



# SMALL WARS

---

## JOURNAL

---

## The Strategic and Operational Dynamics of Limited War

By *Adam Elkus*

Journal Article | Apr 17 2012 - 4:41am

Throughout military history, America has engaged in both limited and unlimited warfare. The Cold War saw the United States pursuing limited objectives rather than the complete destruction of an adversary. The threat of great power conflict and nuclear annihilation frequently had a restraining effect on local conflicts. In the post-Cold War period, the United States returned to unlimited warfare in regional interventions. Military operations and diplomatic pressure are used to overthrow target regimes. But political and strategic failures, fiscal constraints, and the growing military power of other states are prompting a return to limited war. Successful prosecution of limited wars, however, is contingent on a sound understanding of their strategic and operational characteristics. If the United States wages limited war, it must do so by setting genuinely limited objectives. This essay reviews strategic and operational considerations for the planning of limited war.

### Explaining Limited War

Warfare with unlimited goals ends in the destruction of an adversary as a political entity. Destruction need not be total in material character, as regimes have been overthrown without substantial bloodshed. But unlimited war, if prosecuted to its natural extremes, ends with the fall of a given political order and the creation of a new reality. While all war is to some extent characterized by ill intent, unlimited war always involves the escalation of an **adversary to an absolute enemy**. Such a total enemy is portrayed as dangerous, illegitimate, and criminal. The only remedy for such a foe is political annihilation.

Limited war, in contrast, does not climax in the political annihilation of an opponent. It seeks lesser objectives, such as territory or a shift in political behavior. It is true that limited war still involves enemies and enmity, and certainly it also has become much less genteel since the age of 18<sup>th</sup> century maneuver. Furthermore, limited war should not be mistaken as an alternative form of warfare. War has truly one nature, and **its character in any given conflict** is predominately determined by its political object.

Limited war also is not distinguished by limited *means*. The means employed to gain the object only loosely correlate with war aims. Decisive operations have enabled limited aims and economy of force operations are often utilized for wars with expansive objectives. The Gulf War was a limited conflict contingent on the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, yet it required a powerful combined-arms ground campaign and a massive air war. In contrast, the United States did not take on the hard work of ground combat in Afghanistan in 2001 or slug it out with Muammar Gaddafi's forces in Libya in 2011. Yet despite the limited character of the means Washington was willing to devote to those conflicts, their objects were the overthrow of adversary regimes.

Limited and unlimited wars are also ideal categories that **lie on a general spectrum of violence**. While

both ideational and material constraints limit warfare, these limits may be perceptible only in hindsight. During the heat of the Korean War, important figures within the American defense establishment contemplated expansion of the war to the Chinese mainland and the usage of nuclear weapons. The United States consistently misjudged the nature of the Vietnam War—it was a total war for both South Vietnam and North Vietnam, but Washington often behaved as if it were a limited campaign.

Political goals, strategic requirements, and political-military effects should be understood as interdependent in practice. If a stated goal is out of sync with its strategic requirements or somehow dissonant with the effects created, it may shift in real time. Policy is produced by politics, and strategy expresses policy through tactics and operations. Both endogenous and exogenous shifts can—and frequently do—shift the delicate policy-strategy balance achieved through the political process to a new equilibrium.

The Libya intervention demonstrates the unstable nature of policy and strategy in practice. Gaddafi's ability to harm civilians in Benghazi was the ostensible target of Western military forces in Libya. But his bloody efforts were an outgrowth of an active civil war that raised questions of both political and personal survival. The absolute enmity that characterized the conflict dictated that neither side would be satisfied with anything except total victory. Thus, ending the threat to civilians, as understood by Western policymakers looking from afar, led to the destruction of Gaddafi's armed forces. Because this destruction took place within the context of a civil war, the effect of Western military operations was the destruction of Gaddafi's regime and the rise of a chaotic, ambiguous, and frequently barbarous new political-military environment.

Even a war that achieves its policy aims cannot guarantee perpetual or even mid-range security. Consider two large-scale conventional wars that ended with operations against the enemy's capitol and forced territorial exchange--the US-Mexican War and the Franco-Prussian War. Conventional and irregular threats on the US-Mexican border continued right up to the end of World War I, and the Franco-Prussian War's harsh conclusion triggered decades of French antipathy towards Germany.

Political destruction of an adversary can completely remove a threat. Rome's destruction of Carthage removed an important challenger to its dominance, and the destruction of the Third Reich put a lethal close to nearly century-long threat of a militarily powerful German state. But the end of one absolute enemy sometimes also creates new security threats or leaves the ground open for otherwise unwelcome shifts in the strategic balance. The destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime removed Iran's greatest enemy and created an opportunity to direct Tehran's military planning and covert subversion elsewhere.

Military campaigns should be understood as **injections into political systems**, and the result of such disruptions cannot be mapped with any real certainty. Whenever an external force—lethal or nonlethal—attempts to alter a political system, the results often confound initial expectations. **US work to help counter Haitian gangs**, for example, ran into a central problem: the gangs were hired guns for competing political interests. Fighting the gangs—a micropolitical issue—had macropolitical consequences. Military interventions affect not only local but also regional systems. The Libyan conflict, as **Alex Thurston argues**, had disruptive effects in the North African regional system and substantially contributed to the ongoing instability in Mali. It is impossible for policymakers to operate with the knowledge and time necessarily to make perfect decisions. But the bar for the use of force must be very high.

### **Strategic Considerations**

Policy and strategy in limited war must be genuinely *limited*. Disaster frequently awaits those who wage unlimited war with limited resources. While some military forces have undoubtedly achieved favorable

operational outcomes under quantitative disadvantages, the margin of superiority needed to make the impossible possible is often exceptional. The Anglo-American joint operation to overthrow the Iranian government in 1953 was a masterpiece of political subversion, but also would not have been possible if it were not for **fortuitous local dynamics** and a good helping of luck. Similarly, the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 rested mostly on Afghan military land power supported by Western standoff firepower.

Policymakers should consider what is possible to achieve through the use of force before committing American land, sea, or air forces. Objectives should be as specific as possible—phrases such as “teaching a lesson” or “defending the international system” should be banished from the political-military lexicon. A truly limited objective can also be abandoned or altered in response to new strategic circumstances, and a war is certainly not limited if it entraps one or both combatants into a new commitment. When the United States committed itself to containing Saddam Hussein’s Iraq after the Gulf War, it was in fact committing itself to his overthrow. The **total character** of the sanctions and American policymakers’ casting of his regime as fundamentally illegitimate helped commit the US to a set of circumstances in which US pressure could only be relieved with Hussein’s overthrow.

Thomas Schelling **famously described** a “diplomacy of violence” in his book *Arms and Influence*, and both the threat and employment of coercive force in a limited war presumes the continued existence of the opponent as a political entity. In a limited war, the adversary ideally should have a way out that can be justified to domestic audiences and elites. Most importantly, policymakers must understand that an adversary state may perceive the worth of an objective differently. What one states believes to be a limited objective may be an object of core strategic importance to the opponent. Japan might have believed that it could strike the heart of American military power, retreat behind a fortified line of islands and ships, and wait for the Americans to sue for peace rather than expend large resources fighting far from home. Tokyo’s delusion led directly to the destruction of the Japanese imperial system.

The success of limited war also depends very much on the nature of the adversary. A “**real enemy**” that considers war to be politics by other means is capable of settling for less than political annihilation. However, an absolute enemy that sees politics as *war by other means* will only cease to be a major security threat after it is no longer a strategically cohesive force. What distinguishes a run-of-the mill tyrant from a Hitler is the totalizing character of the latter’s strategic ambitions. There also are **important differences** between a local group of partisans animated by local concerns and an international revolutionary organization that fights for abstract goals. The local fighter ceases to be a military concern after disengagement from a distinct area of operations. The international revolutionary considers the globe his battlefield. Embarking on limited war when the adversary seeks to wage a total war is a classic strategic mistake that should be avoided at all costs.

Military force can sometimes deter even total enemies. However much what David Maxwell often dubs the “**Kim Family Regime**” may loathe South Korea, it cannot act on its prejudices without risking annihilation. But North Korea does regard truces and diplomacy as simply tactical pauses, and will continue to trouble what it regards as an absolute enemy with military and covert provocations. This process will likely continue as long as the Kim Family regime exists.

### **Operational Art and Campaigns**

Designing a limited campaign, like any other sort of military effort, is contingent on the military environment, resources available, and the political object. The farther American forces must go, the greater the dependence on local actors. A “**loss of strength gradient**” lessens the impact of military power as it travels from a distant base area to a far-flung target, necessitating local relationships for

forward basing. Operating inland in Central Asia created a dependence on a host of unsavory actors, most notably the Pakistanis, and military operations in the Persian Gulf carry their own political costs. Operations closer to one's natural frontiers, such as India's riposte of Pakistan in the Kargil war, are obviously easier. Sometimes political considerations will dictate an indirect approach closer to home. The United States also cannot, for example, interfere too much in the affairs of Mexico and prosecutes the drug war indirectly.

Technical considerations also dictate the shape of the campaign. Suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) has remained an element of American campaign planning since the expansion of Air Force capabilities allowed military forces to avoid the kind of attrition characterized by the air war over Northern Vietnam. The recent proliferation of battle networks has added suppression of enemy networks to the checklist, and the growing proliferation of guided weapons suggests the potential for adversaries to create their own rudimentary reconnaissance-strike complexes. A proliferation of network-enabled robotic weapons will likely place even more emphasis on the electromagnetic spectrum, cyberspace, and other components of command and control warfare.

However, SEAD and counter-battle network missions pose a dilemma for future campaign planners. Striking anti-ship ballistic missiles placed far into the interior and military satellites raises questions about the ability of the war to remain limited. Suppressing battle networks, especially in the case of computer network operations, also has a high potential for collateral damage to civilian networks. Certain kinds of standoff weapons are also easily mistakable for nuclear forces.

Operational art based on the destruction of regime command and control through operational shock also poses problems for limited war. Recent American operational concepts, such as Effects-Based Operations, Rapid Decisive Operations, and the Five Rings targeting approach, have focused on the rapid destruction of a state's political-military leadership capabilities. This would ostensibly render the opponent's military forces supine, particularly if the conventional enemy is sufficiently brittle and can be systemically disrupted. These "magic bullet" methods frequently overpromise, but it is not inconceivable that advanced targeting capabilities might inflict severe—if not fatal--disruptions on command and control networks and render fielded units irrelevant. Such an outcome, however, raises problems of a different sort for limited campaigns.

It is difficult to wage a limited war to coerce an opponent if the operational means involved break the authority of the regime outright. Regime command and control assets direct fielded forces but also help direct paramilitary and military forces maintaining political order. A state under this kind of sustained threat may perceive the stakes to be existential and conclude that the real object of military operations is political annihilation. Destroying a regime while leaving significant portions of its fielded forces intact also poses significant policy problems, as the 2003 invasion of Iraq proved. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) might create better and quicker means of operational annihilation, but low-tech military destruction often is better in instilling a psychological perception of defeat.

A campaign planner, as T.X. Hammes **noted**, can also carry out a campaign of exhaustion rather than decisive battle. A campaign may employ a variety of assets to strike economic targets. This style of operations was dubbed "**guerre de course**" in the classical era. The Kargil war featured an analogous style of slow, heavily telegraphed political and military moves designed to gain an advantage without triggering general war. Finally, there is also coercive war, **as waged in Kosovo** with a multiplicity of political, military, and economic means. These methods, however, are contingent on the adversary playing along. Signaling a lack of willingness to escalate or a fear of risking a larger war to gain an operationally decisive advantage may simply cause the target to double down or escalate in order to achieve escalation dominance. Proxies can also sometimes also be useful as a diplomatic bargaining chip or simply as a

means of eroding military power and political reserve. However, proxies also have important **practical limitations** and sometimes entrap their sponsors into realizing the objectives of the client rather than the patron.

Limited war against underdeveloped states or non-state groups also poses particular operational problems. A state lacking sufficient political, military, or economic connectivity will present less opportunity for targeting that achieves truly cascading effects. States without developed infrastructure, in general, do not yield a traditionally target-rich environment. The lack of sophisticated air defenses also means that underdeveloped states and regions also present enormous opportunity for the targeting of small groups and individuals. Air power alone is unlikely to eradicate a group heavily situated within a region's human terrain and also requires the development of local informants for targeting intelligence. The deployment of advanced sensors--particularly unattended ground sensors--has been key to targeted warfare in austere regions since Vietnam-era operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Non-state actors in control of state or quasi-state territories can sometimes be coerced, as the Israelis have in Gaza, by **sharp and sudden attacks** designed to achieve or regain deterrence. Tenuous truces can be maintained over a period of time by a willingness to strike with overwhelming force against a non-state adversary. Great powers over history—unable to pacify non-state forces in frontier regions—have used a combination of raids, diplomacy, and economic inducements to manage the threat to their heartlands. The United States has a similar power over the actions of irregular foes. The maxim that irregular adversaries cannot be deterred or coerced is empirically unsupportable. Deterrence and compellence will take on **a different character**, but will not vanish from the scene altogether.

## Conclusion

Limited means rather than ends often characterize what American policymakers view as “limited war.” Such categorical confusion only ensures that operations are waged without the resources necessarily to achieve success and larger entrapment in more expansive commitments than policymakers might have necessarily bargained on. Truly “limited” war can only be possible with limited aims and a sound understanding of the dynamics of war under political constraint.

## About the Author



### **Adam Elkus**

Adam Elkus is an analyst specializing in foreign policy and security. He is Associate Editor at Red Team Journal. He is a frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal and has published at numerous venues including The Atlantic, Defense Concepts, West Point CTC Sentinel, Infinity Journal, and other publications. He is an associate at SWJ El Centro and blogs at Rethinking Security.

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-strategic-and-operational-dynamics-of-limited-war>

## Links:

{1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/adam-elkus>

{2} <http://slouchingcolumbia.wordpress.com/2012/03/27/the-allure-of-the-absolute-foe/>

{3}

<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDAQFjAA>

{4}

<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCQQFjAAhM-ry0gHs6JnUBw&usg=AFQjCNF54VhArzlO3MpvsmDnY9yuK9RvA>

{5} <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA479311>

{6} <http://www.ndu.edu/press/gangs-netwar-haiti.html>

{7} <http://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2012/04/13/natos-intervention-in-libya-was-a-mistake/>

{8} <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-myth-operation-ajax-4761>

{9} [http://www.amazon.com/Invisible-War-United-States-Sanctions/dp/0674064089/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1334159515&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Invisible-War-United-States-Sanctions/dp/0674064089/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1334159515&sr=1-1)

{10} <http://www.amazon.com/Influence-Henry-Stimson-Lectures-Series/dp/0300002211>

{11} [http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&products\\_id=318](http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=318)

{12} <http://www.amazon.com/Theory-Partisan-Intermediate-Commentary-Political/dp/0914386336>

{13} <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2012/201201.maxwell.nkorea.html>

{14} [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loss\\_of\\_Strength\\_Gradient](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loss_of_Strength_Gradient)

{15} [http://www.infinityjournal.com/article/53/Offshore\\_Control\\_A\\_Proposed\\_Strategy](http://www.infinityjournal.com/article/53/Offshore_Control_A_Proposed_Strategy)

{16} [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commerce\\_raiding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commerce_raiding)

{17} [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/428/kosovo\\_and\\_the\\_great\\_air\\_power\\_debate.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/428/kosovo_and_the_great_air_power_debate.html)

{18} <http://slouchingcolumbia.wordpress.com/2012/03/18/itll-do-you-damage-proxies-covert-war/>

{19} <http://thomasrid.org/deterrence-beyond-the-state/>

{20} <http://www.amazon.com/Complex-Deterrence-Strategy-Global-Age/dp/0226650030>

{21} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/there-is-no-substitute-for-victory>

{22} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/applying-ends-ways-means-to-the-spectrum-of-conflict>

{23} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/12517#comment-form>

Copyright © 2012, Small Wars Foundation.



Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

Please help us support the [Small Wars Community](#).