challenges to airpower. As warfare evolves, it is crucial that existing airpower strategies adapt accordingly to address hybrid threats, while upholding ethical standards and maintaining public support. There may be as well a need for developing novel airpower strategies based on innovative technologies such as drones, ethical Artificial Intelligence and precision warfare to deal with more complex environments. This is especially the case since these fluid environments increasingly involve situations where State and non-State actors, conventional and unconventional tactics, kinetic and non-kinetic operations blend seamlessly to create more ambiguity and fog of war, making the use of any of the four traditional airpower strategies fraught with even more uncertainties.

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