LEADERS AS TARGETS

Lieutenant Colonel Mark B. Chakwin, USA
Lieutenant Colonel Dieter Voelkel, GE AF
Major Scott Enright, USAF

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Dr. David Winterford
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Biographies

Lieutenant Colonel Mark B. Chakwin, USA, was commissioned in Armor in 1981. He has held many armor and cavalry staff and command assignments and now serves as a Foreign Area Officer (48F) assigned as China Country Director at the U.S. Pacific Command's Directorate for Strategic Planning and Policy (J-5).

Lieutenant Colonel Dieter Voelkel, GE AF, was commissioned in Air Force in 1981. He has held several positions in staff and command in the Air Defense branch. At present he is deputy commander of a tactical air control battalion in Freising (South Germany).

Major Scott Enright, USAF, received his commission in 1987 in the field of Communication-Information. He subsequently worked in the former Strategic Air Command, U.S. Space Command, NATO, and Air Intelligence Agency. He is en route to a staff officer position at Headquarters, Defense Information Systems Agency.

Targeting of threat leaders by military strikes is increasingly being touted as an option for crisis resolution. Operational and strategic level commanders face greater pressure than ever to employ this option. A survey of the legitimacy, capability, and efficacy of targeting enemy leaders shows that commanders may have the right and ability to target threat leaders. However, the lack of positive effects for such targeting, both in theory and in practice, argues that commanders shouldnot pursue this approach.

Introduction

Today, the United States is using all elements of national power to wage war on terrorism[1]. Polls indicate that the American public supports this war. [2] Moreover, these polls also suggest that the public looks favorably on possible efforts to target and kill the terrorist Al Qaeda leader, Osama Bin Laden.[3] This is not an unusual attitude for the American people, who also have responded positively in questions about possible use of military force against Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to remove him from power.[4]

This attitude also draws attention to the notion of leadership targeting as an option for operational- and strategic-level military commanders, when they plan the use of military power in crisis resolution. Belligerents in modern history have generally balked at specific military targeting of threat leaders,[5] but polls suggest that, at least in the United States, a military strike against a threat leader could be an approved solution to crisis resolution.

Definition and Scope

      "Targeting a leader" is conducting a focused military attack against the dominant military or civil enemy leader who guides an enemy in a war or crisis. A wider examination of history legitimacy and efficacy for this issue also considers assassination (civilian and military), defined later. However, the present consideration is on the target (leader) and effects and not those issues surrounding the assassin.

Military Relevance

      Military operations have traditionally focused on identifying enemy centers of gravity and destroying them. Enemy leaders are not often highlighted as the center of gravity for a foe, but they can be. Clausewitz introduces one instance:

> Alexander had his center of gravity in his army, so had Gustavus Adol-
> phus, Charles XII, and Frederick the Great, and the career of any one of
> them would soon have been brought to close by the destruction of his
> fighting force . . . [The center of gravity for] a national insurrection
> [lies] in the **personalities of the leaders** and public opinion; against
> these points the blow must fall.[6] (emphasis added)

A contemporary military thinker offers another perspective:

> Destruction or isolation of any level of command may have serious—
> and perhaps fatal—impact on the unit or units subordinate to it. . . . As
> the death of a king on the field of battle meant defeat for his forces, so
> the effective isolation of the command structure in modern war has led
> to the rapid defeat of dependent forces.[7]

The role and importance of leaders has been expressly noted by Western governments, and has even served as a basis for post-conflict action against defeated leaders by war crimes tribunals.[8] These tribunals have not assessed the value of leaders in particular operations, but have affirmed both the unique position that leaders hold and the link between leaders and the actions of their forces. The post-conflict focus on leaders is yet

another forum to draw attention to the idea of targeting an enemy leader by military force for the next conflict or crisis.

There is historical precedent for leadership targeting, which in the past has been debated under the concept of assassination. "Seventeenth and eighteenth century scholars debated the use of assassination as a tactic of war. These authors believed that leaders of an opposing army or specific members did not enjoy absolute protection and were legitimate targets of attack."[9] This was more than abstract theory of the period. Targeting and eliminating opposition leaders was a common and accepted method to resolve numerous power struggles in Europe at least through the seventeenth century.[10]

Legal Norms and Leadership Targeting

Some researchers, however, take a different view and suggest that by the mid-seventeenth century targeting enemy leaders for elimination was increasingly viewed as counter to Western moral and social norms.[11] The rationale for this evolution is complex and rich enough to be the subject of a separate paper, but the combination of the emergence of nation states, large standing armies, and more elaborate political structures cultivated their view that ". . . by 1632 a collective understanding was emerging that the 'appropriate and legitimate' means of dealing with foreign antagonists was to send armies, rather than assassins against them."[12] The net effect of this development was to foster laws and norms that curtailed assassination or targeting of leaders not directly engaged or leading combat.

Time has further refined the views of the Western international community about how and when leaders can be targeted. Some states now have parsed the notion of assassination and the concept of military targeting leaders for attack as a combat operation into

two separate categories. Assassination, which the U.S. Army describes as "hiring assassins, putting a price on the enemy's head, and offering rewards for an enemy 'dead or alive,'" is prohibited under current U.S. military law.[13] Moreover, "during peacetime, the targeted killing of any individual, whether a combatant or not, is generally considered an assassination and is not permitted."[14]

Other Western nations share similar perspectives on assassination. The United Nations (UN), the largest organized voice of nations, does not support assassination in any form. Some UN members, however, including the United States, view at least one article of the UN Charter as providing legitimacy—via self-defense—for certain actions taken to target and remove enemy leaders. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter states:

> Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defense shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.[15]

Even without wording to support targeting enemy leaders, efforts to do so have been recommended in modern times by various leaders or staffs as means to resolve crises or wars. In recent times these have included planned or actual operations like those during World War II against Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto[16] and German leader Adolf Hitler,[17] or contemporary efforts against Columbian drug lord Pablo Escobar.[18] Some analysts also assert that the U.S. military air strikes in Libya in 1983, the U.S. inva-

sion of Panama in 1989, and the U.S. air strikes in Iraq in 1993 were efforts to target or decapitate threat leaders.[19]

A central element shaping the official U.S. perspective on assassination and leadership targeting since 1981 has been Presidential Executive Order 12333 (E.O. 12333). That directive followed from a Presidential order first prepared by President Ford in response to Senate hearings on CIA support for assassination efforts abroad. The parts of that executive order that applied to assassination are sections 2.11 and 2.12:

> 2.11 PROHIBITION ON ASSASSINATION. No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination.
> 2.12 INDIRECT PARTICIPATION. No agency of the Intelligence Community shall participate in or request any person to undertake activities forbidden by this order[20]

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, many questioned whether President George W. Bush would cancel E.O. 12333. At the time, Presidential spokesperson Ari Fleischer reiterated that E.O. 12333 had not been rescinded.[21] On the other hand, the president's moral authority to use force to strike enemy terrorist leaders was bolstered by a Joint Resolution of Congress on 14 September 2001 that gave the president authority to use "all necessary and appropriate force against 'persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on 11 September 2001.'"[22] This may be one reason why the President has not publicly rescinded E.O. 12333. Another may be that he accepts the validity of an existing federal brief, referenced below, which asserts that the United States may target enemy leaders without being in violation of E.O. 12333, or even the Law of Land Warfare.

According to reporter and writer Mark Bowden, after the first President Bush took office on 1989, his chief of International Law for the U.S. Army Judge Advocate Generals' office, W. Hays Parks, prepared a formal memorandum to clarify E.O. 12333. Parks's product was dated 2 November 1989 and initialed by the legal counsels for the State Department, CIA, National Security Council, Department of Justice, and Department of Defense. The memorandum concluded:

> The purpose of Executive Order 12333 and its legal predecessors was to preclude unilateral action by individual agents or agencies against selected foreign public officials, and to establish beyond any doubt that the United States does not condone assassination as an instrument of national policy. Its intent was not to limit lawful self-defense options against legitimate threats to the national security of the United States or individual citizens. Acting consistent with the Charter of the United Nations, a decision by the president to employ clandestine, low visibility, or overtly military force would not constitute assassination if the U.S. military force were employed against combatant forces of another nation, a guerrilla force, or a terrorist or other organization whose actions pose a threat to the security of the United States. [23]

Targeting Leaders

Even if popular opinion, congressional resolution, and legal opinion have opened the door for targeting leaders, military planners still need to assess their ability to do so. There are examples of U.S. military successes that confirm its ability to target leaders.

In United States history the most visible, and possibly most successful, example of targeting a military leader might be the raid on Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on 18 April 1943. In that raid, U.S. pilots ambushed Yamamoto's aircraft during the Japanese admiral's inspection tour of his forces. The raid succeeded in killing Yamamoto and injuring his Chief of Staff. It was acclaimed at the time for its effective use of intelligence and for eliminating one of Japan's best war strategists.[24] The United States

combat operations in Panama, which included traditional combat operations against Panamanian forces, also targeted then-Panamanian President Manuel Noriega for attack and seizure. The U.S. forces ultimately gained custody of Noriega and, following continued conventional military peace operations, restored stability that had been missing for the international community living in Panama.[25]

Another example of military targeting of military leaders was Britain's operation against German Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich, the SS general designated as *Reichsprotektor* in Bohemia and Moravia (Czechoslovakia), in 1942. The British intelligence services dispatched a team that ultimately succeeded in killing Heydrich.[26] British leaders who authorized that targeting have attested to the action's value to the war effort. Others, however, subsequently questioned its worth, since it elicited a swift and large-scale German retaliatory murder of at least 1,800 locals.[27]

Efficacy

Being permitted to target leaders is one element, being able to do so is another, the third, and perhaps the most important element in targeting leaders, is assessing the value of doing so. Even the preceding successful examples have evoked questions on the efficacy of those actions. Assessment of results must focus on determining how leadership-targeting would promote or attain the end state that the friendly commander seeks.

Such an assessment is difficult to accomplish for at least two reasons. First, the abstract nature of the results will always be part of either choice. What this means is that, when considering whether or not to target a leader, military strike-planners must evaluate "leader targeted" against "leader not targeted" outcomes. To do so will always involve

comparing one "real" outcome (whether a strike occurred or not) against an assumed future that did not occur, and that cannot be verified.

The second factor that makes such an assessment challenging is the large range of influences that affect operational and strategic-level environments. For example, the direct effects of suddenly eliminating a leader of a small or even middle-sized tactical combat operation can be directly linked to actions and reactions of that unit. However, this situation does not parallel that in operational or strategic-level environments. Units and organizations at those levels involve more sophisticated and elaborate command hierarchies, and also include political elements (and actions) with significant effects that are independent of specific combat operations or results. Assessing the effect of the loss of an operational or strategic leader at those levels becomes problematic. To describe this dilemma another way: ". . . we cannot say with certitude that similar outcomes would not have occurred in the absence of any military operations, or in the face of markedly different sort of military operations."[28]

Faced with these challenges, one approach for assessing the value of targeting an enemy leader might be to review the actions of enemy leaders with the goal of testing whether the enemy leader is or is not the enemy center of gravity for the threat:

> With regard to the problem of the outbreak of war, the case studies indicate the crucial importance of the personalities of leaders. . . . The personalities of the leaders on the other hand have often been decisive. . . . In all these cases [WW I, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Six-Day War, Iraq-Iran] a fatal flaw or ego weakness in a leader's personality was of crucial importance. It may in fact have spelled the difference between the outbreak of war and the maintenance of peace.[29]

This perspective is not unique. It is central to those who believe that the cause of many conflicts is rooted in a specific leader, whose influence provides a unique effect.

Remove that unique influence—target the leader—and the center of gravity for a crisis will be removed. Other authors, including Blainey (1988), generally concur, but expand or tailor the concept from an overarching leader to include the top leadership group of a nation. Warden's (1993) "Five Strategic Rings" theory also fits partially into this group emphasizing the paramount value of the leader, at least in some situations.[30]

Assessing whether the leaders represent the center of gravity for a crisis and (therefore) whether it is effective to target them has additional facets. Some authors posit that one should consider the psychological characteristics of those leaders or decision-makers. If leaders, including presidents or prime ministers, exhibit "intolerance of complexity," "ideological rigidity," or a "narcissistic compulsion to be loved by everyone," as well as other character traits, they are more likely to subscribe to a decision that would "bring on otherwise avoidable wars."[31] Assessing a leader's unique role (and value) in this line of analysis not only focuses on the actions, but also the psychological motivations to determine the value of the leader as a target.

Another approach to determining, in general, whether targeting leaders has value as an option for crisis/war resolution is to assess the role or position of leader in conflict resolution models. Political science models offer a unique way to separate the phases of conflict, to identify the relevant variables, and to analyze the interaction of both in a logical model. Conflict termination models, however, generally do not explicitly address the tactic of military targeting and eliminating a leader. They focus instead on morphing concepts and actors into variables that can be manipulated with academic rigor to reveal trends, patterns, or relationships. These models still can be useful to highlight the objec-

tive importance of leadership in the process, and to consider the value leader actions are given in the model-assessment process.

Barringer (1972) offers an elaborate model to characterize crises and project the conflict potential of courses of action. For example, in considering crisis termination he identifies a phase for conflict termination that he labels "P-IV." When he applied ten actual crises to a portion of his model, only one case (the Spanish Civil War, 3/39) actually identified a form of leadership targeting (a coup) to describe conflict termination P-IV.[32] No other branch or condition in his model had a case with leadership targeting. In addition, targeting leaders did not appear in the model as a primary or contributing factor. For Barringer, leadership targeting appears chiefly as an outlier. It was not a main element in his patterns of conflict.

Clarke (1992) offers another model for Conflict Termination.[33] He focuses on centers of gravity, but does not agree with the authors previously cited who view leaders as centers of gravity. Clarke posits (in part) that conflict termination relies on recognizing the center of gravity for both sides. His model structures commander decisions to protect friendly and undermine enemy centers of gravity. Clarke's main factors are the elements of national power coupled with a commander's recognition of both political and military objectives for the entire process. His model is notable in that it does not assume that leaders or their personalities are automatically centers of gravity. Moreover, Clarke also considers numerous factors, including size of force, disposition, and legal and political factors. He does not place a separate or unique value on the leader.

While not disputing it outright, neither of the preceding models reinforced the first school's assessment of leaders as centers of gravity. The first two approaches to as-

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sessing the efficacy of targeting leaders employed a macro view of conflict and sought to examine how leader-targeting "fitted in." It is more useful to do the reverse and focus on situations where leaders have been targeted or assassinated, and note the effects "from the inside."[34]

One case study (Havens, et.al. 1970) presented 10 assassinations in detail and reviewed more than 200 successful or failed attempts on heads of states or prominent leaders. Its blunt bottom line: "Close examination of the case studies as well as the corpus of modern assassination (as exemplified by the enumeration of assassinations in Appendixes A and B) indicates that the impact of an assassination on the political system tends to be low."[35] Havens and his colleagues added that, for a variety of reasons, even those leadership targetings or assassinations that succeeded were rarely guaranteed to change the political systems or conditions that motivated the action.[36]

Another study of assassinations or targeting of leaders identifies some of the immediate effects of the action.[37] "As for policy consequences in the wake of 'spontaneous assassinations' presumably the most probable result is an increase in the polarization of opinion and policy demands that the leader selected for murder has tried to avoid." This would suggest that a significant or "positive" result could occur and undo the targeted leader's actions. However, the Marvicks' analysis, including their review of Middle East situations, continues in detail along an *opposite* line:

> The immediate effect of a violent, nonlegitimate act such as assassination is to thrust into prominence those agencies and group spokesmen specializing in the management of violence. Within the government this means that security officers, internal and external, receive an increased measure of attention. . . . Non-governmental groups occupied with the manipulation of violence may find their positions threatened or enhanced by the murder of a public figure.[38]

A more recent study (Hudson, 2000) looked at the process and effects of assassination or targeting leaders. It offers similar results: "In over half the assassinations studied, therefore, the result was the exact opposite of what was intended; in one-third of the cases nothing much happened; in one case something else, a world war, was the result and in only one instance can it conceivably be said that the assassin's sponsor succeeded in his political aims."[39]

Most of the assassination analysts are content to identify the absence of a link between an assassination and subsequent political change. Hudson goes farther and challenges the unconditional perspective that targeting leaders will stop a crisis or effect a radical change:

> It is much easier to argue that Adolf Hitler or Slobodan Milosevic were personally responsible for the disasters that they appeared to initiate. Anger against a personality is easier to arouse than it is against a political system. But it was the resentful Germany of the 1930s with its hyperinflation and deep sense of inferiority that allowed Hitler to lead it. The tide of aggressive German Nationalism was to reach its peak before ebbing. Three wars in the last half of the nineteenth and two in the first half of the twentieth century were the result not so much of individual leaders as of the German character as it had developed for historical and geographical reasons over many centuries. . . . Milosevic did not create Serbian nationalism: he personified it. . . . Nonetheless, although leaders may only be able to lead when the conditions are right for them to do so, often they do guide their countries into situations which would not exist were it not for them.[40]

For Hudson, leaders can make a difference but their sudden elimination rarely guarantees sudden change or a cessation of the evil that some attribute (exclusively) to leaders of a regime.

Perhaps the most relevant study was RAND's "*Operations Against Enemy Leaders*" report that focused on U.S. military actions to target leaders. [41] In general the report

recognizes the permissibility and capability of U.S. forces to target leaders, but observes

that there is a low return for the risk and expense.

> The promise of such benefits [of military attacks to target leaders] 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 takedown operations conducted by U.S. invasion and occupation forces. Only the last form of attack has produced consistently successful results.[42]

The RAND study concludes with themes that echo the "assassination analysts":

> 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.[43]

Conclusion

Repeated polls show that the American public supports U.S. military efforts to target threat leaders when necessary. Authors like Hudson suggest that this is simply because these leaders represent the face of the enemy. Others, like Stossinger, argue that it is because the leader is the center of gravity for the threat. Still others, like Barringer, hint that leaders as centers of gravity are something of an exception.

The U.S. Government has defined its legal and moral legitimacy for taking military action against leaders when necessary. In addition, the U.S. military has demonstrated its capability and experience to do this mission, although not always successfully.

The fundamental question is reduced to a test on whether targeting a threat leader is likely to prevent or end a crisis or war.

Based on theory and U.S. experience, it generally is not. Therefore, while U.S. commanders may have the right and capability to target enemy leadership, the low probability of effecting crisis resolution, plus the costs and potential damages surrounding such an action cited by reports such as that of RAND, suggests that such targeting leaders for military strikes generally should not be carried out.

ENDNOTES

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[12] Thomas p. 14

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[19] Strikes summarized in Bowman, Stephen *When the Eagle Screams, America's Vulnerability to Terrorism*, (Writers' Club Press, San Jose), 2002, pp. 248-9; for one articulation of unofficial, but oft-cited comment that these strikes were targeting the leaders, see William Schlickenmaier's Editorials, *How to Fight a War,* on http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2603/ws4.html, May 1997

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[41] Hosmer, Stephen T., "Operations Against Enemy Leaders," RAND's Project AIR FORCE, 2001

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